

Chapter 1

Protagoras and the Philosophic Origins of Antilogic

“For I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us. Of a hundred members and faces that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as deep as I know how.”

Montaigne, “Of Democritus and Heraclitus”

The antilogical theory of argumentation originates with Protagoras of Abdera, the preeminent Sophist of Periclean Athens. Protagoras was the first Sophist to hold public debates, the first professional teacher of advanced studies, a major philosophical and rhetorical influence, a friend and ally of Pericles, and, according to many, the founder of humanistic education (see Schiller, B. Smith, Bouwsma). Despite his stature, however, any effort to reconstruct a Protagorean approach to rhetoric and argumentation begins basically from scratch. As Edward Schiappa notes, the investigation of Protagoras by communication scholars has been “virtually non-existent” (16). That is, while we have a growing volume of commentary on Protagoras, little of this scholarship directly addresses the relation between Protagorean ideas and the rhetorical tradition, and even less attention has been paid to the potential contribution of Protagorean thought to the theory, practice, and pedagogy of *contemporary* discourse.

In response to this situation, *Many Sides* attempts to reconstruct the Protagorean legacy as an alternative current in rhetorical history and to reclaim this legacy as the basis for an innovative, neo-Sophistic conception of argumentation. However, because Protagoras himself and the notion of a Protagorean rhetoric are only vaguely familiar to most scholars/teachers of rhetoric, composition, and argument, it seems best to begin this project with

what the Greeks called the *archai*, or starting points. And in the case of Protagoras, the starting points are his two most original and influential ideas: the doctrine of opposing arguments and the allied concept that humanity is the measure of all things.¹

Any theory of argumentation built upon Protagorean ideas will naturally foreground the two-*logoi* fragment, in which Protagoras is reported to have been the first to claim that “on every issue there are two arguments (*logoi*) opposed to each other” (*DK* 80 A12).² Indeed, the concept of opposing positions in argument (*antilogoi*) is, as G. B. Kerferd notes, “the most characteristic feature of the thought of the whole Sophistic period” (1981, 85). It is also the driving concept behind this book. But if we are to understand the full resonance and promise of the opposing-*logoi* concept, it is crucial that we also consider the theoretical framework that supports the unique practice of Protagorean antilogic. So while antilogic will be the centerpiece of my inquiry and will occupy our full attention in the ensuing chapters of Part I, this opening chapter is devoted to the human-measure doctrine, that momentous philosophical theory which F. C. S. Schiller calls “one of the great monuments of Greek genius” and which I take to be the first principle of Protagorean thought (1970, 37). First, however, a brief introduction to Protagoras himself is in order.

Like most of the Sophists, Protagoras was an outsider in Athens. He was born (c. 490 BCE) in the small city of Abdera on the coast of Thrace in the northern Aegean. His arrival in Athens (c. 460) coincides with both the dawn of the Sophistic tradition and the Age of Pericles, in which innovations in drama, politics, philosophy, art, and medicine all contributed to the inauguration of Western culture. Protagoras himself was acquainted with Pericles and was dispatched by him to draft the laws of Thurii, a Greek colony in southern Italy. But Protagoras’ primary legacy comes in the intellectual sphere. In the dialogue that Plato names after him (which remains the best portrait we have of the great Sophist), Protagoras declares with pride that he is “a confessed sophist” and educator (*Protagoras* 317b), implying that he was a professional teacher of practical knowledge; i.e., of how to conduct one’s public and private life with virtue, and, in particular, how to reason and speak well on all occasions (see Plato’s *Gorgias* 449a and *Protagoras* 318-19a; see also Kerferd 1981, 24-41). We also know that Protagoras was the first of the Sophists to charge a fee for his lessons, which makes him a founder of Western pedagogy and the first paid professor (*DK* 80 A2, Philostratus 1.10.4).

Diogenes Laertius lists fourteen books by Protagoras on subjects ranging from argument and debate to government, theology, mathematics, and wrestling (9.55).³ None of this work survives in anything more than a few isolated sentences, and for these fragments we depend upon the reports of

near contemporaries (Plato and Aristotle) and on the work of much later Greek writers notably Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, and Sextus Empiricus, all figures from the 2-3C CE. So in dealing with the Protagorean canon there is a good deal of speculation as historians and theorists grapple with the provocative, yet gnomic dicta that constitute his surviving corpus. Nor are the details of his life any more precise; e.g., it is unclear if Protagoras died in disgrace or distinction, though his death itself is conventionally set around 420 BCE. What we do know is that Protagoras was a formidable intellectual presence whose challenging, original ideas—on diction, grammar, criticism, and theology as well as philosophy and argument—not only compelled careful scrutiny by Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates but also continue to reverberate with implications for our own age, as we will see.⁴

1. THE PROTAGOREAN FRAGMENTS AND THE THEORY OF PERSPECTIVISM

The generally accepted version of the human-measure fragment is as follows:

Of all things the measure is [humanity], of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not.

(Sextus, see *DK* 80 B1)

By any standard, the statement is momentous; nor is it too much, I think, to claim for it status as the point of origin, the *fons et origo*, for 2,500 years of Western Humanism.⁵ In a purely philosophical context, the fragment gives rise to a host of potential controversies, many of which I will address in the course of this chapter. With regard specifically to matters of discourse, however, the human-measure doctrine can be effectively approached by concentrating on two of its primary attributes, **perspectivism** and **relativism**. This division is admittedly arbitrary because the two topics dovetail. But to take up these attributes in turn should help us to distinguish some of the complex theoretical concepts that undergird antilogical practice.⁶ So, in this chapter, I begin by examining the human-measure doctrine and its theory of perspectivism, and then by exploring the long-standing objections to this philosophical program. Once these basic concepts are on the table, I proceed by reviewing the controversy over Protagorean relativism and then by pointing out some of the promising implications of Protagorean theory for rhetoric. You will note, then, an antilogical movement in this chapter as we

oscillate between contrasting approaches to this provocative and enduring philosophical doctrine.

With regard to **perspective** or point of view, the human-measure doctrine implies that all experience is based on, measured by, filtered through the perceptual apparatus of the individual (*panton anthropolos metron*, or “of all things humanity is the measure”; DK 80 A16). It is, of course, possible to argue that *anthropos* should be read as “society at-large,” thereby positing cultural knowledge (*nomos*) as the “measure” of all things; and, indeed, Protagoras does place particular emphasis on the role of social groups in the formation of knowledge (see *Protagoras* 322). At present, however, I will follow Plato as well as Cornford, Versenyi, Kerferd, and most contemporary scholars in assuming an individualized rather than a collective agent for the human-measure concept, so that it is the individual percipient or knowing subject who becomes the medium through which all knowledge is manifested and measured (see Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152a, 158a, 161d; Kerferd 1981, 86; see also Donovan 37-38, Guthrie 3.188-89, Schiller 1970, 33). In order to more fully appreciate what is at stake in the Protagorean emphasis on personal point of view, it will help if we set this epistemic theory in the context of early Greek thought.

Prior to the arrival of Protagoras in Athens, Greek philosophy had been heavily influenced by Parmenides of Elea, perhaps the most prestigious of the Presocratic philosophers (Kirk 266, *Encyc. of Philosophy* v. 6, 47). In contrast with earlier theories of natural order, such as the Pythagorean table of opposites or the Heraclitean notion of flux, the Eleatic philosophy of Parmenides propounded a monistic vision in which reality or Being (*ousia*) was conceived of as single, indivisible, continuous, changeless, and motionless.⁷ Correspondingly, Parmenides regards all apparent manifestations of variety and transformation in the world as an illusion, the “way of seeming” as opposed to the “way of truth.” Moreover, according to Parmenides, truth itself can only be approached by logical deduction, unaided by the senses. Conversely, any reliance on opinion or sense perception constitutes a descent into error, into “two headedness” and an unwarranted acceptance of pluralism, division, and contradiction.⁸ The human-measure concept, then, with its implication that knowledge always presents itself through the filter of individual perspective and is thus subject to variation and multiplicity, this bedrock Protagorean notion stands in direct opposition to Parmenidean monism. More specifically, for Parmenides, the fixed structure of the world is subject to precise calculations that provide a foundation for all true knowledge; while for Protagoras, no invariant reality is available to human perception and so knowledge about the world exists only within the domain of human conjecture.

This basic, if simplified opposition is central to any consideration of Protagoreanism. For example, when viewed from the Parmenidean perspective, no single event could be conceived of as both A and not-A because Being itself is one and consistent, unable to both exist and not exist simultaneously (see Plato's *Sophist* 237a). In more practical terms, the same wind can not be acknowledged as both cold and not cold at the same time (cf. *Theaetetus* 152b). In this context, truth is bivalent: there are only two potential responses to a truth-claim (true or false) because the world itself is determinate; any middle ground is inadmissible (hence the philosophical principle of the "excluded middle"). But, from the Protagorean perspective, bivalence is inadequate because it fails to comprehend the actual range of human response. If the individual is the measure of all things, then the nature of event A (our perception of the wind) depends not on an objective standard of abstract binaries, but rather on the frame of reference of the individual(s) actually involved in calculating the attributes of the event in question. And, as Protagoras was the first to point out, not all frames of reference for individual measurement are the same. A wind coming off Lake Michigan may be experienced by person B as cool, by person C as warm, by person D as mild, E as blustery, and by person F as without character. Our perception of the wind—and of everything else that is subject to human evaluation—relies, according to Protagoras, upon what we as individuals bring to the experience and how we conduct our assessments of the various phenomena that make up the world. As a result, knowledge is best seen as multivalent, an expression of the variations that distinguish the human community and our diverse ways of knowing.

Correspondingly, when we shift our focus from the realm of sense perception to more distinctly cognitive experience, we encounter the same perspectival differences. The experience of interpretive difference is neatly described by Lewis Carroll's Alice and by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. In the first instance, Alice is speaking with the Caterpillar about her difficulties in adjusting to Wonderland:

"... being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."

"It isn't," said the Caterpillar.

"Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet," said Alice; "but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?"

"Not a bit," said the Caterpillar.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0402-5>

Many Sides: A Protagorean Approach to the Theory,
Practice and Pedagogy of Argument

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2002, XXVIII, 300 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0402-5