Protagoras' Pedagogy of Civic Excellence

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Protagoras, the professor of such famous aphorisms as, "Man is the measure of all things" (DK 80 B1=Sextus *Against the Schoolmasters* 7.60; see Schiappa 117-133) and "For every argument there is a counterargument" (Diogenes Laertius 9.51; see Schiappa 89-102) is alternately lauded as the progenitor of humanism and disparaged as the godfather of relativism. Such discussions of Protagoras, while productive in themselves, tend to downplay one of his most important and revolutionary claims: that "civic excellence"–*arete*, pl. *aretai*–can be taught. In this essay I will elucidate both Protagoras' conception of "civic excellence" and his methods of teaching it as they are portrayed in his eponymous Platonic dialogue.

Set against the heady ambiance of late Periclean Athens (on the dramatic date see C.C.W. Taylor 64; Walsh), the *Protagoras* is the single most revealing source concerning the sophist Protagoras' pedagogic philosophy. A number of fine treatments of this dialogue exist, emphasizing different dimensions of the debate between Socrates and Protagoras. The most influential and widely discussed treatments are those of A.E. Taylor, who has stressed the ethical dimension of the debate, and Werner Jaeger who has laid emphasis on the pedagogical. As the topic under discussion in the dialogue is whether *arete* can be taught, both ethical and pedagogical questions are present, and deeply intertwined. In my commentary, I will lay emphasis on elucidating Protagoras' pedagogic theories, which are frequently treated only as foils for Socrates' views. I am inclined to agree with Michael Gagarin's argument that Plato's purpose is not to attack Protagoras, but rather to compare Protagoras' and Socrates' views on *arete* and whether or not it can be taught. This view implies that a fair-minded Plato has represented Protagoras' views as fully and forcefully as possible, and that a reasonably good picture of Protagoras can be gained from study of the dialogue (for an alternate view, see Farrar 53-56).

Before turning to my commentary on the *Protagoras*, I begin with a preliminary discussion of the key term of the dialogue, *arete*, and about the general state of education in fifth century Athens.

The Meaning of *Arete* through the Fifth Century B.C.E.

The chief question of the *Protagoras* is whether *arete*, often translated as "virtue" or "excellence," can be taught. To understand the dialogue some knowledge of *arete*'s ancient association with the political power of ruling elites is required, for only once it is understood that the possession of *arete* justified political leadership can the destabilizing potential of teaching *arete* be appreciated.

Arete is a word whose earliest meaning was considerably softened by later influences. Although Protagoras and his contemporaries frequently used it to signify a just and moderate

character, in the Homeric poems (recorded *circa* 700 B.C.E., but reflecting a way of life already in decline), *arete* was a term that designated the highest ideals of a warrior elite–courage and martial prowess. (Jaeger 3-14; Adkins 1960, 30-40; Adkins 1972 10-21; Van Wees, 61-165: see examples of this usage in Homer *Il*.11.90; 11.763; 15.642, and especially 13.274-295). Even when the word's meaning expanded to include justice and moderation, it retained an association with courage, excellence in competition, and power. The possession of *arete* was what gave rulers the right to rule. *Arete* is, after all, derived from the same root as *aristos*–a word that signified the "best" class of people. An "aristocracy" is literally the rule of those who possess *arete*.

The evolution of *arete* in classical Greece in some ways parallels the evolution of the word "virtue" in late antiquity. "Virtue," as we know it, is a Christianized shadow of the Latin *virtus*, which originally designated masculine strength and courage, and was a quality prized by the Romans for obvious reasons. Like *arete*, the term *virtue* mellowed as it aged. However, despite the parallel, "*arete*" is generally more accurately translated as "excellence" than "virtue." It is of the greatest importance that neither the Christian understanding of virtue (emphasizing the sinner's humility before God), nor the liberal view of virtue (which sees it as a private rather than a public matter) be read back into classical discussions of *arete*. There was nothing humble about the archaic warrior elite, and nothing private about the brand of excellence they idealized. *Arete*'s essential connection to the public standing of an individual held throughout the classical era.

The long and rich history of *arete* has been told by a number of prominent scholars. Jaeger ("Book One," in *Volume One*), A.W.H Adkins, Walter Donlan, and Alasdair MacIntyre (114-189) all, at varying lengths, relate the story of how the ideal of excellence signified by *arete* evolved from that mixture of courage and martial prowess valorized in Homer, into the ability to choose the mean between extremes described by Aristotle. In order to give some sense of the history of this key term, I will here very briefly give the bare outline of the narrative related by these scholars.

There is general agreement that the transformation of *arete* was driven by the increasing importance of the *polis* (pl. *poleis*) or "city-state" (Jaeger 99-114; Donlan 35-75). Homeric *arete* was an ideal well-adapted to the needs of independent warlords who answered to no authority but an enemy's sword. But such an ideal was not conducive to the formation of stable states with permanent institutions of law, commerce, and mutual defense. Indeed, the early histories of many Greek city states, Athens not excepted, were marred by the violent conflict of rival aristocratic clans. It is not surprising, then, that the concept of *arete* was modified in the context of the *polis* so as to better serve the end of political stability.

Athens and Sparta took rather different approaches to adapting Homeric *arete* to life within a stable polity. In Athens, as in many Greek states, the competitive impulses of the warrior elite were preserved in a less threatening form by being channeled into games, festivals, and civic institutions. The elite vied for the honor associated with winning games, sponsoring festivals, providing for military expeditions, and, of course, for recognition in a highly competitive legal and intellectual culture. While the Athenians allowed old rivalries to simmer and competitive impulses to persist in

tamed form beside a slowly growing appreciation of cooperative excellence, the Peloponnesian state of Sparta took quite a different approach. At Sparta, competitive *arete* was systematically crushed in every individual by the harsh system of military education they called *agoge.* The sort of excellence they idealized involved both an unlimited capacity for violence and a total devotion to the state. These ideals are especially well preserved by the mid-seventh century elegiac poet Tyrtaeus, who wrote a series of songs to inspire his countrymen in battle that contrasted the *arete* of the citizen-warrior to more frivolous forms of excellence like athletics, beauty and wealth (see especially fragment 12; see Jaeger, *Volume One*, 87-98).

The idea that cooperative excellences like *dikeosyne*, "righteousness," and *sophrosyne,* "temperance" or "moderation," were the most important sorts of *arete* took a long time to gain traction. Both the Athenian institutionalization of competition and the Spartan *agoge* were well established when the poet Theognis declared that "*Dikeosyne* is the sum of all *arete*" (Fragment 10D), and this sentiment was well ahead of its time in the mid-sixth century. By the fifth century, in which Plato's dialogues *Meno* and *Protagoras* are set, the average Athenian appears to have been ready to admit that there existed different sorts of *arete*, most prominently including *dikeosyne*, *sophrosyne*, *hosiotes* (piety), *sophia* (wisdom) and *andreia* (courage) (see *Meno* 73e-74a; *Protagoras* 324e-325a, 330b). This list prominently features a number of cooperative traits. However, when pressed for a definition of *arete* itself, as a singular abstract quality, most Athenians would probably have agreed with Meno:

> It is easily stated that a man's *arete* is this–that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. (71e)

Meno's definition shows that the wolfish *arete* of the warlord remained alive and well within the *polis* in Socrates' time, but had put on the lamb's clothes of civic life. Such traditional notions of the meaning of *arete* would continue to vie for supremacy with those newer conceptions of excellence centered on justice and moderation.

Even as the meaning of *arete* expanded to include notions of justice and moderation, it was still viewed as a trait exclusive to the ruling class well into the fifth century. Where the archaic warlords had defined themselves in terms of martial excellence, the ruling clans of the *polis* began to define themselves as being more just and more self-controlled than the masses. These new conceptions of excellence, although "softer" than Homeric *arete*, continued to warrant rule. It was only when the sophists like Protagoras arrived in the mid-fifth century to make the shocking claim that *arete* could be taught to practically anyone that the exclusive connection between the ruling families and their *arete* began to unravel. The connection between *arete* and power is an important part of what is at stake in the *Protagoras*.

It is important to emphasize how radical, potentially destabilizing, and much debated was the claim that *arete* could be taught. Aristophanes' comedy, *Clouds*, represents the traditionalist

response to the sophists. He portrayed them as the peddlers of contrived and meaningless verbiage who had no concern for the devastating effects they were having on the social order–which was being turned on its head as non-aristocratic citizens gained wealth through trade and the professions, and the older aristocratic clans were being attacked both legally and politically. Aristophanes portrays the sophists, in whose ranks he includes Socrates, not as teachers of *arete* at all, but rather as tricksters who were leading common citizens to overreach both their capacities and their station.

The fifth century debate about the teachability of virtue was by no means limited to embittered aristocrats. The fifth century sophistic treatise, *Dissoi Logoi*, which sets out opposing arguments on a variety of subjects, devotes its sixth chapter to arguments concerning the teachability of *arete*. The anonymous author considers a number of objections to the thesis that *arete* is teachable. These include the objection that many go to the sophists without learning *arete*, and the objection that many learn *arete* without going to the sophists. He argues that neither of these is absolute proof that *arete* can't be taught–don't many fail to learn letters from their tutors, while some untutored pick up literacy on their own? Yet who would say that letters can't be taught? The author concludes with the safely agnostic position that, although the arguments that *arete* cannot be taught are not sufficient to prove the case, neither is there sufficient proof that *arete* can be taught. Those who provided an education that purportedly increased *arete*, a group that included both Protagoras and Plato, could not afford to be as blithely agnostic on the subject as the author of the *Dissoi Logoi*. Plato shows how seriously he takes the question by devoting both the *Protagoras* and *Meno* to it.

***Paideia*: Education in Fifth Century Athens**

To understand the debate about the teaching of *arete* that takes place in the *Protagoras*, it is also necessary to know something about the state of education in fifth century Athens and the new class of teachers who were rapidly changing it: the sophists.

The years between the Athenian victory over the Persian fleet at Salamis (480 B.C.E.) and the critical defeat of the Athenian fleet at Syracuse (413 B.C.E.) were, in general, a time of bold confidence, rapidly increasing prosperity, and progressive democratization in Athens. The penultimate part of this period of prosperity is called the Periclean Age, after Pericles, the most influential statesman in Athens between approximately 450 and 430 B.C.E. Under Pericles Athens undertook to build the Parthenon and other public works, and enacted political reforms that put the common people–the *demos*–on a more even footing legally and politically with the *agathoi*–the ancient ruling elite.

By the 440's Athens began to attract the itinerant teachers of Greece, called sophists. Their name, *sophistes*, was derived from the word for wisdom, *sophia*, which, in the Greek of the time signified a crafty sort of useful knowledge (Kerferd 24-41; Schiappa 3-12). We know of many individual sophists: Gorgias, Protagoras, Antiphon, Lysias, Hippias, Prodicus and many others. The story of the "sophistic movement" has been told at length in a number of times (Grote; Untersteiner; Guthrie; Kerford; Jarratt; Enos; J. Poulakos) and there also exist a variety of studies of individual

sophists (for Protagoras, see Schiappa; for Gorgias, Consigny; for Antiphon, Gagarin 2002; for Isocrates, see Too, T. Poulakos, and Haskins).

When the sophists began to arrive in Athens in the mid-fifth century, education, called *paideia*, was a haphazard enterprise. The story of its progress also has been recounted by a number of prominent historians (Marrou 3-101; Beck; Jaeger; Griffith) to whom I refer the reader for more detail. From a patchwork of primary texts (including Thucydides 7.29, Aristophanes *Clouds* 961-1100, *Knights* 987-96, 1238-9; Plato *Protagoras* 325e-326b, *Charmides* 159c, Isocrates *Antidosis* 267) historians have put together a rough outline of the traditional *paideia* at Athens. The sons of citizens, starting at the age of seven or eight, studied with tutors to learn the basics of reading, music and gymnastic pursuits for as little as two years (Griffith 67-68). The vast majority of citizens completed their tutoring by puberty. Any education beyond this was accomplished through military training (the *ephebia*) which commenced at the age of eighteen and lasted for two years, and through a variety of private and civic associations. There were no systematically structured pursuits for young men to follow between puberty and their eighteenth birthday.

Mark Griffith has recently emphasized the extent to which private and civic associations contributed to the "higher" education of Athenian youth. He points out four types of associations that had some pedagogical function: 1) the *choria*, which were groups whose purpose was choral recitation to honor the gods at various festivals (such as the Dionisysia at which comedies and tragedies were performed), 2) the *syssitia*, which were clubs where members of the same military unit dined together, 3) the *symposia* and *hetaireia* were smaller private clubs devoted to drinking, discussion, and political organization, and 4) various professional associations devoted to patron gods. In each of these contexts a citizen might hear and discuss the poetry that still transmitted the culture's normative ideals, take part in the discussion of politics, and generally be socialized to the expectations of the society.

Much of the practical work of politics–the discussion of policy and formation of power blocks–seems to have taken place in the more exclusive private clubs (Griffith 57, and Connor). It is probable that the path to power in the *polis* lay both through membership in the most exclusive private clubs as well as the sponsorship of the activities of religious and military organizations. In such contexts, the more intellectual excellences, such as *sophia*, *epistmeme*, and *dianoia* ("brilliance") would have probably taken on increasing importance (Ford).

Given the situation, the sophists found a demand not only to provide speech writing and legal guidance for adult clients who were facing the uncertainties of a litigious democracy, but also to provide an education that prepared the young to take part in the sort of "sophisticated" discussions of poetry and politics that were the substance of *symposia* and *hetaireia* conversation. It was thus the valuable *arete* of *ey legein*–good composition–that the sophists professed to teach: an *arete* that encompassed being articulate, quick, generally knowledgeable, and, above all else, impressive in conversation. To this end, the sophists taught a variety of subjects: including speech writing, literary criticism, cosmology, and geometry. At least some of them explicitly claimed that through such

studies students could increase their *arete*. Their popularity as educators was also aided by the lack of any formal education for children between about fourteen and eighteen years of age–one should imagine Protagoras and the other sophists lecturing to groups that included many boys in this age group.

Protagoras' Account of How *Arete* Can be Taught

Now, with some understanding of both the general state of education in fifth century Athens and the potentially destabilizing effects of the claim that *arete* can be taught, we are in a position to look more closely at Protagoras' account of how *arete* can be taught as it is presented in the *Protagoras*. It is useful, for purposes of exposition, to consider this account in three portions. The first portion of the dialogue builds to a clever challenge issued by Socrates to Protagoras to defend the proposition that *arete* can be taught. In the second portion, Protagoras meets the challenge by defining *arete* and offering proof that it is teachable. In the final portion Protagoras gives a demonstration of this manner of teaching *arete*. I shall deal with each in turn.

Socrates' Challenge

The opening of the dialogue finds Socrates telling how he accompanied his friend Hippocrates to meet the great sophist, Protagoras. Socrates had encountered the young Hippocrates rushing to see the sophist with the abandoned enthusiasm that today is reserved for pop idols. Hippocrates revealed to Socrates his hope that sitting at the feet of Protagoras will make him the ability of *deinon legein*–to speak awesomely (312d). Socrates decides to come along to play the part of the young man's better judgment. The pair encounter Protagoras in the house of Callias, a wealthy noble famous for his extravagance, surrounded by an impossible array of leading sophists, the sons of Pericles, and Alcibiades, a young aristocrat much admired by Socrates, and everyone else, for his beauty.

Protagoras' position at the center of this gathering reflects his prominence as an intellectual figure in Athens in the Age of Pericles. Among the earliest and most famous of the sophists, Protagoras was born in the Thracian commercial center of Abdera *circa* 490 B.C.E. and died *circa* 420 B.C.E. He was closely associated with Democritus and Leucippus, the Abderian pioneers of atomic philosophy (DK A1=Diogenes Laertius 9.50). He was also closely associated with Pericles. He is reported to have been an advisor to Pericles by Plutarch (*Pericles* 36) and to have been selected to draft the constitution for the new Athenian colony of Thurii, founded in 444 (Diogenes Laertius 9.50). Although he apparently became quite wealthy from his teaching, he is generally treated as a man of integrity and an important thinker by Plato, Aristotle and the later tradition (Schiappa 12-16).

Upon meeting Protagoras, Socrates, in the role of Hippocrates' better judgment, asks what Hippocrates will get out of becoming a follower of Protagoras. Protagoras replies simply that Hippocrates will become better (*beltion*) each and every day he comes to class (318a). This answer does not satisfy Socrates, because young men naturally become better every day as they mature into adults. So he presses Protagoras to explain how his instruction is superior to that of the other

gathered sophists. Protagoras' reply is perhaps the oldest defense of liberal education in the western tradition. He explains that while other sophists force the young into further study of the crafts (*technai*) of calculation, astronomy, geometry and music, he works to improve the good judgment (*eyboylia*) of each pupil concerning both the management of their own households (*oikoi*) and the state (*polis*), "showing him how to be influential through speech and action" (318e).

Protagoras' response here hinges on distinguishing what he teaches from *techne*, and it is worth considering both the full meaning of this term and Protagoras' disavowal of it. A *techne* (pl. *technai*) was, in general, a productive craft, like pottery, carpentry, weaving, painting, shipbuilding, and so on. In classical Greece such crafts were generally practiced not professionally by citizens of the first rank, but by those of lower status, and also by women, slaves and itinerant craftsmen. Thus, knowledge of *technai* was not something to which ambitious young men aspired. Although some crafts, like metalworking, had a higher rank than others, in general expert technical knowledge was not generally looked upon as part of *arete*, but rather as a mark of subservience or even femininity. So Protagoras' disavowal of the teaching of *techne* is consonant with the expectations of his students and with the traditional outlook.

In response to Protagoras' disavowal of the teaching of any *techne*, Socrates asks Protagoras if he means to say that he teaches the *techne* of civic life (*politikos techne*). Protagoras agrees that he does (319a), but this is a hasty commitment. Later in the dialogue Protagoras will reassert his opening position, making clear that he does not consider *arete* to be a species of *techne*. While Protagoras' position was quite traditional, Socrates' positive valuation of *techne* is non-traditional and vaguely proletarian. His suggestion that there could be a *techne* of politics was downright radical. It amounted to subordinating the *arete* of the descendants of warriors to the *techne* of the craftsmen who had served them. The progress of the dialogue will reveal that, whatever its ideological disadvantages, it is clear that a *techne* can be taught. The same can not be said for *arete*.

Socrates next makes the leap to equate what he calls Protagoras' *politikos techne* with *arete*, and proposes that *arete* cannot be taught, and, by implication, that Protagoras is a fraud. He offers two proofs that *arete* cannot be taught. (1) While the Athenian Assembly (*ecclesia*) listens to advice on technical crafts like shipbuilding only from those with professional knowledge, it seeks advice on political matters from any citizen regardless of profession. Therefore political *arete* must not be something that is taught, like technical knowledge, but rather something inherent (319b-d). (2) Moreover, if *arete* could be taught, Socrates continues, those with great *arete* would have taught it to their children, but the fact that this has not been accomplished in most cases is evident from the mediocre character of the progeny of many notable men, like the sons of Pericles (who happened to be in the room) (319e-320c).

In this opening exchange, a number of important problems with both Protagoras' statement and Socrates' counterstatement emerge. Protagoras set out by maintaining that he was not a teacher of *technai*, but rather one who sought to improve the judgment of his pupils. This account is unclear because Protagoras has substituted a goal (students attaining good judgment) for a wide range of

content (all craft knowledge), without specifying how he would achieve the goal. Socrates has assumed that Protagoras must be implying that he will achieve the goal of imparting good judgment by means of instruction in another sort of craft knowledge, a *politikos techne*, and further assumes that knowledge of such a craft would necessarily entail possession of *arete*. Protagoras, however, has said that he will not depend upon craft knowledge to develop good judgment. Beyond this, it remains unclear to what extent *techne* can really be equated with *arete*, which requires doing as well as knowing, and has quite different class associations.

What is clear, as Kerferd has pointed out (113), is that Socrates has set a trap for Protagoras. If Protagoras takes the bait and accepts that *arete* is a product of a teachable political *techne*, he will be disqualifying the majority of the assembly from being competent to participate in deliberations, and will also be implying that Pericles, his friend and patron, either has no *arete* or is negligent in teaching it. To avoid these traps Protagoras needs to produce an account of *arete* that distinguishes it from *techne*, proves it to be possessed by everyone to some degree (to preserve the open character of the Assembly), but also that it is teachable (to preserve his own reputation), and finally that some are more capable of learning it than others (to defend Pericles from the charge of neglecting his sons' education).

The four parameters that Socrates' challenge impose on Protagoras' definition of *arete* can be enumerated, as follows: 1) Teachability, 2) Distinction from technical knowledge, 3) Universal distribution, and 4) Uneven distribution not solely determined by the quality of instruction. Although these parameters are not quite mutually exclusive, they certainly offer some deep conundrums. Why teach something that is universally inherent? How can anything other than technical knowledge be taught? What are the chances that an unevenly distributed quality is also universally distributed?

Protagoras' Account of Arete

In response to Socrates' challenge, Protagoras gives a longer and more nuanced account of what *arete* is, how it is related to *techne*, and the extent to which it can be taught. The account has three parts. The first part makes the case that *arete* is something distinct from *techne* and that it is possessed by all to some extent. The second part makes the case that *arete* is teachable. The third part makes the case that some have a greater aptitude for political *arete* than others.

The case that *arete* is distinct from *techne* and universally distributed among people begins with a *mythos* or fable that tells how humans came to possess both *techne* and *arete* (320d-323a). Prometheus, the story goes, stole fire and along with it "craft wisdom" (*entechnos sophia*), and gave these gifts to humankind. But such skills were not enough to enable people to live peaceably together. Humans in possession of technical knowledge but without political excellence lived in a perpetual war of all against all. Zeus, seeing the plight of humans, sent Hermes to distribute the *aretai* of *aidos* and *dike*, respect and justice, giving some to every human being, and these excellences allowed humans to come together and form *poleis*. Unlike the *technai*, which had been given only to some, the *aretai* were given to all.

To this mythical account of how political *arete* was given to all people, Protagoras adds a logical argument that makes the same point (323a-327a): no one in any court ever makes the defense that they have no *dike* and consequently cannot be blamed for a crime, therefore it must be universally supposed that all people have a sense of *dike*.

The basic message of both the fable and the argument is that some degree of *arete* must be possessed by every member of every human community for those communities to exist at all. To lack all *arete* is to be less than fully human. All this is true enough if one takes *arete*, in its most basic form, to be merely basic fairness and social competence.

Next, Protagoras turns to make his second point, namely, that even if everyone has some amount of *arete*, it is possible to increase *arete* through instruction. To make this point, he begins by arguing that the use of punishment presupposes that it is possible to correct behavior and thus teach *arete* (323c-324d). Only a simplistic few see punishment as a means of vengeance. The rest see it as a means either of making the wrong-doer better, or of deterring other wrong-doers. Both rationales assume that it is possible to learn *arete*, again understood as basic socially responsible behavior. This fairly brief passage both makes the point that *arete* is teachable (a point which will be reinforced later) and also implies that some have more *arete* than others. Both these points are true if one can accept that *arete*, understood to be social competence, is fostered by correction and punishment.

Finally, Protagoras addresses the question of why the children of great men often turn out to be rather average in matters of civic *arete*. Protagoras begins by remarking how surprising it would be for noble families, who could lose their position and lives if any member displayed a lack of *arete*, to neglect to teach it. He then proceeds to describe how the children of the *agathoi* (nobles) are, in fact, "taught and admonished from earliest childhood until the last days of their lives." (325c) Running from 325c to 236e, this description is one of the most important sources of information about early Athenian pedagogic practice. It describes a well-bred Athenian citizen's education, beginning with nurse and mother, moving on to gymnasium, letters and music, and continuing through the law and politics. In all phases, there is much emphasis on admonishment, *noytheteo*, and correction, *kolazo*, a word that literally means "to prune." Protagoras claims that this whole educational process contributes to the development of *arete*, thus defending Pericles and the other *agathoi* from the charge of neglecting to educate their children in *arete*. He also takes the opportunity to reinforce the point that *arete* is teachable: Athenians would not expend so much energy on correcting the behavior of the children if they did not believe that it was possible that all this correction, which is a kind of teaching, would increase *arete*.

Having made the point that the *agathoi* do teach *arete* to their children, Protagoras provides an explanation of why the children of the *agathoi* don't become better than their fellow citizens. It is that, in Athens, everyone, not just the children of the leading families, receives a lifetime of training in *arete*, so it is no wonder that not much difference is seen between the children of great men and

ordinary citizens. He proposes an analogy to explain why the children of great men fair no better than the children of ordinary men (327b-327d): In a city where all citizens were constantly instructed in flute playing from the earliest age, the children of master-flute players would have no better a chance of becoming master-flute players than the children of average flute players. It would depend entirely on the nature (*physis*) of the individual (327d). So it is with *arete*, because everyone receives the best instruction from the earliest age, anyone can excel. Ultimately, by asserting that all Athenians receive a superior education in *arete*, Protagoras is able to make the nature of the individual (*physis*) the most important determining factor in the attainment of *arete* without denying that education (*didacteo, paideia*) is also a factor in principle. He thus preserves a justification for his professional practice even while allowing for highly variable results.

Protagoras' Pedagogy of Arete

Protagoras' account of the nature of *arete* leaves unclear how exactly he goes about improving the good judgment of his students. He has asserted that he does not do it through instruction in a particular technical knowledge, but said nothing about how it is accomplished. To learn the anser to this question we must move forward to 339a where Protagoras gives what should be taken as a demonstration of his pedagogic practice. He begins with these words:

> I consider, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man's education (*paideia*) is to be awesome (*deinon*) in matters of verse, to apprehend in the compositions of the poets, what is rightly (*orthos*) made and what is not, and to know how to distinguish them and account for them when questioned.

It would seem that Protagoras' main enterprise is to develop *arete* by means of the critical analysis and interpretation of poetry. Following this introduction is a lengthy discussion of a poem by Simonides (339a-347b).

Given the introduction just cited, Protagoras' purpose for turning to a discussion of Simonides' poem is apparently to give a pedagogic demonstration. Many scholars, including Taylor and Gagarin, are inclined to see the discussion of Simonides' poem as less than entirely serious. Gagarin (151) thinks Socrates is sending up sophistic methods of interpretation–which he probably is. But although the tone is certainly light, and the interpretations somewhat arbitrary, I am inclined to agree with Clapp that there is a serious purpose behind the exercise. While Clapp rightly sees Socrates' reading of Simonides as an answer to certain issues raised by Protagoras, even this interpretation, like Gagarin's, doesn't explain why Protagoras chose to discuss a poem in the first place. There can be no other reason for this choice than to give a demonstration of one of his favorite methods of teaching.

The question naturally arises of how Protagoras could plausibly have held that the critical interpretation of poetry could foster *arete*, particularly in its political dimension. There is both a general answer to this question, pertaining to the place of poetry in classic Greek culture, and a specific answer, pertaining to Protagoras' specific handling of the discussion of Simonides.

Concerning the place of poetry in Greek culture: As many scholars have noted, poetry was still one of the primary means by which the social norms and expectations were conveyed in the classical era (see Robb, Havelock 1963 20-35). The works of Homer, Hesiod and other poets contained all that the average Greek knew about the world beyond his immediate experience. Thus the study, interpretation, and critical analysis of poetry in classic Greek society might be thought of as being the rough equivalent of the study, interpretation and critical analysis of scripture in a theocratic society. In both cases there would be a political dimension to the interpretation of key texts. In addition, there was a general belief that imitation (*mimesis*) of the subjects of epic and lyric poetry lead students to take on their laudable characteristics. In his description of the traditional *paideia*, Protagoras himself said:

> the children, when they have learnt their letters and are getting to understand the written word as before they did only the spoken, are furnished with works of good poets to read as they sit in class, and are made to learn them off by heart: here they meet with many admonitions, many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past, that the boy in envy may imitate (*mimeomai*) them and yearn to become even as they. (Protagoras 325 c-e)

Given this general attitude toward poetry, the expectation that the advanced study of poetry would advance *arete* is hardly surprising. Moreover, clever discussion of poetry was a staple of conversation at the private and civic associations to which all Athenian citizens belonged and through which much of the practical work of politics was conducted. To be "awesome" in matters of verse, then, could probably lead to social advancement in a fairly direct way.

One can find some additional reasons for the belief that the criticism of poetry could enhance *arete* in Protagoras' particular approach to the subject. Even before Socrates productively hijacks the discussion, Protagoras is doing far more than counting syllables and matching rhymes. His sort of criticism apparently involves looking for internal contradictions in logic (339c-d), consideration of the multiple senses of key terms (340c-342a), and contextualization of the poem in terms of history and the literary tradition (342a-343c). Moreover, to conduct such critical discussions of a text from memory is in itself a rigorous mental exercise. Clearly, such discussions arguably could lead to the development of several important critical skills: logical analysis, a critical approach to the meaning of language and a general facility for textual interpretation. Further, because poetry was often used without much critical understanding to warrant questionable behavior and even legal actions (Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* revolves around this point, see especially 5d-6a), its analysis promoted a more thoughtful and reflective approach to received cultural norms.

If Protagoras had some good reasons for claiming that the critical analysis of poetry could promote *arete*, Socrates' objections to such proceeding should also be noted. At the end of a dazzling analysis of Simonides' ode, Socrates steers the conversation away from any further discussion of the poem. He explains that most claims about the "true" meaning of poetry are in

principle unprovable, and that it is generally more productive for men to critically consider their own affairs than it is to spend their time showing how dazzling they can be in interpreting poetry (347c-348a).

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