

Protagoras's Great Speech and the Republic

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Abstract

This paper argues, first, that one can render Protagoras's view on the teachability of political virtue coherent by distinguishing between the affect required for achieving it and the capacity for developing these affect into fully fledged virtues. Second, the paper argues that by focusing on Books II - III of the Republic one might see an affinity between between Protagoras's suggestion that virtuous citizens might give advice, without ruling it, in the affairs of the city and Plato's conservative practical political theory.

Keywords

Affect vs Virtue, Education by Practice, Conservative vs Totalitarian,
Reverence and Solidarity, Two Republics

1. Introduction

Plato's *Protagoras* is puzzling. It is not clear whether the position ascribed to the character after which the dialogue is named reflects the views of the historical personage, or of Socrates, or of Plato. It is also not clear whether the views expressed in the Great Speech of Protagoras are internally coherent. The dialogues begins with Socrates' remark, referring to Protagoras whom he met that morning, that he is "the wisest of all living men". [209d1] This remark is difficult to reconcile with Plato's frequent criticism of Sophists. Socrates, then, proceeds to recount what was said in the meeting. The meeting, we discover, was provoked by an acquaintance of Socrates', Hippocrates', who was excited to talk to the great man. From this point on the dialogue follows Socrates' questioning of Hippocrates reasons for wanting to learn from Protagoras. Having been told by Hippocrates [312a], that "I suppose that he will make a Sophist of me", the discussion turns to the question of who Sophist are and what they teach. A number of answers to this question are explored by Socrates and Hippocrates before Protagoras, himself, explains what teaching he offers to those who aspire to political

eminence [316c1]. His first explanation is this:

Young man, if you associate with me, on the very first day you will be in a position to return home a better man than you came, and better the second day than on the first, and better everyday than you were on the day before. [318a]

But when Socrates asks him to explain what his student will be better of [318d]. Protagoras replies that his students will not be exposed to the drudgery of calculation, astronomy, geometry and music¹ but, instead:

...he will learn only that which he comes to learn. And this is prudence in affairs private as well as public... and he will be able to speak and act most powerfully in the affairs of the state. [318e-319a]²

2. The Great Speech

This comment is followed by Protagoras's Great Speech in which he gives, in defense of his position, more detail about the teachability of (political) virtue. The defense is in response to Socrates' challenge that virtue cannot be taught. The argument Socrates produces against the teachability of political virtue is surprising, for, it assumes that Athenian democrats are right to allow everyone, even if they possess no special political expertise, to give advice in the Assembly concerning matters of the state [319ed]. And, he thinks, that is the reason political virtue (statecraft) is not something that can be taught³. This claim goes against the view often expressed in Plato's dialogues, for example in the *Republic* (Plato, 1992a) and the *Statesman* (Plato, 1992b), that statesmanship is a craft that demands expertise. So, what to make of Socrates' argument? Is it merely ironic, exposing an error democrats make about political participation? Or does he believe, like the democrats do, that some form of political participation by all citizens should be allowed? In this essay, I will try to show that the views expressed in the *Protagoras* (Plato, 1956) might be reconciled with the ones expressed in the early books of the *Republic*⁴.

It is significant that in his argument Socrates does not claim that anyone, re-

¹This comment is strange for a number of reasons: 1) did Sophists teach calculation, astronomy, geometry and music? 2) music is mentioned but the other three are not included in the list Protagoras gives later [325e-326a], but here [319de] it is implied that calculation, astronomy and geometry are part of it: "driven back into them" [318e1]. 3) could this be a veiled criticism of the educational programme outlined in *Republic VII*?

²This invites the question whether Protagoras teaches competitive or cooperative virtue. Adkins (1972) believes that Protagoras's position is ambivalent, collapsing the Homeric competitive conception of virtue with the Periclean cooperative one. A simple answer might be that Protagoras teaches both: how to excel in looking after one's own interest and, at the same time, the interest of the city as a whole.

³Socrates' example of what people think about participation in politics refers to politics as a form of knowledge. So, his argument is ambiguous. Is he questioning whether the art of politics can be taught, implying that there is a specific virtue associated with politics, or is he questioning whether people can be taught to be better. This ambiguity carries over to Protagoras' reply to him.

⁴A case could be made, focusing on the early books of the *Republic*, that all citizens, not only philosophers, could be just.

ardless of qualification, could rule the city. So, the knowledge assumed is not for making important political decisions but only to give advice (Aristotle, 2013)⁵. It is clear from what Plato says in his other dialogues, such as the Republic (Plato, 2013), *The Laws* (Plato, 2004) and *The Statesman*, that he opposed rule by a General Assembly. His reasons were both a) empirical: as a matter of fact, only a few can attain expertise in political knowledge, see *The Statesman* [292e]; and b) philosophical: the masses cannot engage in rigorous debate (see, Republic [494a]). Consequently, it is appropriate to ask why Plato endorsed, even tacitly, Protagoras's rejoinder to Socrates. In other words, it is important to decide how seriously Plato takes Protagoras's defense of democracy. This, in turn, leads to the question of how to reconcile Plato's elitist view on political rule with Protagoras's observation that: "your countrymen (Athenian democrats) are right in admitting that the tinker cobbler to advise about politics" [324c]⁶. But, before turning to this question it needs to be established whether Protagoras's account of the sources of democratic politics is, itself, coherent.

Protagoras's advocacy of political egalitarianism is central to his defense for the teachability of political virtue. The defense is presented in two stages. First by a myth and second by a logical argument (a *logos*). The myth establishes the fact that, according to Zeus, if cities are to survive their citizens must possess a sense of solidarity: *aidos*/reverence, respect for one another, and a sense of what is right (*dike*)⁷. If cooperation with others is all there was to political virtue, and if all citizens had it naturally, there would be no need for teaching it. But, Protagoras concludes the myth by suggesting that "... when [the Athenians] meet to deliberate about political excellence or virtue, which proceeds only by way of justice and self-control... they think that every man ought to share in this virtue, and cities could not exist if this were otherwise." [322e-323a]

There are a number of difficulties with the myth. First, Zeus' order that "he who has no part in reverence and justice shall be put to death" [322d], seems puzzling. If he gave these gifts to everyone, how could anyone have no part in them? Second, there is a shift from possessing the affects of reverence and the sense of right and wrong, to possessing justice and self-control. Protagoras continues by supporting what was said in the myth by a logical argument in which

⁵Aristotle in his *Politics*, Book 3, Chapters 11 - 13 makes a similar distinction. But his reasons are different: a) unlike Plato, he believes that the opinion the many can be superior to one wise person even if individually they are inferior to it; and b) he thinks that excluding the poor from all political decision making would create needless conflict. [1281b25]

⁶It is interesting that in *The Statesman*, [259ab] the Eleatic Stranger raises the possibility that private citizens might be capable of giving expert advice to the ruler. But he does not explain how they would attain that capacity. All he says is that those exercising authority, such as household managers, would qualify, see: Egyed (2023).

⁷These are what Zeus gives to mankind to prevent them from being unjust and constantly waging war against one another. Note that what Protagoras says later implies that, either some people would give up these gifts, or that there are injustices besides the ones which threaten the life of the city. One could ask whether the socially unjust would still have the affects Zeus gave to all human beings. A comment in Republic I [351c] suggests that there might be a form of perverse justice among thieves who might cooperate with one another for a common purpose.

he takes up the teachability of political virtue, directly. First, he notes that since all citizens have a sense of belonging and a sense of what is right, “every man can be admitted as a counselor about the virtues of justice and self-control” [323a and 323c]. This is so because people think that every man ought to share in those two virtues [323b]. An indication of this, he claims, not very convincingly, is that people believe that everyone should profess to be just whether they are or are not. A more convincing point he makes in support of his view is the existence of punishment of those who are unjust. Rational punishment practiced by societies is a form of education. It is not retribution but a deterrence. [324b] Punishing the unjust implies that they must have responsibility for what they do and what they are. In other words, being politically virtuous takes an effort which includes learning. [323d]

There seems to be a tension between what Protagoras says in the myth and what he says in the logical argument. In the myth he says that Zeus gave two gifts, *aidos* and *dike* to all men, which implies that these two gifts constitute natural attributes, innate to humans. But if these two attributes are innate, and they are the virtues required for human existence, why do they need to be taught? And, this seems to go against the claim in the logical argument that political virtue is, and must be, taught. Protagoras cannot have it both ways. Either virtue is a natural attribute or it is acquired through teaching. However, the contradiction could be avoided if *aidos* and *dike* are not considered to be political virtues but merely conditions for them. Significantly, at the beginning of the logical proof Protagoras characterizes political virtue as righteousness (*dikaiosune*), and self-control (*sophrosyne*). It is for not having those two virtues that people can be held responsible and, therefore, they must be learned. In this way, by distinguishing virtue and the conditions for acquiring it, the contradiction between the myth and the *logos* can be avoided. Also, the distinction introduces an important factor in political education, namely, that in order for the teaching/learning of virtue to be effective certain feelings/affects must already be present in those who are being taught (Plato, 1965)⁸.

The main message of the myth is that while humans, like all other living beings, are motivated by self-interest and the need to survive: needs that are satisfied by the gifts of Epimetheus and Prometheus, it is only Zeus’ gift, the capacity for the art of government [322b], that would prevent human beings from destroying one another. This means that *aidos* and *dike* are necessary conditions for the survival of cities. But, as the *logos* shows, even these two affects needed to be transformed into full fledged political virtues. This is what is achieved by a

⁸Plato’s *Meno* also raises the question whether virtue was natural or acquired. However, my main interest in this dialogue is Meno’s question: “And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know?” [80e] Socrates’ answer relies on the theory of recollection. “There is no teaching, he says, but only recollection”. [82a1] But the example of teaching the slave boy applies to teaching only theoretical truths such as those of geometry. By contrast, teaching in the *Protagoras* aims at practical wisdom. So, one might conclude that theoretical truths are to be thought by exploring the implication of true opinions, while practical truths are taught by developing social affects.

combination of general education and special training provided by experts such as Protagoras.

Socrates has another argument against the teachability of political virtue. This is how he puts it: “the best and wisest of our citizens are unable to impart their political wisdom to others ... persons who were good themselves, and never yet made anyone else good”. [319e, 320b] Protagoras’s reply might also help with the question of the difference in outcome in the political education different individuals receive. “All men are teachers of virtue, he says, each according to his ability” [327e]. This implies that people can learn political virtue to the extent that their individual, natural, capacities allows them. Early education is provided by the family. This is followed by public schooling, and instruction in why it is important to follow laws. This is in preparation for the highest form of political education provided by experts such as Protagoras. So, even though all citizens would be qualified to participate in discussions regarding matters concerning the state, only a few would achieve sufficient “political eminence” [316c] qualifying them to make important political decisions. Having clarified Protagoras’s position on how virtue can be taught, it is now time to look at his and Plato’s views on the best form of political governance.

It is generally agreed that Protagoras presupposes a democratic form of government in his Great Speech. Those who hold this view base their view on the hints made in the speech to the effect that all citizens can be taught political virtue and, therefore, must be allowed to give advise about affairs of the state [310b-d and 322e-323d]. But allowing all citizens to give political advice does not amount to advocating democracy. Given what Protagoras says about differences in natural capacity and, as a result, the quality of education received by different individuals, it is possible that he might have been in favor of differentiation in political roles. In other words, he might have been in favor of some other form of constitutionalism besides democracy.

3. Protagoras and the Republic

On the surface, it seems that Plato’s Republic, by defining justice as non-meddling implies a radically different conception of politics from the one proposed by Protagoras in his speech. For, it seems that, even if one grants that what the second advocates is not pure (radical) democracy but only some measure of popular participation in governing, Plato would not extend even that form of political participation beyond the guardian class. Take, for example, what he says in Book IV of the Republic:

[But] I suppose that when someone, who is by nature a craftsman or some other kind of money maker, is puffed up by wealth ... attempts to enter the class of soldiers, or one of the unworthy soldiers tries to enter that of judges and guardians, ...or when the same person tries to do all these thing at once, I think you’ll agree that these exchanges and this sort of meddling

bring the city to ruin. [434ab]

This passage states, in seeming contradiction to what is said in the Great Speech, that craftsmen, and even soldiers, should not be allowed to do the job of judges and guardians. Still, the question remains, what exactly, in Plato's view, is the job of judges and guardians, and what it would mean, according to Protagoras to advise about politics [324e] (Mintz, 2016)⁹.

Plato's political elitism amounts to holding that only a few individuals possessing expertise in statecraft should be allowed to rule. But, would he allow that a greater number citizens who are just, having received adequate general education in music, poetry and the law, give advice on political matters?¹⁰ There is no direct evidence in the Republic supporting that hypothesis. However, there is one passage at the end of Book IV which can be interpreted as implying that citizen who are just could make useful contribution to politics without being an expert in it. After noting that the separation of tasks is "a sort of image of justice" [443c4], Plato concludes by saying a) an individual is just not by doing its job externally but by "(not allowing) any part of himself to do the work of another part or to allow the various classes within him meddle with each other... and from having been many things he becomes entirely one... only then does he act. And b) when he does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of the body, engaging in politics, or in private contract—in all these, he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps to achieve it" [443de].

The passage just mentioned indicates that Plato is relying on the soul/city analogy as a way of explaining individual justice. But it also implies that Plato is not only, or even primarily, concerned with the politics of an ideal city¹¹. In other words, he thinks that any citizen, provided its soul is in proper order, could "engage in politics" in the real world. If Protagoras's Great Speech is about cities and citizens as they existed in his time, one can see affinities between it

⁹At [319b] Socrates suggests that craftsmen would participate in the Assembly, giving advice pertaining to their trades. Presuming that craftsmen of the Republic would also have special expertise, some of which would be important to the affairs of the state, where would they articulate their relevant professional expertise if not in an assembly of citizens?

¹⁰A number of interpreters of the Republic believe that the educational programme described in books II and III is meant for all citizens, including the third class. (A useful discussion of various positions on this issue are given in Mintz, 2016). This belief receives support from what is said in Book IV about moderation. For, it stands to reason that those who are ruled must have some basic education if they are to agree with how they are being ruled. See for example: "the ruler and the ruled share the same belief" (in the best city) [431e1], "moderation resembles a kind of harmony" [431e5] and "moderation spreads throughout the whole" [432a1].

¹¹If one takes the city/soul analogy seriously one might consider the description of virtues of the city as corresponding to virtues of the soul. Thus, saying that in an ideal city the most reasonable citizens should rule without interference from the less reasonable ones would imply that in a virtuous individual reason should rule without interference from the other parts. At [428cd] Plato implies that those who rule it should have a practical knowledge of the city as a whole. So, a just individual should have a practical knowledge of its soul as a whole. Looking at Plato's teaching this way, one might see affinity with the way Protagoras sees it. They both teaches people to grasp, as far as they are capable, the complex totality of their selves, of their household and, in rare cases, of their cities.

and, at least, some part of the Republic (Kant, 1959)¹².

It has been suggested (Thesleff, 2009) that the first four books of the Republic were composed at a relatively early date. If that is the case, it is possible that at some point early in his career Plato had a more favorable attitude toward democracy than the one presented in the middle books of the Republic (Vegetti, 2004)¹³. It is also possible that he thought that the democratic form of government that existed in Athens following the Persian wars was an example of a viable form of it. He might have thought that Athenian citizens were, at that time, for a short time, virtuous (Hegel, 1971: p. 177)¹⁴. It is also possible that throughout his life Plato was ambivalent about political equality and freedom. An example of Plato's ambivalence can be found in a dialogue thought by most commentators to be late one, *The Statesman*.

There is a reference to Zeus in *The Statesman* that seems to fit poorly with the rest of that dialogue. The reference is also in the context of a myth. In our epoch, the epoch of Zeus, says the Eleatic Stranger, “no king can be said to attain to (the eminence of the divine shepherd) ... Those who rule these states of ours in this present era are much more like their subjects in nature, and far closer to them in training and in nurture than ever a shepherd could be to his flock” [275bc]. This passage could be read as a general condemnation of all past and present political constitutions where rulers are no better than their subjects. But such reading is undermined by the fact that the reference to the era of Zeus is in the context of defining who a true statesman is. More specifically, the Stranger wants to differentiate between the statesman and the tyrant who, he says, are “entirely different people, differing in the manner of their rule”. The one rules over its subjects by force and the other by consent. [276e] “[A]t this point, Young Socrates declares, we have really completed our definition of the statesman” [277a1]. Surprisingly, the Stranger demurs. Instead of exploring the possibility of different types of non-tyrannical constitutions, he continues spending much time on the nature

¹²In addition to the passages cited above, in Republic [591d-592b], what I take to be the conclusion to the political and philosophical substance of the early books, Plato comes back to the question of how an educated and just citizen would react to the politics of existing constitutions. Such an individual, Socrates suggests, might not want to take part in the politics of his fatherland but might “take part in the politics of the city we were founding and describing, the one that exists in theory, for I don't think it exists anywhere on earth.” [592a] There seems to be a conflict between this and the passages just mentioned [443e]. The earlier passage suggests that a person whose soul is in order could engage in politics, and this passage suggests that a person whose soul is in order would not engage in politics, presumably for fear of disrupting that order. Still, on a generous reading one might presume that a just person would not be completely inactive in the politics of his fatherland. Such a person could participate in it by supposing that he lived among just people in a just city, or, to use a Kantian formulation: as if he lived in an ideal city. Acting with that in mind he would not upset the balance of his soul.

¹³Vegetti entertains the possibility that the views of the historical Protagoras may have played a role in the configuration of the Republic (Vegetti, 2004: p.145). This, he thinks, is most evident in the first four books, and he goes on to note that the middle books were meant to correct the lack of rigor of these books, resulting in an “excessive and hyperbolic” new start (Vegetti, 2004: p. 157).

¹⁴Hegel, referring to Montesquieu, notes that “the sentiment of virtue is the substantial form of a democratic republic” (Hegel, 1971: p. 177). Thus, one might conclude that having a virtuous citizenry is a prerequisite for a democratic constitution.

of ideal ones. So, it is plausible to see in *The Statesman* the same tension that exists within the Republic between absolute political rule and popular participation in government, once again, making it possible to see an affinity between Plato's view and the views put forth by Protagoras in the Great Speech.

4. Conclusion

Commentators on the *Protagoras* are divided on a number of questions: Is the dialogue an accurate report of the historical Protagoras, or is Socrates' interlocutor a fictitious character whose views are made up by Plato? Whichever way one answers that question, it leaves one with the problem of explaining Socrates' laudatory remarks on Protagoras and his endorsement of Athenian democracy put forth in the Great Speech. Also, a number of readers of the dialogue see a contradiction between what is said in the myth and what is said on the logical argument that follows it. They find that the combination of the myth and the *logos* conflates what is virtue by nature and what it is by convention. I have tried to address these two difficulties.

On my reading, the view that all citizens must be educated in political virtue in order for cities to survive, is shared by Protagoras and Plato. My main thesis is that one can render Protagoras's view on the teach ability of political virtue coherent by distinguishing between the affect required for achieving it and the capacity for developing these affect into fully fledged virtues. In this way, one can also explain the apparent tension between Plato's political elitism and Protagoras's advocacy of general participation in discussions relating to matters of the state. Assuming that there is a tension between a humanistic, though conservative, political teaching and an authoritarian, hyper rationalistic one running through Plato's writings¹⁵ and, if one separates these two strains contained in them, it is possible to see an affinity between the views expressed in the Protagoras and one of those strains: Plato's humanistic politics.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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¹⁵I agree with those who think that the middle books of the Republic were a later addition to what has come to be called the "Proto-Republic". But I hesitate to endorse the view that Plato abandoned his early humanism in favor of totalitarianism, later on. In my view, it is more plausible to think that throughout his life Plato was ambivalent between what he thought were possible improvements in existing political systems and what political systems could be, ideally. Book VII of the Republic is a case in point, it stands out as the most extreme example of how a highly theoretical, absolutist, philosophy would impact on political rule. As such, in its attempt to ground practical wisdom in rigorous theoretical form it is Plato's most objectionable contribution to political theory. And those who see what is said in Book VII, especially at its end [540e-541a], as the high point of his political teaching would, naturally, conclude that Plato's and Protagoras's respective positions are irreconcilable. Taking a fragmentarian view of many of Plato's writing, I sought to avoid that conclusion.

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