
Review

Sophistry and political philosophy: Protagoras' challenge to Socrates

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In Gregory Vlastos' famous introduction to the *Protagoras* from Vlastos 1956, Protagoras is a sophist with “moral inhibitions” and Socrates is a trickster. While Protagoras “refuses to admit that injustice is compatible with *sôphrosunê* [and to] identify a life of pleasure with the good life” (Vlastos, 1956, p. 8), Socrates “is not a wholly attractive figure” and “his handling of Protagoras is merciless, if not cruel” (p. 24).

In Bartlett's brief introductory chapter (only four pages), we encounter a related contrast. Generalized in terms of the difference between philosophy and sophistry, Bartlett sets out to identify the distinct consistency of both Protagoras' theoretical and his moral-political teachings by contrasting them to Socrates' (p. 3). This he does through a detailed and attentive analysis of the two dialogues where this is most explicit, the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*. As we shall see, Bartlett is not ready to go as far as Woodruff and claim that Protagoras is Plato's “grandfather” (Woodruff, 2017, p. 226), but he does take some pain to show how difficult it is sometimes to distinguish the sophist from the philosopher (e.g. pp. 17, 53–54, 68–69, 111, 137, 188–190, and p. 212, but cf. p. 223).

The book is made up of an introduction, two main parts and a general conclusion. The first part concerns the *Protagoras*, the second the *Theaetetus* 142a1–183c7 (where Protagoras' teachings are discussed). The most striking feature of both parts is Bartlett's ability to bring forth the connection between Protagoras' epistemological commitments and their political repercussions. As this also bears on Plato's political agenda – concealed under the dialogue's logico-dramatic casting – Bartlett offers an important discussion of the inseparability of theory and practice, as well as of form and content.

In the *Protagoras*, to begin with, it may seem as if Protagoras' political commitments are explicit. The open and self-proclaimed sophist explains that he teaches *euboulia*, a sense of good counsel that covers both private economy and political craft. As Bartlett elegantly shows, Protagoras' great speech, where this is



all spelled out, does however work as a cloaking device. It is designed to help Protagoras stay out of the sophistical closet and to allow him to operate inside a political community constituted by principles that he does not respect (pp. 36, 50, 80, 97, 210). To lay this bare, Bartlett's nose for details plays a central role. We find one notable example on p. 18. Here Bartlett shows how Protagoras' forked tongue is already introduced in the dialogue's framing. As Plato sets the scene, Protagoras is not only given a trailing chorus, to which he preaches, but also an inner circle of auditors. This, according to Bartlett, suggests that it might be possible to listen to Protagoras many times over without being part of his inner circle, a circle in which Protagoras reveals his true doctrines to students like Antimoerus, who studies to "become a sophist himself" (313a4–313a5). As the author shows, Socrates' main strategy is to force the sophist to articulate these hidden views. Even if Bartlett neglects both Socrates' important warning about the dangers of sophistical merchandises (313c7–314c2) and his related and much debated comment about the problem of speaking like a book (329a3) – the latter dismissed with the wave of a hand (p. 71) – Bartlett nevertheless manages to show how Socrates' treatment is efficient. It reveals both how Protagoras speaks differently to different audiences (p. 36 or 209) and how his disbelief in conventional education – and its understanding of virtue as benefiting the common good (p. 97) – forced the sophist to claim that it is mad to admit injustice (p. 50), even if it is wise to entertain it (p. 80).

In the second part of the book, Bartlett turns to the *Theaetetus*. Here there is no explicit discussion of Protagoras' political views. What we are offered instead is a detailed discussion of various definitions of knowledge and their metaphysical underpinnings. Despite Protagoras' "caginess" (p. 166), Bartlett both spells out what lies hidden and, against the background of a close analysis of the discussions that precede Protagoras' so-called long speech (166a2–168c2), Bartlett importantly shows how the sophist's epistemological relativism has political effects: One problem with Protagoras' relativism is that he seems to be in a bad position to claim to know more than anyone else. If each person's perception is true, no one can know more than anyone else; so why, then, pay for education? Protagoras' solution is simple (cf. pp. 174–176). He does not claim to teach anything about the true being of reality, but he does promise to make his students better by (secretly) showing them how to exploit the illusion that such a truth exists. The point comes best forth in what Bartlett calls the "political turn" in Protagoras' speech (p. 176). Here we learn that the view of the wise "differs in key respects from that of 'the cities'" (p. 177). While the wise understand that moral concepts – such as the noble and the just – are just as conventional as our sense perceptions are true for each of us, ordinary citizens are subject to a false doctrine that keeps them chained to the laws of the community. For Bartlett's Protagoras, what is just and noble is "only in the element of opinion" (p. 176). This can be manipulated by "skilled orators" (p. 176) and the point of view of the



wise is therefore “extramoral or amoral” (p. 177). According to Bartlett, the difference between the morality of the cities and the outlook of the wise was a core point of the education Protagoras’ offered. While officially supporting the morality of the city he happened to find himself in, Protagoras’ true teaching “permits some few to free themselves from the burdens of the conventional dictates of the just and the noble” (p. 177).

The book’s general conclusion is not as brief as the introduction, but it does leave the reader wanting more. Even if Bartlett eventually offers a much-anticipated comparison between the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, the conclusion mostly rehearses the separate analyses of the book’s parts, offering a summary of the main points and arguing that the two portraits we get of the sophist are at best “complementary” (p. 223): They present two non-identical accounts that relate to each other only as the *Theaetetus* is an answer to the problems posed by the *Protagoras*. In addition, there might also be a problem with Bartlett’s assumptions about the methodological payoffs that the comparison between the dialogues offers. Bartlett claims that even if both dialogues have much to say about Protagoras’ teachings, they say very little about Plato’s own positions: “In the *Protagoras-Theaetetus* Plato is more intent on teaching us to see the challenges posed by knowledge than he is on setting forth the adequate response” (p. 223). Plato’s own position, according to Bartlett, can however be traced in “the approach” Socrates took, i.e. in “the practice of ‘dialectics’ or the giving and receiving of a *logos*” (p. 223). This view does, however, need to be assessed in the light of Michel Frede’s discussion of the matter. According to Frede, Plato owes much more to the sophists than is often acknowledged, and one of the most important things we can learn from the *Protagoras* is a set of rules characterizing a certain type of sophistic practice called dialectic. In trying to get the respondent to contradict a formerly given statement, one person asks the questions and another answers with yes or no. “Socrates’ mastery of this [sophistic] practice is such that he manages to ‘refute’ the respondent even where [he] actually shared the respondent’s view” (Frede, 1992, p. 17; cf. Nehamas, 1990, p. 5). As this goes to show, even if Bartlett’s portrait is fairly nuanced, both Plato’s and Socrates’ debts to Protagoras may be greater than Bartlett dares to admit.

Finally, the overall production of the book is excellent, and the volume has a clear and attractive layout. The bibliography is surprisingly short. This reflects Bartlett’s general tendency to state his own independent position, rather than engaging with the vast literature that exist. The book does not have a separate index of references to Plato’s dialogues, but references to the dialogues are included in the general index. The book also contains many generous summaries that make it easy to follow Bartlett’s fluent and lucidly styled argument.



References

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