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CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



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PLATO

*Gorgias, Menexenus,
Protagoras*

EDITED BY
MALCOLM SCHOFIELD

TRANSLATED BY
TOM GRIFFITH



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Editorial note

The translation (by TG) is made in the case of *Gorgias* from the text in Dodds's edition, and in the case of *Menexenus* and *Protagoras* from Burnet's edition in the Oxford Classical Texts series. The few variations from these adopted here are mentioned in notes at the appropriate points. The notes to the translation (by MS, as with the rest of the editorial matter) have benefited in various ways from TG's scrutiny, and the translations in their final form are the outcome of several rounds of comment from MS and rethinking by TG. Raymond Geuss and Quentin Skinner as series editors made suggestions for improvements to the draft of the introduction, all gratefully implemented. The book is therefore very much a joint production, which owes its origins to a suggestion by Jeremy Mynott, at the time Chief Executive of the Press – to whom also thanks are due.

TG

MS

December 2008

Introduction

The *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*

The *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* are not only the longest, but by general agreement the most important among Plato's 'Socratic' dialogues (the quixotic *Menexenus* – on which more later – is another matter). Both present Socrates in argument with leading members of the sophistic movement, questioning the claims to wisdom or expertise that they make. In both Socrates brings the discussion round to his own central preoccupation with living a good life.

But there the resemblances cease. One difference is purely formal. The *Gorgias* (like the *Menexenus*) is written as drama, with parts for Socrates, Gorgias, and various other characters, notably Polus (a follower of Gorgias who has authored a book on rhetoric) and Callicles (apparently a rising young Athenian politician). There are few indications of time or place. For the *Protagoras*, Plato elected for a more complex structure, beginning with a short exchange in direct dramatic form between Socrates and an unnamed companion, which then frames a lengthy report by Socrates, full of circumstantial detail, narrating an early morning visit from a young friend called Hippocrates, and their subsequent encounter with Protagoras and other sophists at the house of the wealthy aristocrat Callias.

The major difference is one of tone. Plato's writing in the *Gorgias* has little of its usual urbanity. The dialogue often strikes readers as a bitter and passionate piece of writing, in fact more bitter and passionate the longer it goes on. It certainly communicates intense intellectual energy with remarkable directness. The *Protagoras*, on the other hand, is composed for

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much of its duration in a relaxed register of sly comedy. No reader forgets Socrates' rude awakening before dawn, the unfriendly reception he and Hippocrates get from Callias's doorman, the scene that greets them once admitted, or later in the dialogue the elaborate games Socrates plays with a poem of Simonides in apeing sophistic techniques of interpretation. Whereas the *Gorgias* ends with a myth of last judgment, on the last page of the *Protagoras* Socrates imagines the outcome of the discussion teasing him and Protagoras about the contradictions between their respective initial and final positions. Few Platonic dialogues convey so evocatively an intellectual atmosphere: an almost nostalgic sense of the optimistic rationalism of what has sometimes been called the Greek enlightenment, caught at a moment perhaps just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.¹

Working out why the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras* are so different is an unresolved conundrum of Platonic scholarship. Date of composition might have something to do with it. But for neither dialogue is there any hard evidence about date of composition (with *Menexenus* we are a bit better off). The usual conjecture has been that the *Gorgias* was written later than the *Protagoras*. I think the *Gorgias* is the work of an angry young man, the *Protagoras* the product of more detached middle age.

The sophists

At the beginning of the *Hippias Major* ascribed to Plato, Socrates tells us this about the sophists (282b–c):

Gorgias, the well-known sophist from Leontini, came here on public business, as an ambassador from his home city – selected because he was the most capable person in Leontini to handle their communal affairs. When he spoke before the *dēmos* [i.e. the popular assembly], people thought he did so extremely well; he made a lot of money by giving demonstrations and associating with the young in private, and left our city in pocket.

Very similar things are then said of Prodicus, especially in relation to a recent visit made to represent Ceos on public business. Subsequently

¹ Although as often Plato is not careful to avoid conflicting chronological implications about the dramatic date: see N.C. Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras* (Cambridge 2008), p.66. For its part, the conversation in the *Gorgias* seems to be envisaged as occurring in the second phase of the Peloponnesian War (for example, Archelaus of Macedon has only fairly recently committed the crimes which brought him to power in 413 BC), but other remarks made in its course have been thought more consistent with an earlier date.

The sophists

Protagoras – portrayed by both Socrates and Hippias as belonging to a somewhat older generation – is mentioned as having had similar success at making money.

The sophists – in their heyday perhaps in the quarter century 450–425 BC – were public figures of a new kind, given major diplomatic roles by their home cities not because of their aristocratic standing, but on account of their political skills, above all their abilities as speakers. Plato's *Meno* distinguishes them from 'gentlemen' (95a–b). Their success away from their public duties in making money by 'demonstrations' and 'associating with the young' makes them resemble not so much statesmen of previous eras remembered for their wisdom, such as Solon or Pittacus, but a poet like Pindar, remunerated by his royal or aristocratic patrons for the odes he wrote to celebrate their sporting victories at major Panhellenic festivals, or a musician (like Sophocles' teacher Lampros), retained to instruct their children on the *kithara* and in the associated poetic and musical repertoire, evidently regarded as a key element in a sound education (see *Prot.* 326a–b). The sophists' clientele was likewise mostly the aristocracy: as Plato portrays it in the *Protagoras*, the *jeunesse dorée*. Protagoras in the *Protagoras* goes so far as to claim that in previous times poets and musicians and even athletes actually were sophists, 'practitioners of wisdom', but concealed their educational ambitions behind the mask of their craft or practice (*Prot.* 316d–e). No doubt this attempt at assimilation goes too far. But it is significant that in making it Protagoras is effectively claiming for himself a professional pedigree.

The same section of the *Protagoras* makes it clear that being a sophist was a competitive business. Protagoras's teaching will equip a young man for life and politics, whereas a Hippias (he implies) might force on you technical subjects you were glad to have escaped, like astronomy (apparently a favourite with Hippias) and other mathematical disciplines, technical analysis of verse and music, and so forth. This is of course the sales pitch of the first in the field now scenting rivals coming up close behind, and to be taken with several pinches of salt. No doubt it was precisely his polymathic range that would have attracted students to Hippias. Protagoras himself seems to have had wide interests, with critical analysis of the poets prominent in his repertoire. It is attested by Aristotle (*Soph. El.* 14.173b17–22; *Poet.* 19.1456b15–18) that he found mistakes in the very first line of Homer's *Iliad*: use of the imperative mood of the verb 'sing' in addressing the muse (not right for a prayer, only for a command), and its coupling of a feminine adjective with 'wrath' (*mētis*: wrath is something masculine).

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This evidently has little connection with the preparation for political activity Protagoras professed to offer. It must have more to do with impressing late adolescents with the application of irreverent ingenuity to something they had been taught when growing up to take as beyond criticism. When Meno says that for Gorgias what matters is making people clever speakers, so that he ridicules sophists who promise to improve them all round (*Men.* 95b–c), this is to be read primarily as Gorgias's way of differentiating himself from the competition. We should not suppose that he was any more single-minded in his interests than they were. The purpose of his philosophical tract *On what is not* (two paraphrases of the work survive) is debatable, but it can have had little to do with training people in rhetoric. In the *Meno* itself Meno claims to have learned from Gorgias views on philosophical topics as diverse as the nature of virtue and the definition of colour.

Is Gorgias legitimately described as a sophist? He is certainly referred to as such in the *Hippias Major* (see p.viii above; *Apol.* 19e–20a probably has the same implication). And if a sophist is someone who undertakes as his profession to impart 'wisdom' for a fee, then application of the label to Gorgias seems entirely apt. But it was called in question by E.R. Dodds, author of the great modern edition of the *Gorgias*. The *Gorgias* itself does of course forge its own formal distinction between sophistry and rhetoric (see 463a–465c), and Gorgias is made to describe himself there as an expert in rhetoric (449a). But there is no independent evidence that he called himself a *rhêtôr*, 'orator' (in the dialogue he volunteers it only after Socrates has taken a full page to explain what sort of identification is being looked for); and it is quite likely that the very expression 'rhetoric' is a fourth century coinage. On the other hand, it may be that Gorgias did not claim the title 'sophist' either, as Protagoras evidently did. In conversation with Gorgias's followers Callicles and Meno (*Gorg.* 519c, *Men.* 95b–c), Socrates is made to talk without challenge as though 'sophist' is associated almost by definition with the specific undertaking – from which Gorgias expressly refrained – to 'teach virtue' (in other words, to improve people).

It is otherwise hard to find any significant difference in the general profiles presented to the world by Protagoras and Gorgias. Like other major sophists, both clearly owed their standing to their abilities as performers. In the *Gorgias* Socrates arrives just too late to hear the speech Gorgias delivers. But we can still read his display orations *Encomium of Helen* and *Defence of Palamedes*, both brilliant exercises in theoretically ingenious

The sophists

exculpation, with the *Helen* particularly full of examples of the alliteration and assonance and the highly artificial antitheses which influenced much subsequent Greek oratorical prose. The *Protagoras* does contain a great set piece performance, written by Plato for Protagoras (and presumably in something like his manner), on how it is that most people become civilised even though there are no professional teachers in civilisation. Prodicus was celebrated for his lecture on the choice of Heracles, portrayed as a paradigmatic figure at a crossroads in life who wins the struggle of virtue with vice (see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34). The scene became a favourite in Renaissance iconography. From the *Hippias Major* we learn that there were actually contests in oratory of some sort at the Olympic games. Hippias claims never to have been defeated in them. Perhaps Protagoras has these in mind when he talks of ‘opponents in argument’ in the *Protagoras* (335a; cf. *Helen* 13).

Near the beginning of the *Protagoras* Socrates gives young Hippocrates a warning. Someone who pays a sophist for his teaching is not in the same position as someone who buys food and drink. You can take food and drink home and inspect them before consumption. With a sophist there is no similar opportunity. As soon as you listen, your soul has ingested what you have paid for – whether it is good or bad. On the other hand, it is hard to find anything morally subversive in the claims and arguments Protagoras advances in the dialogue. ‘Man is the measure of all things’, the famous Protagorean slogan construed as a charter for epistemological and moral relativism in a later Platonic dialogue (*Theaetetus*), makes no appearance and leaves no obvious trace in the *Protagoras*. The *Protagoras* seems to find the sophists more amusing than threatening.

In the *Republic* Socrates acknowledges that most people do think that there are young men who get corrupted by sophists (*Rep.* 6.492a). There is a self-referential resonance in the line he takes himself on the issue: the whims of the Athenian people – in the assembly or in the courts, on huge public juries – do much more damage. When in the *Meno* Anytus (later to figure as one of Socrates’ accusers at his trial) claims that sophists plainly bring about the ruin and corruption of those who associate with them (*Men.* 91c), Socrates replies that it is just not credible that someone like Protagoras could have fooled the whole of Greece and got away with making his students more depraved than they were when he took them on – for forty years (*Men.* 91d). Again, there is an obvious subtext. Socrates may not have charged Protagoras’s huge fees, but he certainly associated with the young, and might well have looked to the

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average Athenian as close to being a sophist as made no difference ('Ugh! Sophists!', says Callias's doorkeeper, as he overhears Socrates talking with Hippocrates). The charge of corrupting young people is double-edged. It is what Anytus would file against Socrates for real.

The *Gorgias* on power

Early in the dialogue Socrates puts it to Gorgias that it shouldn't be the practitioner of rhetoric who advises the city on building walls or fitting out harbours or dockyards, but master builders. Gorgias takes this as his cue to 'unfold the power of rhetoric in its entirety'. 'You are aware', he says (455d–e), 'that your dockyards here, and the walls of Athens, and the building of harbours, owe their origin to Themistocles – or in some cases Pericles – and not to the advice of the experts.' Socrates agrees that he heard Pericles himself on the issue of the 'middle' wall. This is a revealing exchange, for several reasons.

First is the contrast with the *Protagoras*. In the *Protagoras* Socrates raises the same point with Protagoras, but in doing so clearly separates out (as doesn't happen in the *Gorgias* passage) technical questions on which expert advice in shipbuilding (for example) is needed and indeed insisted upon by the Athenians, and policy issues on which they think it appropriate to listen to anybody at all (*Prot.* 319b–d). He goes on to mention Pericles, but only as someone who plainly couldn't transmit his own wisdom to his sons. Socrates' object is to give himself a basis for arguing (as he next goes on to do) that the excellence in political judgment Protagoras claims to teach is *not* any sort of teachable skill. In response Protagoras first tells his myth of the origins of civilisation, and then elaborates on it by arguing that the fundamental ethical attributes needed for civilised life (and by implication for democracy) are not specialised skills to be transmitted as such, but generally distributed human propensities that are developed in a whole range of ways by society at large. This turns out to be just the first instalment of the purely theoretical enquiry into the nature of human goodness that will occupy the rest of the dialogue in one way or another. We hear no more about constructing buildings or ships.

Not so in the *Gorgias*. Walls, harbours and dockyards are something to which Socrates will return in talking with Polus (469e), and above all in his conversation with Callicles, when he ends up launching a scathing attack on Themistocles, Pericles, and other Athenian statesmen. These edifices are now treated as the most visible symbols of all that is rotten in Athenian

The Gorgias on power

political life, and its concentration not on justice or making the citizens better people, but on popular gratification (see especially 514a–d, 517b–e, 518c–519a). Similarly, in the *Menexenus*’s coolly ironical pastiche of a funeral oration (which Socrates puts in the mouth of Pericles’ mistress, the courtesan Aspasia), the rebuilding of the walls and the reacquisition of a fleet in 394–2 BC are represented meretriciously as a final triumph for Athenian political resolve, first epitomised by the great victory over the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC (*Menex.* 245e; cf. 245a).

There is a much more immediate engagement in these dialogues than in the *Protagoras* with politics and with the realities of political power. As Dodds said: ‘Men like Callicles did not pay high fees to Gorgias because they enjoyed playing tricks with words, but because they were hungry for power and the new education was “cause of rule over others in one’s own city” (452d).’² What gives the *Gorgias* its special edge is Plato’s confrontation with the assumptions and aspirations he saw as driving politics, especially the politics of his native Athens (and from the *Menexenus* it is clear that thoughts of contemporary, not just fifth century politics, were nagging in his mind). For that enterprise, it is not the theory of Gorgianic rhetoric as such that is of sole or in the end principal significance, but rhetorical appeal to a mass audience as the principal ingredient in political decision-making. Plato’s ultimate target is oratory as actually practised in the Athenian democracy, conceived by its leading practitioners as a form of control (just as Gorgias thought of it), but in truth – so Socrates will argue – ingratiating servility. ‘Gorgias’ teaching’, to quote Dodds again, ‘is the seed of which the Calliclean way of life is the poisonous fruit.’³

So Gorgias’s talk of unfolding the power of rhetoric in fact anticipates the focus of the *Gorgias*’s moral debate. What Socrates will call in question is the very nature of power. The dialogue’s key distinction is drawn in his conversation with Polus: is power the ability to do whatever you please (as tyrants and democratic politicians alike assume), or rather to do the good that a rational person will want if they can discern it? Discussion about the distinction and its implications for the evaluation of the life of politics and the life of philosophy, and of the role of justice within them, will be what occupies much of the rest of the *Gorgias*. It culminates in a moral imperative: accept the argument of the dialogue as authoritative, try to win others to it; the alternative is

² E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford 1959), p.10.

³ Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, p.15.

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worthless (*Gorg.* 526e). Contrast the *Protagoras*, whose final exchanges are the civilities of leave-taking (*Prot.* 361d–362a).

Socrates launches his critique of the conventional notion of power with the paradoxical claim (466d) that ‘both orators and tyrants have the least power in their cities’ (tyrants and democratic politicians are seen by all parties to the conversation as birds of a feather). The claim turns on what Socrates says next (466e): ‘They do virtually nothing of what they will – though they do as they please.’ Socrates is prepared to concede that a tyrant or a politician may be able to do whatever he likes: something Callicles will later represent as the freedom of those ‘born with a strong enough nature’ (484a) if they assert themselves. But they do not necessarily do what they really want – what they will. And if people cannot achieve what they really want, Socrates argues, they do not have much power. In one way or another, this idea will recur again and again in the dialogue.

Some common-sense examples are supplied to provide preliminary clarification of the idea of willing at issue here. In effect Socrates draws a distinction between means and ends. What we will (or at any rate what we will primarily) is the end or rationale for the things we do, not those things themselves: health rather than taking medicine, the reason for going to sea (to get rich), not going to sea itself. And it is because these goals are good that they constitute the rationale for such behaviour – taking medicine, going to sea.

A potential complication rears its head when Socrates goes on to ask (468b): ‘So it is in pursuit of the good that we walk, when we do walk, because we *think* it better?’ With the parallel question addressed to the behaviour of orators and tyrants we are within sight of the destination to which he is moving. The examples are no longer blandly uncontroversial: ‘And do we put to death, if we do put to death, and banish, and confiscate property, because we *think* it is better for us to do that than not to do it?’ We start to wonder whether ‘for the sake of the good’ means ‘for the sake of what *we think* good’.

Apparently it doesn’t. Socrates now quickly gets agreement from Polus that we will something such as putting to death or banishment or confiscation, if and only if putting to death or banishment or confiscation actually *is* beneficial; if it is harmful, it is not something we *really* want – even if we *supposed* we did, and supposed it to be better (468d). And someone who does not do the good he wills doesn’t have great power – that is, if we agree with Polus that great power is something good (here

The argument with Callicles

the assumption in play seems to be that for power to be something good it would have to deliver something good).

One might put Socrates' view of what it is that we will as follows. It will normally happen that the rationale for our actions is some good (e.g. health), which we ourselves correctly conceive as such; and that good so conceived is primarily what we will. But it may sometimes happen that though we conceive of our actions as achieving by our design some good, we are mistaken. In which case we don't will the outcome they actually achieve. What we will is the real good, not something we merely suppose to be good. Here our will (which is for the good) comes apart from our conception of what the good is. For them to converge we need proper understanding. Understanding is what orators and tyrants lack – but even though their conception of it is wrong, that doesn't mean that they don't will the good at all.

Polus is going to need a lot of convincing that tyrants and orators *are* wrong about what is good or beneficial for them. But it is perfectly understandable that he ends up agreeing rather quickly with Socrates that they would not will what is actually harmful to them. When we go to the doctor, we want our health back, not medicines which will damage us, even if he or we mistakenly conceive them to be conducive to health.

The argument with Callicles

The idea that power is the ability to do just what you please is not silenced in the dialogue forever by Socrates' argument here. Something very like it is reasserted by Callicles, perhaps the most eloquent and passionate of all Socrates' discussion partners in the dialogues, and someone whose view of life has often been justifiably perceived as Nietzschean. Soon after he bursts into the conversation, it becomes clear that the power of the strong to get the better of the weak is what Callicles counts as power – and indeed as natural justice (483b–484c). When at 491e Socrates puts a question – pivotal for the direction the argument then takes – about ruling not just others but oneself, he responds that 'the person who is going to live in the right way should allow his own desires to be as great as possible, without restraining them'. As he sums it up a bit later (492c): 'Luxury, lack of restraint, freedom – given the resources, that is what virtue and happiness are.' In short, power to do what one likes *does* deliver the goods.

Socrates deploys a range of argumentative tactics against Callicles' position. In the initial sequence (492e–499b) the most effective (as Plato

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represents it) involves getting Callicles to allow that he is equating the good with the pleasurable and the bad with the painful, but then to admit that hedonism is a poor fit with the wisdom and courage Callicles admires in the person who exercises power (497d–499b; cf. 491a–c). For if the good is what makes a person good and the bad a person bad, fools and cowards are going to turn out just as good as anyone else – because they feel as much pleasure. And in Callicles' scheme of things the division between the naturally superior and the naturally inferior is fundamental.

Yet Socrates' success here against Callicles is limited. More immediately, the problem is that it is only in order to allow Socrates' critique to be developed that Callicles agrees to have his position characterised as hedonism: as the equation of the good and the pleasurable (495a–b). Indeed, this is palpably not the way he chose to articulate his view of virtue and happiness when given the opportunity to put it in his own terms (491e–492c). And when he gives up hedonism in response to Socrates' arguments, he asserts that he was never really committed to it in the first place: which rings true enough (499b). He is only really interested in defending a position which emphasises the power to deploy a range of resources and abilities – which clearly for him have a value of their own – in fulfilling desires, and differentiates it from the absence of any such power.

More broadly, there is a radical disjunction between what Socrates sarcastically dubs the 'lower' and the 'higher mysteries' (497c) in the bad-tempered exchange that interrupts the previous stretch of question and answer dialectic (495a–497d). Callicles represents a conception of what it is for argument to be intelligent and accordingly truly persuasive that is incommensurable with Socrates'. He thinks his grand talk about nature and freedom and the strong can dispense with the slow, precise, particular steps that make up Socratic conversation. For Socrates they are all-important; for Callicles they are 'clever stuff', 'drivel', 'little footling questions' (497a–c). Interestingly Gorgias intervenes at this point, making it clear that he wants the discussion completed (cf. 506a–b), and indicating that Callicles must allow Socrates to test him as he wishes. Presumably Plato is signalling a breach of reasonable norms of debate on Callicles' part. We are reminded of the contrast at the very outset of the dialogue between 'demonstration' and 'discussion' (447b–c – where Callicles reports Gorgias as willing to answer whatever questions people want to put to him).

Callicles does not really engage again with Socrates until questions of power are reintroduced into the discussion (from 509b), particularly in

The argument with Callicles

relation to tyranny and more generally the political sphere. He responds with enthusiasm to the thought that to have the power to avoid being wronged by others you must either be a tyrant or a friend of whatever regime is in being (510a–b). This response sets up Socrates' final assault on Callicles' position. Preserving one's life at any cost, he suggests, is something a 'real man' (he echoes Callicles' own language: 483a) should forget about. The alternative – for a politician expert in rhetoric operating in a democracy – is surely more unattractive. It can only be assimilation to the values and ethos of the *dēmos* (513a–c). That is why Themistocles, Pericles and the rest have not tried to make the citizens better people, but only looked for ways of indulging their desires – practising rhetoric as sycophancy. This lengthy critique of Athenian politics is cast not in the form of question and answer interrogation, but as a rather magnificent piece of rhetoric (see especially 517b–519d).

Socrates' critique is represented as both a success and a failure. Callicles is made to end up agreeing reluctantly that politics as he conceives it is what Socrates calls flattery or sycophancy. In other words, in the end he accepts the paradox that the exercise of supreme power in a democracy requires you to become the *servant* of the people (521a–b). Or as Socrates had said in his very first words to Callicles (at 481d): 'You have no power to oppose them.' On the other hand, Callicles does not draw the Socratic conclusion that the only basis for a true politics (502e–503b, 513d–e, 521d) lies elsewhere. The ultimate sticking point for him is Socrates' central ethical claim in the dialogue: that doing wrong is worse for the person who commits it than having wrong done to them – with its concomitant, that avoiding punishment for wrongdoing is worse than being punished.

Callicles concedes that *if* these claims were true, then being powerless to avert the harm involved would be a disgrace (508d–509c). But he isn't and can't be convinced that such theses are true (e.g. 510e–511b), or that Socrates really appreciates how nasty the world actually is (e.g. 521b–c; cf. 486a–c). The *Crito*'s Socrates had insisted that one should never do wrong or injure anyone in return for injury. And there he had commented (*Crito* 49d): 'There is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other when they see each other's way of thinking about it.'

Modern readers of the *Gorgias* have also resisted Socrates' argument (made in the conversation with Polus) that doing injustice is more harmful than suffering it (474c–475e). In making that argument Socrates never

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explicitly raises the question: ‘Harmful to whom?’ One might think the answer: ‘Harmful to the community and to general respect for law and order’ a more obvious answer than: ‘Harmful to the agent’, which is how Socrates in fact interprets the conclusion.

Here perhaps lies the central puzzle of the *Gorgias*. Its thesis that wrongdoing is worse than having wrong done to you is fundamental to the dialogue’s critique of power politics and of rhetoric as its instrument. Socrates’ conviction of the truth of the thesis is represented as underpinning his willingness to face death rather than demean himself by resort to sycophancy (521c–522e). He insists to the last (527b):

Among so many arguments, while the others are proved wrong, this argument alone stands its ground – that we should more beware of acting unjustly than of being treated unjustly, and that more than anything, what a man should practise, both in private life and public life, is not seeming to be good, but being good.

Yet as actually formulated in the conversation with Polus that argument is so obviously questionable. Perhaps this just shows what it is to stake your life on philosophy.

The *Gorgias* and the *Menexenus*

The *Gorgias*’s clearest philosophical and literary affiliations are with the *Apology* (Plato’s version of Socrates’ speech at his trial) and the *Crito* (where Socrates explains why he must decline an old friend’s offer to help him escape the condemned cell). In its way it is as preoccupied with Socrates’ life and death as they are. Its delineation of the inevitable conflict between philosophy and the values and forces of politics clearly echoes the *Apology*, likewise its preoccupation with the care and fate of the soul as the proper focus of the examined life. The *Gorgias*’s central moral argument for the proposition that we can do no greater harm to ourselves than commit injustice or try to avoid punishment for it develops a rationale for Socrates’ refusal (explained in the *Apology*) to participate in politics (‘a person who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public life, if he is to survive’: *Ap.* 32a), and for the *Crito*’s thesis (with the practical consequences Socrates draws from it) that life is not worth living ‘with that part of us corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits’ (*Crito* 47e).

In all these works Socrates takes a clear stand on what he believes in against the world. They do not end in the puzzlement and inconclusiveness

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characteristic of many other ‘Socratic’ dialogues, while at the same time they contain no elements of the metaphysics and epistemology of mature Platonic writings such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. It seems likely enough that among other things the *Republic* is an attempt to work out a more deeply considered version of the *Gorgias*’s central argument. That only confirms the impression that the *Gorgias* belongs with the *Apology* and *Crito* in an earlier phase, notwithstanding its inclusion of speculative material such as we get in the passage on geometry and the world order at 507e–508a. We might guess at a date of composition in the late 390s.

There is one other dialogue which has long been perceived as a companion piece to the *Gorgias*: the extraordinary *Menexenus*. If the *Gorgias* analyses rhetoric and attempts to expose its pretensions and contradictions, the *Menexenus* presents a sample rhetorical performance which bears out the diagnosis of sycophancy pronounced in the *Gorgias*. For his sample Plato chooses a funeral oration, at Athens often the occasion for a showpiece assertion of democratic self-identity. In fact he has Socrates pretend that this specimen is partly composed of material originally prepared for Pericles’ funeral speech of 431 BC over the Athenian war dead. Thucydides’ version of this (2.35–46) is one of the most important moments in his great history of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (431–404), designed as a masterly testimony to the liberal ethos of public life and the rationality of political decision-making under Periclean leadership. Socrates claims that Pericles’ speech, like the pastiche oration of the *Menexenus*, was actually written by his mistress Aspasia. The subtext is clear: Periclean rhetoric was designed – like his mistress’s professional activities – to give its audience one thing above all: pleasure, albeit in style.

Nineteenth-century scholarship doubted the authenticity of the *Menexenus*. But stylistically it is not unPlatonic; and Aristotle twice refers to the work. The oddest of all the dialogue’s oddities itself speaks for rather than against authenticity. ‘Aspasia’ takes the narrative of Athenian military history which occupies the first and longer section of her oration down into the early fourth century (after Socrates’ death in 399, of course, and almost certainly after her own, too). It is hard to believe that any forger would have taken such liberties with chronology. It is usually supposed that the latest event ‘Aspasia’ refers to is the cessation of hostilities achieved by the so-called King’s Peace of 387/6, indicating a likely composition date soon afterwards.

Plato was not the only writer of the time to be composing dialogues figuring Socrates. One probable stimulus for the writing of *Menexenus* was

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the *Aspasia* by Aeschines of Sphettos (now mostly lost). In Aeschines, too, Aspasia was represented as an intellectual in her own right, sharp of tongue and shrewd in public affairs (Lucian *Imagines* 17). Socrates has her interviewing Xenophon and his wife in Socratic style at one point (e.g. Cicero *De Inventione* 1.51–3). What seems likely is that the *Menexenus* seeks to trump the *Aspasia* by making the courtesan not just the apt pupil of Pericles, but herself the composer of his famous funeral oration (as well as the one in the dialogue).

Something else that may have prompted the writing of *Menexenus* was the publication (probably not for actual public delivery) of a funeral oration by the firmly democratic speech-writer Lysias, somewhere near the end of the 390s, like Plato's 'Aspasia' celebrating Athenians who had died in the Corinthian War. In the *Menexenus* there are naturally dominant echoes of Pericles' funeral speech, particularly at the beginning and end of 'Aspasia's' oration, and in the subtleties invested in the treatment of the Athenian political system as aristocracy tempered by democracy (238c–d; cf. Thuc. 2.37.1). But there are striking resemblances with Lysias's, too, as for example the extravagant assessment of the size of the Persian army at Marathon as half a million, a figure not known to any other ancient writer (240a; Lys. 2.21). There are also places where Plato looks as though he may be meaning to question Lysias's account in a different style. A notable case in point is Lysias's extended celebration of the democrats who overthrew the Thirty Tyrants (Lys. 2.61–5). Plato's briefer account compliments the conduct of all parties following the conflict, yet a crucial silence draws attention to democratic perfidy and brutality by dint of simply omitting mention of it (243e–244a).

Plato leaves the reader in no doubt that the oration he writes for 'Aspasia' is satirically conceived. Quite apart from the conceit that she, not Pericles, is the real orator, the opening exchanges between Socrates and the young Menexenus are designed to make the satirical intent crystal clear. Not content with the heavy humour of a Socrates who feels himself growing 'taller, more noble, and more good-looking' whenever he listens to a funeral speech (with the effect lasting for several days), Plato then goes for bathos. He has Socrates dismiss such speeches as invariably ready-made. Every orator will have one prepared for use, and even if improvisation were necessary, they are easy to produce off the cuff.

The speech 'Aspasia' delivers is subtle pastiche, not obvious parody. It takes the usual form of eulogy of Athens and its history, followed by consolation and encouragement for the relatives of those who have died

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in battle and for the citizens at large. From comparison with other surviving funeral orations, it is apparent that stock tropes of the genre are being deployed throughout. In Plato's variations on those themes will have come some of the bite of the satire – as with the treatment of the restoration of democracy from 403 as compared with Lysias's (mentioned above), or in the extended passage near the beginning on Athenian 'autochthony': their claim to be sons of their own soil, a standard theme developed by Plato more literally and at much greater length than in any other extant funeral speech.

What is most evident to the modern reader is the strikingly partial and chauvinistic character of the historical narrative, a trait common to the genre, here still more exaggerated. Athens is consistently portrayed as heroic saviour and liberator of the Greeks. She shoulders this burden mostly on her own, receives little gratitude for it, and indeed is victimised by other Greek cities. Her control of a large and profitable empire during most of the fifth century, exercised in effect as a form of tyranny (in the words of Thucydides' Pericles: 2.63.2), goes entirely unmentioned. Other uncomfortable truths are similarly suppressed. The disastrous Sicilian expedition of 415–13 is presented as a highly principled – and nearly successful – war of liberation. Defeat at the end of the Peloponnesian War (in 404) is acknowledged, but represented as an act solely of self-destruction: 'Where our enemies are concerned, we remain undefeated to this day' (243d).

This self-deluding strain is sustained in the treatment of renewed Athenian military activity in the 390s. Again the city emerges as heroic saviour of the other Greeks (and even of the old enemy Persia, 'instinctively anti-barbarian' though the Athenians are) – this time against the imperialistic ambitions of the Spartans. Once Spartan aggrandisement has been curbed, the Great King of the Persians starts to fear Athens again, and proposes unacceptable terms for the continuation of the anti-Spartan alliance. Against his expectation there is craven submission on the part of the other Greeks, with Athens alone holding out. However, she emerges from the hostilities with ships, walls and colonies intact.

So 'Aspasia' claims. What all this disguises is that throughout the period in question, the major powers were Persia and Sparta. It was in fact a Persian fleet that the Athenian admiral Conon commanded in 397–393 during a period of naval successes against the Spartans. Conon subsequently persuaded the Persians to hand over a good part of the fleet to Athenian control. It was with Persian financial assistance that the rebuilding of Piraeus

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and the long walls was completed in 394–391. But it is all too easy to imagine that there were Athenian politicians of the day who were pretending otherwise and trumpeting home-grown Athenian revival. If so, then anger and disgust at the duplicity of their rhetoric will perhaps have been the main reason why Plato decided to write the *Menexenus*.

The exact contours of the disingenuousness in ‘Aspasia’s’ account of the subsequent negotiations with Persia are hard to determine.⁴ In 392–391 at least one abortive attempt was made at a peace settlement (perhaps more than one), but on the initiative not of Persia but of Sparta. What is said about the Athenian diplomatic posture would be accurate if the reference is to these negotiations, although if Xenophon is correct (*Hellenica* 4.8.12–15) the other Greek allies also took the same position (Corinth, Argos, the Boeotians). The references to Athenian losses at Corinth and Lechaëum seem to relate to engagements in 394 and 392. All this points to an imagined date for the speech of 391 or 390. Hostilities, however, were not over (as at 245e it is envisaged that they are), even if – as Xenophon reports – large citizen armies were not employed after 392 (*Hellenica* 4.4.14). So if ‘Aspasia’ is conceived as speaking in 391 or 390, the main self-deceptions are gross enough. The war is *not* over; the negotiations had not been initiated by the Persians, still less from fear of Athens; and Athens’ healthier military position is mostly due not to her own spiritedness but to self-interested Persian investment.

Five years later, in 387–386, the Persians *did* initiate negotiations, and an effective settlement (the King’s Peace) was achieved, very much on their terms. Despite further military successes against Sparta, by then the Athenian position was weak, even if her negotiating posture – refusal to abandon the Greeks in Asia – remained as ‘Aspasia’ claims. In 388 the Spartan Teleutias had made an effective raid on the Piraeus, and in 387 ingenious tactics on the part of the Spartan admiral Antalcidas left him (in Xenophon’s words) ‘master of the sea’, i.e. the Aegean (*Hellenica* 5.1.28). If this is the situation obtaining at the imagined date of ‘Aspasia’s’ oration, then Plato must be doing his best to make her try to mask the Athenians’ humiliation by recalling military successes now several years past as though they were somehow still fresh. The disjunction between Athens’ current political situation as it really was in 386–385 and the story told by ‘Aspasia’ would have been stark.

⁴ I am grateful to Robin Osborne, Peter Rhodes and Stephen Todd for discussion and advice on this matter, although responsibility for the summary in the next two paragraphs is mine.

The Symposium and the Protagoras

The closing pages of the speech, offering consolation and encouragement, do so rather more expansively than other surviving funeral orations. Some of the language in the opening few sentences (246a–c) carries Socratic echoes, as does the stress on the need for self-sufficiency a bit later (247e–248a). We should not infer that Plato is now offering us what he regards as *good* rhetoric. As the *Gorgias* has argued, Pericles' sort of rhetoric always aims to ingratiate itself with its audience and give pleasure. Just as 'Aspasia's' speech attempts to outperform other funeral orations in its narrative section by offering superior pleasures of self-deception through the extremes to which it takes historical distortion, so it endeavours to make the pleasures of the consolation it supplies more consoling and its encouragement more encouraging – adding a few touches of philosophy as needed for the purpose. To repeat, this is not crude parody, but sophisticated pastiche.

The Symposium and the Protagoras

The *Protagoras* is among other things an entertainment. It has obvious affinities with other Socratic dialogues (especially the treatment of courage in the *Laches*), and with the *Meno*, often seen as a dialogue transitional between the early and middle groups, and as taking up as its topic the question about the nature and consequently the teachability of human goodness or virtue left hanging at the end of the *Protagoras*. But there are also some striking connections with the *Symposium*, the supreme entertainment piece in the Platonic corpus.

The most obvious is the overlap in the casts of characters assembled in Callias's house in the *Protagoras*, to listen to the sophists, and at the playwright Agathon's party in the *Symposium*, to celebrate Agathon's victory in the dramatic festival. Of the speakers at the party we find (besides Socrates) Eryximachus and Phaedrus listening to Hippias, and the lovers Pausanias and Agathon listening to Prodicus (315c–e). The dazzlingly talented young Alcibiades, ultimately to lead Athens to disaster and to become a byword for aristocratic corruption, is also there (as in the *Symposium* he arrives after all the others). He makes interventions in the conversation of the *Protagoras* (336b–c, 347b, 348b), and Socrates' erotic fascination with him (a major theme in the *Symposium*) is the topic which launches the whole dialogue (309a–b). Among the speakers at Agathon's party only Aristophanes, the comic dramatist, is absent. But his spirit hovers over the opening scenes of the *Protagoras*.

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There are other parallels. As Socrates in the *Symposium* stands transfixed in thought in Agathon's neighbour's porch after the other guests have arrived (*Symp.* 174d–175b), so in the *Protagoras* he and Hippocrates stand in the doorway of Callias's house finishing their discussion (314c). In the *Symposium* the girls who play the reed pipes are sent away so that the men can concentrate on their talk (*Symp.* 176e). In the *Protagoras* Socrates similarly expresses contempt for parties where people cannot generate their own conversation, but pay high prices for girls to play the pipes (347b–e). The *Symposium*'s narrative frames are even more complex than the *Protagoras*'s, but here too the outer shell is a conversation between the narrator and an unnamed companion, which similarly enables the creation of the atmosphere of a vanished social and intellectual world. At least one computer analysis of the dialogues makes the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium* closer to each other stylistically than to any other dialogues.⁵

If I had to make a literary judgment, I would opt for the verdict that, where the dialogues run parallel, the *Protagoras* is parasitic on the *Symposium*. The reference to Socrates' pursuit of the beautiful Alcibiades which constitutes the friend's opening sally in the *Protagoras* seems designed to remind us of the *Symposium* rather than to introduce any theme integral to the dialogue itself. Gathering together all the speakers at Agathon's party except Aristophanes looks like a device for emphasising his implicit presence in the comedy of the opening scenes. In every case the inclusion of the topic or speaker in the *Symposium* is integral to the development of its plot, whereas in the *Protagoras* it is mostly circumstantial detail that could as well be omitted or substituted. Nothing from the point of view of plot would be lost, for example, if some other pair than Agathon and Pausanias were listening to Prodicus. The remarks Socrates makes later about girls playing music or dancing at a gathering certainly make a good point, but they are strictly surplus to the actual requirements of the conversational tactic he decides to employ at that point in the discussion.

My guess accordingly would be that the *Protagoras* was written subsequent to the *Symposium*, probably in the late 380s.⁶ It will be said that the *Symposium* is a middle period dialogue. But its inclusion in a middle

⁵ See G.R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato* (Oxford 1989).

⁶ The composition of the *Symposium* is usually taken to postdate the year 385, on account of the apparent reference at *Symp.* 192e to the Spartans' dismemberment of the Arcadian capital Mantinea.

The Protagoras against the sophists

period group is based not on stylistic criteria, but on philosophical assessment. Even then it is only the speech Socrates says he heard from Diotima, with its explanation of how someone may ascend through *erôs* to a vision of the Form of the Beautiful, that marks it out as ‘middle period’ – not any development in Socrates’ own style of argument or in the theses he himself proposes. As often with relative date of composition of Platonic dialogues, there isn’t on examination any solid reason for thinking the *Symposium* could not predate the *Protagoras*.

The *Protagoras* against the sophists

If the *Symposium* is written in such a way as to try to convince us of the ‘authenticity’ of its Socrates, of its representation of the long extinct aristocratic milieu in which he often included himself, and (ultimately) of the truth about Socratic *erôs*, what are we to make of the *Protagoras*’s use of the same cast of characters, the same kind of milieu, and some of the same thematic elements? Repetition is never just repetition. What the *Protagoras* gives the reader – to begin with, at least – is a burlesque version. Indeed the very idea of staging an assemblage of sophists may have been inspired by a comedy. Aristophanes’s elder contemporary Eupolis had written a play called *Sycophants*, which included Protagoras among its characters; and since it referred to Callias’s recently coming into an inheritance, it might even have been set in his house (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 5.218c).

A defining moment in the dialogue is the encounter with Callias’s doorkeeper (‘Ugh! Sophists!’), taken with its immediate sequel. Negotiating your way past a surly and recalcitrant doorkeeper is a trope of Aristophanic comedy, and the comic register thereby established is sustained and richly developed by the portrayal of the leading sophists: to whom we are now introduced (314c–316a). The focus is on the various physical postures of intellectual authority they strike (aided and abetted by their acolytes). Its amusement value is enhanced by recognition that some of the acolytes are figures familiar to us from a completely different setting in the *Symposium*. It is all too believable, but in its exaggeration unbelievable. That sense of contradiction is reinforced by Socrates’ representation of the scene (when he gets to Hippias and Prodicus) as a mock descent into Hades, conveyed by allusions to Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Prodicus and Hippias remain one-dimensional caricatures throughout the dialogue, constructed like all caricatures to capture one highly simplified