

Chapter 3

Pragmatism, Ethics, and the Function of Antilogic

“See how reason provides plausibility to different actions. It is a two-handed pot, that can be grasped by the left or the right.”

Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”

“At every opposition we do not consider whether it is just, but, right or wrong, how we can get rid of it. Instead of stretching out our arms to it, we stretch out our claws.”

Montaigne, “Of the Art of Discussion”

In Chapter 1, we explored the philosophical base of antilogic and the fragmentary Protagorean texts; in Chapter 2, we reviewed the general features of antilogic itself, along with its nearest relatives, potential origins, and original milieu. With this background in place, we can now concentrate on particular features of our subject that define its distinctive contribution to the rhetorical tradition and account for its continued relevance. To this end, I have chosen three constituent elements of antilogic that characterize its unique nature and promise. In this chapter, I take up the first two: the underlying **pragmatism** and controlling **ethics** of antilogical argumentation. I hope to show that antilogic, unlike dialectic, will naturally combine questions of knowledge with matters of conduct, so its procedures of inquiry are invariably oriented toward practical action. In addition, there is an obvious conflict between my claim in the last chapter for antilogic’s egalitarian politics and the traditional charge that Protagoras would substitute worse arguments with better ones, a conflict that requires us to attend to the ethics of antilogical exchange and to the place of moral conduct in the Protagorean social order. In the next chapter, I follow these studies in pragmatism and ethics with an investigation of more familiar rhetorical

territory: namely, the **formal elements** that distinguish antilogic and constitute the norms of its unique practice. My goal is to round out Part I by detailing the cardinal features of my subject and, in so doing, provide a comprehensive overview of this provocative, if unfamiliar approach to argumentation.

1. THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSIONS OF ANTILOGIC

Throughout *Many Sides*, I have attempted to render the past in a form useable for contemporary practice. With the present topic, there is a natural kinship between past and present. Readers will recall that Protagorean antilogic transforms Presocratic theories on the dualism of nature and the cosmos by applying the Heraclitean concept of related contraries directly to logos; i.e., to language, reason, and argument.¹ In so doing, Protagoras locates all consideration of the “real and true” in direct relation to human linguistic faculties. In Aristotelian terms, discursive exchange becomes the “formal cause” of what we know about the world, the way in which the material of experience takes shape for knowing subjects.

Given such notions, it is hardly surprising that a host of contemporaries—including Harold Bloom, Stanley Fish, Steven Mailloux, Joseph Margolis, Richard Rorty, Cornel West and others—have acknowledged Protagoras as the first philosopher of “linguistic consciousness.”² If we accept Gustav Bergmann’s now famous comment that “all linguistic philosophies talk about the world by means of talking about language,” then Protagorean theory is clearly an early effort to talk about the world by contemplating the way in which logos serves to mediate experience and give form to what we know (in Rorty 1967, 8). We can recognize in Protagoras, then, an ancestor to language-based epistemologies even if Protagoras’ own influence has, until recently, been modest at best. What has not been well recognized in contemporary commentary is the fundamental role of antilogic in this prototype of the “linguistic turn.” In response to this neglect, it is worth dwelling for the moment on the idea that while antilogic indeed foregrounds the linguistic basis of human understanding, it refines this notion by imagining the epistemic process as a constant oscillation between contending logoi. This refinement yields other, productive continuities between Protagoreanism and modern thought.

For example, as opposing forces of nature, contraries remain relatively distinct.³ In the medium of language, however, the rigid separation of ideas and things tends to dissolve. Language is not simply a tool used by speakers to give discursive form to this or that object or datum; rather, it is an encompassing space within which multiple voices coalesce in the process of

understanding, a space where the boundaries of self and other (as well as signifier and signified) are mediated and transformed. Heraclitus claimed that fire erases all distinctions. Discourse may not have quite the same power to erase boundaries, but antilogic would nonetheless operate as a kind of crucible within which various representations of the world (Protagorean “measurements”) mix and change form as a result of contact and contention (cf. Bineham 1995, 1). This conception of argument, of course, goes beyond a general anticipation of linguistic consciousness and looks forward directly to those modern philosophies that place the dialogical “mixing” of voices at the core of human experience: most particularly, Bakhtinian dialogism, philosophical hermeneutics, Buber’s existential anthropology, and American pragmatism. I will take up various theoretical affinities in due course; for now, we can press the ancient/modern relationship a step further by taking a clue specifically from pragmatism and pursuing the hypothesis that the “linguistic turn” performed by Protagoras in the 5C BCE is a precursor to the notion that language in general (argument in particular) is a form of action in its own right, an effort to make discourse productive not simply as an agent of “intellectual consequences” but also as a means for creating “tangible effects in the public sphere” (Downing 1995, 185). If we would comprehend the full dimensions of antilogic, it is time to consider what it means to introduce a theory of argument that is also a theory of action.

What, then, do we mean when we say that something is practical or that someone is pragmatic? Since we are dealing here with the very origins of these concepts in Western history, perhaps it is best to start with etymology. The English term “pragmatic” (as in a concern for practical affairs and consequences) is of relatively modern usage: William James writes in 1902 of a “thoroughly ‘pragmatic’ view of religion [that] has been taken as a matter of course by common men” (*OED* 2265). But the root of the term comes from the ancient Greek *pragma*: a deed, a thing done and, in particular, an act of public business or private affairs. Similarly, the ancient Greek *praktikos* implies “fit for action or business” (*Liddell and Scott* 581-82). We can follow this etymological trail a step further if we return to the human-measure fragment and the notion that “humanity is the measure of all things.” The word for “things” in this case is not *pragmata* (as it is in the two-logoi fragment) but *chremata*, which Laszlo Versenyi tells us connotes things that we use, or deal with, or events that in some way affect us (1963, 11-13; see Schiappa 117). In an age dominated by the metaphysical speculations of Parmenides and the abstract theorizing of the 6C natural philosophers, Protagoras’ choice of the term *chremata* “announces a practical program for philosophy,” and “recalls” humanity back to “a world of practical application” (Versenyi 1963 12-13).⁴ Protagorean thought, therefore, represents a turn away from arcane theorizing about causal powers

and formal abstractions and toward a frame of reference in which human relations, attitudes, opinions, and actions are “decisive” (ibid. 12). So, in a strictly Protagorean context, to be pragmatic is to attend to the business of humanity; or, to extend this base definition slightly, Protagorean argument seeks to negotiate useful courses of action by executing appropriate judgment in the affairs of society.

Such a definition is not far removed from Aristotle’s famous description of practical reason (*phronesis*) articulated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and developed in both the *Politics* and the *Rhetoric*. Most succinctly, *phronesis* is “a true and reasoned state or capacity to act with regard to human goods” (*Nic. Ethics* 1140b 4-5). Unfortunately, scholarship surrounding the meaning and function of *phronesis* as a central tenet of Aristotelian ethics is distinguished by its complexity, controversy, and—for this reader—a notable lack of clarity.⁵ Nonetheless, we can glean from Aristotle some help in understanding the pragmatism of antilogic. According to the complicated typology of Aristotle’s ethics, there are five “virtues” or “excellences” by which the soul possesses knowledge: art (*poiesis*), scientific knowledge (*episteme*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), and instinctual understanding (*nous*) (*Nic. Ethics* 1139b 15-17). But in the discussion of *phronesis* in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, these mental categories are distilled into three basic forms: theoretical wisdom, which is concerned with knowledge for its own sake; the various arts (e.g., sculpture and medicine), which are concerned with making something; and practical wisdom, which is concerned with action. Hence, we have the standard division of Aristotelian knowledge into theoretical, productive, and practical forms, all of which must be informed by *orthos logos* (right reason) to function effectively.

Perhaps most helpful for our study is the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, since these two constitute what Aristotle calls the two “intellectual virtues” (ibid. 1103a 406). The function of both these intellectual faculties is the attainment of truth (1139b 12), but they have very different domains and methods. The aim of theoretical wisdom is to understand the universal and invariable (“what is not capable of being otherwise”), i.e., knowledge as we might construe it in the realm of theology, mathematics, or physics (1139b 21; Hardie 222). Its constituent features are *nous*, or the instinctive grasp of or insight into the first principles from which reasoning begins (see *Posterior Analytics* 71a 1), and *episteme*, the ability to understand and demonstrate the truth of universals in terms of their causes (*Nic. Ethics* 1139b 31-3). It follows that in Aristotle’s conception of theoretical wisdom, argument finds its appropriate function (*ergon*) in the logical explanation of universal concepts (ibid. 1140b31-41a8).

On the other hand, Aristotelian *phronesis* is characterized by its concern for truth “in agreement with right desire” (ibid. 1139b 30; i.e., a desire that shows itself in our choices about courses of action in particular situations; cf. 1142a 23-30). *Phronesis* (or practical wisdom), is consequently as much a matter of ethics and character as it is of intellect, since moral virtue informs our ability to make rational choices about actions to be performed. I will return to this important connection between *phronesis* and *ethos* in the next section; for now, I would continue my outline by noting that Aristotle posits as the two aspects of practical wisdom (corresponding roughly to the *nous* and *episteme* of theoretical wisdom) the ability to make rational choices (*prohairesis*) and the ability to deliberate effectively (*bouleusis*) about what these choices should be. He writes:

Now it is thought to be the work of a [person] of practical wisdom [the *phronemos*] to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect . . . but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general. (*Nic. Ethics* 1140b 25-28)

This ability to deliberate well (*euboulia*) manifests itself in both the political skill of a Pericles and the more routine demands of “household management” (1140a 7-11). Seen thus, deliberation is concerned with finding the appropriate means to an end, or alternatively, in justifying the nature of one’s choice. If we assume, then, that the *phronemos* begins with circumstances or difficulties (*aporia*) that require response and with the choice of an objective to be achieved by one’s response, then deliberation is the process of considering the means for accomplishing one’s objective (Broadie 228-42). Whereas the argument of *sophia*, or theoretical wisdom, addresses the notion of “why” something is as it is, the argument of *phronesis* is devoted to “how” an objective (or desire) can be effected and justified. Or more succinctly, our proairetic ability to choose well (i.e., to choose in accordance with moral excellence) “fixes” the target and our practical wisdom allows us to determine how best to get there (*Nic. Ethics* 1144a 5-7).⁶ Taken together, the ability to choose a goal worth pursuing and to deliberate effectively on the means of this pursuit, these two features of *phronesis* prepare the way for *eupraxis* or good action, which Aristotle sees as the end of *phronesis* itself (ibid. 1140b 7). Since philosophical wisdom itself “moves nothing” (1139a 36), it falls to *phronesis* to perform the critical role of guiding all action, large or small, connected with human welfare (ibid. 1140b 21-22).

My synopsis of Aristotelian *phronesis* is highly simplified and somewhat too schematic, even for Aristotle. But it is intended only to provide a workable vocabulary for application to the analogous pragmatism of

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