

EXTENDED ESSAY

What can we learn from the myth of Protagoras?

Classics

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AA

I shall be investigating the myth told by Protagoras in his eponymous dialogue written by Plato. I shall be seeing what insight Protagoras gives us by using his myth and how it can be interpreted. First, I shall clarify a few things. I am defining the myth as ll.320d1-323a4 and when I use the phrase political skill, I mean the ability to be a good citizen or social being.

In the dialogue Socrates has come to talk to Protagoras, a Sophist, and has asked him what exactly he does, Protagoras claims that he teaches people how to be good citizens. He says that he will be able to teach them to play their part in running the city, as Athens was a democracy at the time and most people were involved in government to some degree. Socrates does not believe that this is something that can be taught and asks Protagoras to explain why he thinks it can.

The first part of Protagoras' response is this myth: When the creatures on the Earth were being created Epimetheus and Prometheus were given the task of assigning abilities to them. Epimetheus said he would do the assigning and then Prometheus could come and inspect them. Epimetheus gave all the creatures their abilities and made sure they all balanced out so everything was harmonious. He then realised he had forgotten about man. Prometheus then stole fire and technical skill from the gods and gave them to man, but he was not able to steal the art of running a city from Zeus. Man then thrived and progressed but could not band together into large groups and so started to die out. Zeus then told Hermes to give justice and shame to mankind so that they would be able to build cities and continue to live. He also specified that these gifts should be given to all mankind and not just a few specialists.

Should any of this myth be taken literally? If one takes the end of this myth at face value it seems that Protagoras is arguing that the political skill is intrinsic to humanity because humanity is made politically skilful by the gods. If political skill is an intrinsic trait it is implied that it is something you either have or you do not have, like a certain hair or eye colour. Therefore it cannot be learned. This means he is arguing against his original statement that political skill can be taught. Further evidence for it being unlikely that Protagoras is genuinely arguing that political skill is a gift from the gods is that he was an agnostic. In his lost fragment *On the Gods* he says:

About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.¹

This means that he is not saying this actually the case. It also makes it clear that he is not seriously claiming that the beginning of the myth is how man truly was created.

¹ (Freeman, 1948)

However, the question I posed was should **any** of the myth be taken literally. So what about the last part of the story (ll.322d6-323a4)? Here he breaks from the narrative to address Socrates and explains the last of it. The penultimate line of this section is particularly interesting:

“παντι προσῆκον ταύτης γε μετέχειν τῆς ἀρετῆς ἢ μὴ εἶναι πόλεις.”²

“it is incumbent on everyone to share in that sort of excellence or else there can be no city at all.”³

This line is fairly ambiguous as it is unclear whether or not we should take it literally. We do not know whether “παντι” means everyone or nearly everyone. If we take everyone to mean **everyone**, the line quoted above is clearly incorrect. All cities have plenty of people who do not have political skill and the cities still exist. Either Protagoras made a grave mistake, which is unlikely, or he was not speaking literally. Therefore we do not take this part of the story at face value either. But what about the middle section of the myth, the section describing how man fared before obtaining the art of running a city (ll.322a3-c1)? I feel this can be taken literally because it involves nothing supernatural such as divine intervention and is purely a description of the logical consequences to the scenario that has been described. Assuming humans had the gifts of intelligence and craftsmanship, they would have survived but have been under constant threat from predators as fighting them off requires larger groups. Thus human beings would have been in danger of extinction if they had not learned to cooperate. So, yes, some of the myth can be taken literally but it can be discerned that some must be interpreted as we can show through analysis it cannot be being stated as fact.

According to the myth, the art of running a city appears to be comprised of two virtues: justice and shame (“αἰδῶ τε καὶ δίκην”⁴). Protagoras’ choice of justice is fairly self-explanatory, but the choice of shame is more interesting. It feels like an odd pick, an important quality but surely not vital. The word αἰδώς, literally means “a sense of shame”⁵ but has links with honour and respect and, at the time this was written, αἰδώς was commonly associated with σωφροσύνη⁶, a word meaning “soundness of mind”. As the word is linked to σώφρων, it bears connotations of moderation and thus self-restraint. But it is still not clear why this is needed as well as justice. If man has a sense of justice, will this not also give them self-restraint as they will see the injustice of any action they might wish to perform? To answer this, we must delve deeper into the myth.

² (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 323a

³ (Plato, Protagoras, 1976) 323a

⁴ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 322c

⁵ (Scott, 2007)

⁶ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) p108

The two biggest characters of the myth, Prometheus and Epimetheus, are more than just gods but also personifications of two aspects of human nature⁷. Epimetheus represents humanity's simpler and more primal side. He is described as "being not altogether wise" ("οὐ πάνυ τι σοφὸς ὤν"). He is more focused on having fun than actually doing his job properly as evidenced by the fact that he works so hastily that he completely forgets about humanity. Furthermore he specifically asks for the more fun task of assigning each species attributes so that the boring task of checking everything has been done properly is left to his brother. He therefore represents humanity's primal side as he is concerned with immediate pleasures and does not care about anything long term. On the other hand, Prometheus represents man's more logical and evolved side. He is able to solve problems which Epimetheus cannot. He comes up with a solution to the issue of what to give humanity while Epimetheus "was at a loss" ("ἠπόρει"). He is also cunning as he is able to steal from the gods. He is focused on the future as his task to inspect the creatures and see if their gifts will be beneficial later and he steals from the gods for the greater good of mankind; he sacrifices his present for their future.

These two sides to the human mind have been very astutely observed by Protagoras. In fact they are no longer a philosophical observation but scientifically proven. They correspond to two different parts of the brain. The limbic system, a very old and primal part of the brain, is essentially your inner monkey and is obsessed, like Epimetheus with immediate pleasures. The prefrontal cortex is a more recent and highly evolved part of the brain and is more logical and able to see into the future a bit more and see the long term benefits of things, like Prometheus. These two parts of the brain can sometimes get in each other's way and are responsible for various phenomena, such as procrastination. This symbolism in the myth is therefore quite illuminating in regard to the method of human thought and quite ahead of its time.

But how do these modes of thought, which for future reference I shall call Epimethean and Promethean, influence the overall meaning behind the myth? This symbolism is more than just an interesting but irrelevant feature because the implication of the myth is that, having been created by both Epimetheus and Prometheus, man possesses both Promethean and Epimethean modes of thought. The animals, solely created by Epimetheus are entirely Epimethean in character. Being purely Epimethean therefore makes man no better than the animals. But being purely Promethean is not good either as one would only think about future benefits and give no thought to the present at all. Man cannot be purely Promethean nor can they be purely Epimethean. However being both still presents problems for neither will allow for cooperation. The Epimethean man will not care what happens to others, only being interested in gaining pleasure for himself. The Promethean man will also give no consideration for

⁷ (Balaban, Oct 1987)

others as he will only view them as tools or things to be exploited. This is because the Promethean man views everything as a means to an end. He will act in the same way as Prometheus, perfectly willing to steal to achieve his goal. As we are told by the myth, humanity cannot survive with these two traits alone.

And now we return to why Zeus gives mankind shame, or, perhaps more accurately, self-restraint, as well as justice. The gift of justice counteracts man's Promethean qualities. This stops them viewing their fellow's as purely things to be exploited. The gift of justice gives man strict morals to follow; it is beyond law, it is a sense of right and wrong. The gift of shame counteracts man's Epimethean qualities. The gift allows man to control their impulses so that they might be able to cooperate with others and give them consideration as well. It creates morals but a different sort of morals; they are less a strong sense of right and wrong, and more a sense of etiquette and social skill. This is why shame is distinguished from justice.

If we follow the pattern of gods being used to symbolise sides of humanity we notice something else. Zeus appears to symbolise the missing piece of mankind that makes us truly great. This is our moral side, that being our sense of justice and self-restraint. According to the myth these are gifts which are controlled and guarded by him. But Zeus also personifies them because, as we know from Greek mythology, he is the god of justice and mercy. He is also king of the gods just as this last aspect of humanity is the most important because, according to the myth, we would not survive without it. The symbolism also grants an aura of divinity around this last part of the human psyche, as Zeus is the most divine god. The myth might suggest that justice is something that is by nature holy, being bestowed by the most divine of the gods and a quality of that god. He therefore contradicts himself later in the dialogue when he agrees that none of the parts of excellence are like one another:

Σω: ἕκαστον δὲ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν...ἄλλο, τὸ δὲ ἄλλο;

Πρ: ναί.⁸

So: But each of them is something different from any of the others?

Pr: Yes. (Trans. C.C.W.Taylor)⁹

The myth shows us a flaw in Protagoras' later statement before it is pointed out by Socrates.

Zeus' connection with justice in the myth also mirrors the Athenian justice system. In ancient Athens the gods were an important part of the legal system. Oath challenges (where one person challenges another to swear something by a god) were an

⁸ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 330a

⁹ (Plato, Protagoras, 1976) 330a

important practice in Greek law. They appear in mythology, for example in *The Iliad*, when Menelaus is beaten by Antilochus in a chariot race due to some unlawful driving and eventually challenges Antilochus to swear that he was not guilty of foul play¹⁰. In fact, examples are plentiful throughout Greek literature, appearing in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and in the speeches of Demosthenes. As Demosthenes was a speech writer for lawsuits and lived around the same time as Plato, we know that oath challenges were still important to the legal process at the time of this dialogue. Their role in the Athenian legal system was not only a way of verifying evidence but also a means of resolving disputes before they got to court. This was very important as court cases cost the state a lot of money and therefore oath challenges were a very useful tool for saving people time and money. They were effective as nobody would dare to lie when giving an oath for everyone believed that the gods would punish them if they did. If you didn't believe in the gods you could easily commit perjury without fear, hence atheism or worshipping false gods (which was one of the charges raised against Socrates) was a crime. So we can see that the gods were connected strongly with justice just as Zeus is in Protagoras' myth. The Zeus in the myth is therefore symbolic of the gods in general, which is appropriate as he is the father of the gods. Through this mirroring of the reality of justice the myth also may explain why there is divine involvement with the law. It suggests that the gods current involvement with the law is because the concept of law is something divine or divinely given.

The myth also points out the issue with cooperation by showing that there is a struggle between what is beneficial for the individual and what is beneficial for the group. The humans in the myth, although possessing the "τὸν βίον σοφίαν"¹¹ ("practical skill"¹²) and therefore being able to build houses and farm, cannot cooperate because they treated each other unjustly as they cannot agree on what they want and are conflicted due to self-interest. This is something with which, at least according to Protagoras, our "τὸν βίον σοφίαν" alone is not able to deal. This struggle between self and collective interest is also demonstrated by a fun little problem called the Prisoner's Dilemma. There are many versions of it but the one I shall use involves two people each with two different cards in their hands; one card says *Cooperate* on it and the other says *Betray*. The two players each play one of their cards and neither knows what card the other will play. If both players choose *Cooperate*, they each win £300. If both choose *Betray* they both lose £10. However, if one plays *Cooperate* and the other *Betray*, the one who played *Betray* wins £500 and the other loses £100. Of course the optimal choice for everyone is to agree to always play *Cooperate* but you can win more money on your own by betraying the other player although with the added risk of losing money if they also chose the *Betray* card. The overall dilemma

¹⁰ (Homer, 1974) Book 23, p471

¹¹ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 321d

¹² (Plato, Protagoras, 1976) 321d

therefore is should one act selfishly and receive maximum gain? Or should one act altruistically and receive slightly less gain but with less risk? The gifts given by Zeus in the myth help to eliminate this problem among humans. If humans use justice and self-restraint they will be able to focus on the greater good. It is as if they remove the *Betray* cards from the game, or at least make them more difficult to play.

But does this not imply that justice is a bit of a joke? As I have established, Protagoras is not actually saying that the concepts of justice and self-restraint were given to mankind by Zeus. Therefore the myth must be suggesting that humanity learnt political skill, which incorporates justice and self-restraint, in order to survive. This supports Protagoras' argument that political skill can be taught as it is saying that political skill is not intrinsic to humanity but learned and therefore is a logical interpretation. However this means that mankind overcame the Prisoner's Dilemma by simply agreeing to always play the *Cooperate* card. This implies justice is a rather flimsy thing as it only exists because we say it does. Justice is symbolised as holy in the myth as it is so tied with Zeus, as I have already discussed, so it seems odd that the conclusion we draw from the myth is that justice is more or less non-existent. However, it is doubtful that Protagoras is suggesting this because of his famous doctrine¹³ in his book *Truth*:¹⁴

"Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."¹⁵

This doctrine is discussed in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Theaetetus initially draws from it an "extreme brand of relativism"¹⁶ and is eventually forced to accept a less extreme one which "presumably is more like what the historical Protagoras actually taught"¹⁷. This states that values like justice are relative to cities not individuals. In other words justice is like fashion. Something that is fashionable is only so when the majority take it to be fashionable. However, when it is taken to be fashionable, it is truly and objectively fashionable. The point is that something that only is true in thought can become true in reality. So in that way justice is considered real by Protagoras and the argument that political skill was learned still holds up without making a mockery of justice in the process.

From Protagoras' argument that political skill was learned we can see that Protagoras was close to the truth. He seems to argue that humanity managed to beat the Prisoner's Dilemma by learning and using political skill. He suggests that this knowledge is then passed on like a tradition and is so ingrained into society that we

¹³ (Various, 2013) Denyer, ch8

¹⁴ (Various, 2013) Denyer ch8

¹⁵ (Freeman, 1948)

¹⁶ (Various, 2013) Denyer, ch8

¹⁷ (Various, 2013) Denyer, ch8

are not aware that it is not intrinsic to our nature. He later illustrates this particular point with his example of the flute playing city (ll. 327a5-c4). To explain why this is close to the truth I must return to the Prisoner's Dilemma. Scientists have made computer simulations to discover which strategy will win the most money over hundreds of turns. They found that the highest earning strategies were almost always ones that were classified as "nice". By "nice", the scientists meant that they would always cooperate first and were quick to forgive others for betraying them. On the other hand meaner strategies, while gaining more money temporarily made less money in the long term. This means that, evolutionarily speaking, animals that have a higher willingness to cooperate are more likely to survive and pass on their genes. This means that when humans banded together, those groups that were more willing to cooperate were the ones that survived. Thus the humans in those groups passed on those cooperative traits to their children. This is similar to the humans in the myth except instead of a tradition of justice being passed on through ages, it was a tendency towards justice. Therefore from Protagoras' myth we can learn that some of his views were remarkably accurate.

Let us explore why Protagoras gives a myth at all. Protagoras offers two styles of argument, saying:

“ἀλλὰ πότερον ὑμῖν...μῦθον λέγων ἐπιδείξω ἢ λόγῳ διεξιελθῶν;”¹⁸

*“But would you rather that I showed you by telling a story...or by going through a systematic exposition”*¹⁹ (Trans. C.C.W.Taylor)

The word μῦθος is fairly broad. It can mean a fictional tale, and hence is the origin of the word “myth”, but it can also be a parable which is intended to explain something. In that sense it is a sort of embroidered logic as oppose to the λόγος, which, among many things, means an argument based on fact and reason. Protagoras' apparent reason for choosing to give a μῦθος is that it is “more enjoyable”²⁰ (“χαριέστερον”)²¹. This has some logic to it, because if an argument is more enjoyable it is likely to be more compelling and persuasive. However, this does not hold true for an experienced arguer like Socrates. This excuse given by Protagoras and the parable that follows appear to be rather patronising in that regard. It is as if he is treating Socrates and the audience as children to whom he is telling a bedtime story. In fact he even says he will tell his myth “ὡς πρεσβύτερος νεωτέροις”²² (as an old man to his juniors). This impression is deliberate. It is important to bear in mind that it is Plato who is writing this and we do not know what was actually said and there is a possibility that it did

¹⁸ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 320c

¹⁹ (Plato, Protagoras, 1976) 320c

²⁰ (Plato, Protagoras, 1976) 320c

²¹ (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 320c

²² (Plato, Protagoras, 2008) 320c

not even happen. Plato is well known for disliking the Sophists and I doubt that he liked Protagoras. It is therefore a strong possibility that he is deliberately portraying him here as arrogant and in doing so showing us his contempt for Sophists like Protagoras. By saying that Protagoras chose to give his first argument as a μῦθος because it is more fun, Plato also appears to be attacking the intellectual integrity of Protagoras and, by extension, the other Sophists. Protagoras is shown to be less concerned with whether or not the μῦθος is necessary to convey his reasoning and more concerned with entertainment. Plato is therefore suggesting that he is too blasé when it comes to making his argument and is prioritising showmanship over substance and detail.

Despite Plato's view that enjoyment is not the right reason to choose an argument, Protagoras' decision to tell a μῦθος might still have merit. Protagoras, after all, is a teacher and it is reasonable for him to be concerned with keeping the attention of his audience. The audience is comprised of many men who are younger and less intelligent than Socrates. For those members it makes a more accessible argument than the dry logic of a λόγος. I have shown that it can convey more depth through hidden features, for example the symbolism of Epimetheus and Prometheus. Therefore it can be open to interpretation in a way that no λόγος can. In that sense it gives multiple answers to one question as different people draw different conclusions from it. However, a philosopher tends to be more interested in one true answer on which everyone can agree. So perhaps Protagoras is using the μῦθος as he does not think that Socrates' question can be definitively answered. But this is not the case as Protagoras offers the audience a choice between the two forms of argument, therefore implying that Socrates' question can be answered with either, again implying that there is one definitive answer. Then perhaps the room for interpretation is because Protagoras is trying to be as non-committal as possible. If there is more than one interpretation, someone may take it one way and give a good counterargument and if Protagoras cannot argue back he can claim that is not what he meant in the first place. It is a sneaky method of argument and one that you would not hear in a modern debate. It is underhand because not only can one allow themselves a lot of unjustified wiggle room in their argument but can also use the myth to cover up the fact that it does not have perfect logic. By leaving interpretation up to the listener, Protagoras is able to shrug off the need for perfectly sound reasoning. I think Pindar puts it best:

ἢ θαυματοῦς πολλά, καὶ πού τι καὶ βροτῶν φάτις ὑπὲρ τὸν ἀλαθῆ λόγον

δεδαιδαλμένοι ψεύδεσι ποικίλοις ἐξαπατῶντι μῦθοι.²³

²³ Pindar Olympians 1 ll.28-29

Yes, there are many marvels, and yet I suppose the speech of mortals beyond the true account can be deceptive, stories adorned with embroidered lies. (Tr. Diane Arnson Svarlien)

Note in this line the use of the words “λόγον” and “μῦθοι”, the former being described as “ἀλαθῆ” and the latter as “δεδαίδαλμένοι ψεύδεσι ποικίλοις”. So Protagoras’ myth demonstrates to us that one can argue in more than one way, and the μῦθος appears less concerned with hard truth as the λόγος.

So from this myth we can learn about Protagoras’ theories on the nature of the human mind, the nature of justice, the importance of shame and the issue with human cooperation. We can also see that many of his views are perceptive and also quite ahead of their time when we compare them with the findings of modern science. We can also learn that the myth itself may be a particular style of argument and the reason it is so cryptic to make it appear to have more validity than it really does. Overall we learn that the myth of Protagoras is a complex piece of writing with many hidden features and messages and is a testament to the skill of Plato or, perhaps, Protagoras.

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