

Chapter 2

Protagorean Practice and the Nature of Antilogic

"For this is a very true presupposition: that men are in agreement about nothing, I mean even the most gifted and ablest scholars, not even that the sky is over our head."

"So that, since equal reasons are found on both sides of the same subject, it may be the easier to suspend judgment on each side."

Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond"

In *The Romance of the Rose*, Umberto Eco imagines finding a lost part of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a treatise on comedy with momentous implications for what we value in art and culture. The recovery of the book that begins with the human-measure fragment would be no less momentous. After all, the first sentence alone initiates a radical departure from the canonical notion that truth and knowledge are by nature universal and invariant; while the alternative titles for the full text—*Truth* and *Refutations*—pose the intriguing possibility that the former is somehow congruent with the latter (DK 80 B1). As we actually have them, however, the Protagorean fragments are not much more than epigrams; they suggest rather than define, but they suggest much. Early in the 20C, the British pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller argued that the fragments "compress the largest quantum of vital meaning into the most compact form" (1903, 33). Compact, provocative, and open to elaboration.¹ Historical reconstruction must, of course, concentrate on what is given in the historical record; but the persistent vitality of the Protagorean fragments also invites us to contemplate what was lost, to fill in the enormous lacunae according to the light of our own time and place (cf. Schiappa 64-85). In other words, the extant form of the human-measure doctrine operates as what Rorty calls a philosophy of "edification," an enabling source whose

emergent theory is continually enriched by new contributions (1979, 357-60).

My own response to this enabling doctrine has been to cast the human-measure fragment as a theory of knowledge in which the knower and the known exist in symbiotic relation. That is, what counts as knowledge is contingent upon the interpretive processes of the knowing subject ("humanity is the measure"), while, in turn, the interpretations of the subject are themselves informed and corrected by the stuff of the world and the shared views of others. More simply, knowledge claims are relative to persons, and persons are "placed" in history and culture. It is but a short step from this relativist emphasis on personal knowledge to the recognition that, in any collection of individuals, divergent perspectives on the same topic are bound to follow from the more-or-less different positions that individuals inhabit. In other words, when the human-measure doctrine is extended beyond the single subject and distributed throughout the inherently diverse human community, what counts as knowledge will inevitably be attended by multiple and contradictory views (*multiplex ratio disputandi*). Sharon Crowley neatly summarizes the Protagorean perspective on social knowledge when she notes that "disagreement is endemic to the human situation" (i). Nor can our disagreements be easily dismissed; for under Protagorean conditions, contradiction will not be resolved by traditional appeals to either individual authority or universal principles. Instead, with the acknowledgement that there will always be a diversity of views on any given topic, disagreement becomes the substratum of human reasoning, the material with which thinking must grapple and out of which knowledge is constructed.

To put the case yet another way, a particular idea or logos may be relatively true (true for A), but for it or any logos to have currency in the world (i.e., to be valid for others as well), it must be examined alongside alternative positions, the antilogoi which naturally arise in the process of open, social exchange. Only by comparing the widest variety of positions and counter-pointing each against objections raised by another can we arrive at ideas agreed upon as sound. Such, in short, is the epistemological narrative of the human-measure doctrine: knowledge (the measurement of things) begins with the unique perception of the knowing subject, but the acceptability of any proposition offered to others depends upon the conduct of argument and, in particular, the collation and comparison of opposing views. Protagorean doctrine, therefore, theorizes argument as central to the prospects of human knowledge and posits antilogic—or the juxtaposition of opposing logoi—as argument's appropriate protocol. As it turns out, the search for *truth* and the act of *refutation* are parts of the same process.

That Protagoras accorded argument a central role in his own life and thought is corroborated by various historical details. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Protagoras wrote a book called *The Art of Debating* (now lost) and that he was the first person to conduct the public debates that became so popular in 5C Athens and were so closely connected with Sophism itself (DK 80 A1; see *Protagoras* 335a). We also believe that he employed yet another text, titled *Contrary Arguments*, to teach his students how to speak on both sides of a case (Guthrie 3.181-82). He may even have been the originator of the dialectical method of reasoning by “catechism of question and answer” that we now associate with Socrates (Kerferd 1981, 60). And, in Plutarch’s “Pericles,” we hear that the great Athenian leader once spent the whole day with Protagoras debating “the most correct judgment” in a complex case of accidental homicide (DK 80 A10). So, even if we discount some of the biographical record regarding Protagoras as hazy and undependable, we can still with some confidence connect Protagoras with the theoretical origins of argument theory and also with the actual practice of *antilogike technē*, the art of antilogic.

G. B. Kerferd, whose commentary on antilogic has become the critical standard, refers to *antilogike technē* as “the most characteristic feature of the thought of the whole Sophistic period” (1981, 85). And yet, while the Sophistic tradition has been enthusiastically reclaimed by a continually growing number of modern scholars, antilogic, though occasionally referred to, remains for the most part undeveloped. My own intention is to extend the analysis of antilogic beyond the abbreviated comments of Kerferd, Schiappa, de Romilly, and others, and to reclaim its distinctive practice not simply as a neglected feature of the neo-Sophistic revival but also as an instructive precedent for a dialogical approach to contemporary argumentation. The dialogics of antilogic is a topic that will emerge in the course of this book, as we move from its origins in Protagorean theory, to its refinement by Cicero and its pedagogy in Quintilian.² But the full resonance of this alternative tradition of argumentation resides ultimately in the relation between antilogical practice and the theoretical/epistemological matrix with which it was originally connected. For that reason, I rely, as noted, on the vocabulary of Protagorean relativism developed in Chapter 1 as a vehicle for articulating what I believe has been left unsaid about the art of antilogic. Put another way, the living doctrine of the human-measure statement provides an “edifying” framework for exploring the rhetorical implications of the two-*logoi* fragment, implications that have remained for the most part inchoate because they have been disconnected from their theoretical base. The goal of this chapter and the next two, then, is to reclaim antilogic as the pragmatic extension of the human-measure doctrine and to employ this connection as an aid in developing the neglected potential of antilogical practice.

The relationship between the human-measure doctrine and the art of antilogic has not gone unnoticed. At the turn of the last century, Schiller, an enthusiastic supporter of Protagoras, devoted much of his *Essays on Humanism* (1903) to an interpretation of the human-measure fragment as an “empirical” account not only of the relativism of individual perception but also of the conceptual “ambiguity” that attends the inevitable diversity of personal judgments (35). Schiller argues that Protagoras meets this threat of epistemological ambiguity by invoking the offices of rhetoric as the means by which we make “*distinctions of value* among individual perceptions” and, in the process, transform “the mass of subjective judgments” into “collective assessments arrived at in society at-large.”³ Similarly, in the 1960s, Laszlo Versenyi argues that the philosophical insight of *homo mensura* leads directly to “the formal invention” of antilogic. In his words, “antilogical arguments are rooted in and exhibit Protagorean relativism” (1963, 21-22). More recently, Stanley Fish writes that for Protagoras and the Sophists truth is “a contingent affair [which] assumes a different shape in light of different local urgencies and the convictions associated with them.” In this context, rhetoric moves

from the disreputable periphery to the necessary center: for if the highest truth for any man is what he believes it to be (*Theaetetus* 152a), the skill which produces belief and therefore establishes what, in a particular time and particular place, is true, is the skill essential to the building and maintaining of a civilized society. (1989, 480-81)

It is rhetoric, then, that negotiates the passage from “endemic” difference to shared belief, though Fish does not seem to recognize the specific role of antilogic to this process.

There are, of course, others who have commented in passing on the connection between Protagorean philosophy and antilogical practice.⁴ But this commentary seldom pauses to consider Protagorean relativism in significant detail or to fully contemplate the continuity between this philosophy and its rhetorical complement. In consequence, the actual operations of antilogic have remained what they are for Kerferd, a preliminary stage in the development of dialectics (1981, 67; cf. Solmsen 1975, 244). My own exposition, however, would develop a more ambitious profile for antilogic, a role in keeping with the progressive humanism of Protagorean thought and, in particular, with its willing engagement in the construction of knowledge under the aegis of disagreement and flux. I begin with a brief analysis of the two-logoi fragment itself and an outline of its basic features as a distinct argumentative practice. After this extended introduction, I next compare antilogic to its argumentative cousins, eristic

and dialectic, a comparison that should allow me to more fully develop the cardinal features of my subject. Finally, this chapter closes with an assessment of Protagorean antilogic in the context of 5C Athenian culture, most notably its relation to the discourse of Athenian democracy and the maxims of Heraclitus, Protagoras' most notable predecessor. In turn, a review of the historical/social grounds for antilogical practice should prepare us for more specific analyses of its pragmatic and ethical dimensions in Chapter 3 and its formal features in Chapter 4. Throughout it all, I argue that antilogic is best approached as an extension of the human-measure doctrine, a pragmatic response to the exuberant relativism of the Protagorean worldview.

1. ANTILOGIC TRANSLATED AND DEFINED

The core concept of the two-logoi doctrine is effectively paraphrased by Billig as "a method of argumentation by which contrary positions are examined in relation to one another" (Billig 45; cf. Kerferd 1981, 63). I cite this paraphrase first because, if anything, we are in this case even further removed from the actual language of Protagoras, his *ipsissima verba*, than we were from the human-measure fragment. In the latter case, we have the relatively contemporary paraphrases of Plato; but for antilogic, we rely on Diogenes Laertius again, who, in the 3C CE, was removed from Protagoras by more than six centuries. Nonetheless, Schiappa thinks Diogenes is basically faithful to the source in this case when he writes that Protagoras

was the first to say that on every issue there are two arguments (*logoi*) opposed to each other on everything (*pantos pragmatos*). (DK 80 A1)

Other ancient variants are as follows: "Every argument has an opposite argument" (Clement of Alexandria, 2C CE) and "one can argue equally well on either side of any question" (Seneca the Younger, 1C BCE; see DK 80 A20). The import of these variants is basically consistent with Diogenes, and so I will assume his rendition as the base text of the two-logoi fragment and begin this analysis with its two key terms: *logos* and *pragma*.⁵

The range of meanings for *logos* is broad and various, including the following variations: *logos* is (a) reasoning, thinking, or accounting for; (b) speech, discourse, or even specific statements; and (c) the organizing principles, formulae, or laws of the world itself. G. B. Kerferd, from whom I draw these distinctions, writes that "(w)hat we are confronted with is not strictly speaking one word with a number of different meanings, but rather a word with a range of applications all of which relate to a single starting

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

Mendelson, M.

2002, XXVIII, 300 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0402-5