

Nur zum persönlichen Gebrauch

CHAPTER EIGHT

PROTAGORAS' MYTH IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*: FICTION OR TESTIMONY?

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The historical Protagoras as well as his philosophical and rhetorical theories were well known in ancient Athens, as can be inferred from a great number of reactions. Plato himself must have regarded discussing the positions advanced by Protagoras as so important that he has him lecture at length in the *Protagoras* and makes Socrates speak adopting the role of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Hence Plato's writings are among the most extensive testimonies to the views of this 'sophist'. A solution to the problem of how these texts may be used as sources of what Protagoras actually said becomes thus all the more important. In what follows I will try to find some answers to this frequently asked question, focusing on Protagoras' Great Speech in the dialogue named after him (*Prot.* 320 C 8–328 D 2) and particularly on the part that contains the well-known myth (320 C 8–323 A 4).¹

If the value of this speech as a source is to be assessed, the two extreme positions that are theoretically possible, i.e., 'verbatim rendering of Protagoras' words' and 'mere fiction of Plato's' can be excluded—or at least regarded as implausible—right from the start. The view that Plato gives a literal quotation of a speech by Protagoras is untenable since the speech contains an allusion to a performance of Pherecrates' comedy *Savages* in 420 BC (327 D 3–4) and at the same time presents Pericles' sons, who died in 429 BC, as alive and present (328 C 6–D 2). This contradiction cannot be reconciled with possible utterances of the historical Protagoras. Hence Plato must be credited with having a large share in this speech, as he seems not too concerned with

¹ Lampert (2010, 50 n. 54) defines the following as "scholarly consensus": "the speech Plato gives Protagoras faithfully represents the historical Protagoras's views". Van Riel, who argues that "the doctrines of the myth" are largely Platonic, at the same time regards it as possible that Plato has adapted a text by the historical Protagoras (2012, 162). On Van Riel's interpretation see also notes 11 and 21 below. Denyer 2008 does not address the problem in how far the myth may represent ideas of the historical Protagoras; neither does Calame 2012.

absolute historical truth. On the other hand, mere fiction is equally unlikely: Plato would have been considered unreliable by his contemporaries, who still had access to the writings of the historical Protagoras, if he had made him voice beliefs that sounded implausible when attributed to Protagoras. Therefore it is most likely that Plato has his Protagoras advocate positions that he and his audience would have regarded as possible views of the historical figure.

At the same time one has to allow for the possibility that Plato has his Protagoras present interpretations of the views of his historical namesake, or draw conclusions from them that the actual Protagoras did not. There is a range of possibilities of how Plato's portrayal and the views of the historical Protagoras may relate to each other. Methodologically speaking, convincing hypotheses are the only solutions to be arrived at in view of the available evidence. This does not mean, however, that scholars must limit themselves to rather general considerations of plausibility.² What has to be done instead is to find in the text of the dialogue relevant indications that suggest at least a large degree of probability that Plato is referring to positions of the historical Protagoras. The application of such a method seems possible with respect to some features of Protagoras' speech.

After having ascertained in how far the speech of Plato's Protagoras taken as a whole provides information about views and methods of his historical namesake, one can move on and try to find out to what extent the myth, narrated as part of this speech, can function as a source for the historical Protagoras.

1. THE GREAT SPEECH AND THE INCORPORATION OF THE MYTH

Protagoras' Great Speech in Plato's dialogue is a reaction to Socrates' request that he explain in greater detail that virtue (*ἀρετή*) can be taught (320 B 8–C 1). Previously, Socrates had doubted (on the authority of the Athenians!) that virtue, which Protagoras professes to be able to teach, could be taught at all (319 A 3–320 B 5).

In looking at Protagoras' response, let us first focus on the remarkable phenomenon of a notable repetition: five times in the course of the speech it is stated that all human beings share or must share respect for the rights of

² This route is followed by Vegetti in his interpretation (2004, esp. 154 ff.); similarly Senzasono 2007, 98 f., and Lampert in a brief footnote (2010, 50 n. 54).

others or self-restraint (αἰδώς / σωφροσύνη)³ and justice (δίκη / δικαιοσύνη), or else human societies (πόλεις) could not exist.⁴ This statement is obviously intended to appear as the main belief of the Protagoras of the dialogue. Hence one might infer that it agrees with views of the historical Protagoras, at least as regards its general tenor: such a repetition can be characteristic of Protagoras only if a contemporary audience can make a connection with the historical figure.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility that this connection could also be a negative one: the point of Plato's method would then consist in the very fact that the historical Protagoras did not advance this particular theory. But in order to be consistent, one would then have to assume as well that Plato had invented this theory for his Protagoras in order to allow Socrates to discuss it, which is rather implausible. For Socrates' criticism is not directed against the statement as such, claiming that σωφροσύνη and δικαιοσύνη are indispensable for human societies; instead it becomes clear in the course of the dialogue that the Platonic Socrates criticizes the unclear or unexplained implications of this view: what about the unity of these two (and further) virtues, what is their relationship to knowledge?

Plato's strategy will make sense only if the main thesis itself can be taken as a fixed starting-point and is then discussed with respect to its actual meaning. Also, there is no fundamental opposition between the two interlocutors. On the contrary, they are in agreement on an important principle: Protagoras too is presented as a person who regards virtue as something beautiful, and he even expresses this view emphatically (349 E 3–6). When Socrates puts to the test Protagoras' opinion that σωφροσύνη and δικαιοσύνη are necessary for the existence of human societies, the procedure is similar to the discussion of the *homo mensura*-doctrine in the *Theaetetus* (152 A 1–183 C 7). Hence it is probable that Protagoras' belief set forth in the dialogue named after him goes back to the historical Protagoras; it is, as it were, the anthropological-political equivalent of his epistemological principles.

Ascribing both theories to the historical Protagoras does not create a contradiction. For the view stressed in the *Protagoras*, that norms are indispensable for societies to exist (in that human beings share in σωφροσύνη

³ In explaining the myth, Protagoras picks up αἰδώς (*Prot.* 322 C 2)—an expression due to the poetic colour of the myth (just as δίκη)—by σωφροσύνη (323 A 2), treating the terms as equivalent to each other. σωφροσύνη then refers to limiting oneself to the area granted to one person, i.e., to the avoidance of trespassing on others. Cp. Manuwald 1999, 196 f.; 201; Rademaker 2005, 300 f.

⁴ *Prot.* 323 A 2–3; B 7–C 2; C 4; 324 D 7–E 2; 326 E 7–327 A 2.

and δικαιοσύνη), allows for different conceptions of what, for instance, is regarded as just. That means that the simultaneous validity of distinct conceptions of justice in different communities, as implied in the *homo mensura*-doctrine, can be reconciled with Protagoras' requirements for all members of a society as they are outlined in the *Protagoras*. For when Plato has Socrates defend Protagoras' views in the *Theaetetus* (165 E 8–168 C 5), the following principles are voiced: what any community regards as just is just for them, as long as they consider it just, and the politician who manages to create circumstances that are good for the citizens and are seen by them as such instead of circumstances that are bad for them, proves to be a sage (167 C 2–7).⁵ As presented by Plato, Protagoras' anthropological-political principle can easily be integrated with his arguments attested elsewhere. When Plato has thereby constructed his Protagoras without contradictions, this result is indicative of Plato's attempt to report at least the basis for the discussion with the historical Protagoras correctly.

As for Protagoras' boastful speech in the dialogue *Protagoras* in its entirety (320 C 8–328 D 2), it is striking that it starts with a discussion of the form in which Protagoras might comply with Socrates' request. Protagoras offers two options: should he narrate a story (μῦθος) or present an argument (λόγος)?⁶ When he is given the choice, he generously opts for the story as the more attractive (χαριέστερον) form (320 C 2–7). In fact, however, Protagoras does not stick to his preference for a μῦθος over a λόγος, but presents a μῦθος and a λόγος successively, as he says himself at the end of his speech (328 C 3–4). Yet his explicit transition to the λόγος (324 D 6–7) does not coincide with the unmarked factual transition at a much earlier point in the speech (from 322 D 5 onwards), where he stops talking in the style of the mythical narrative.

By this demonstration of how Protagoras deals with various forms of presentation Plato characterizes Protagoras' methods as both experienced and random. And the way in which the Great Speech with the myth is structured itself reveals an implicit criticism of this randomness: as can be inferred from narratives of myths in other dialogues, μῦθος and λόγος are not easily interchangeable for a Platonic narrator of myths. Moreover, the prominent paratactic style (λέξεις εἰρομένη) of Protagoras' myth does not agree with the style of Platonic myths in other dialogues.⁷ This suggests that

⁵ Cp. Kerferd 1949/50, 25; Döring 1981, 111–113; also Zilioli 2007, 100–102.

⁶ What is important here is not only the simple contrast between μῦθος and λόγος, but primarily μῦθον λέγων in contrast to λόγῳ διεξιζόντων, 320 C 3–4.

⁷ On these issues see Manuwald 2002, 60 f.; 2003, 41 ff.

for the narrative of his Protagoras Plato has adopted the mythical way of presentation of the historical Protagoras as well as his narrative style. That the narrative of a myth can indeed function as a means of sophistic *epideixis* is proved by Prodicus' story of Heracles at the crossroads (Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.21–34; DK 84 B 2, II.313–316). On a certain level Protagoras' myth in Plato's dialogue can also be seen as a *protreptikos* to virtue.

The hypothesis of an attempted similarity to a myth of the historical Protagoras can be confirmed by further remarkable inconsistencies in the course of the conversation. Socrates had refuted Protagoras' assertion (that what he claims to be teaching, i.e., virtue, can be taught) by two series of arguments: (1) the fact that the Athenians grant permission to discuss technical questions exclusively to experts, but allow everyone to talk about political problems, immediately suggested to Socrates that they do not regard the latter as teachable in contrast to the former (319 B 5–D 7). (2) The leading figures in the state are not able to pass on their abilities to their sons (319 D 7–320 B 3). Yet Plato has the interlocutor Protagoras claim that the myth will disprove Socrates' argument (320 C 2); in fact, however, it only deals with the arguments in the first part of Socrates' speech. Besides, the myth corresponds to Socrates' first argument against the view that virtue is teachable (319 B 5–D 7) only in so far as it refers to its factual precondition, namely the Athenians' behaviour in popular assemblies.

This structure of the discussion is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the argument based on the behaviour of the people in the popular assembly occurs in connection with the question of whether virtue can be taught only in the *Protagoras*, while the same context in the *Meno* merely uses Socrates' second argument (*Prot.* 319 D 7–320 B 3), namely that the leading men in the state cannot pass on their abilities (*Meno* 93 C 6–94 E 1).⁸ The reason could be that Plato has Socrates use the argument based on the behaviour of the popular assembly in order to create a starting point for the myth.

The second noteworthy detail is that the myth—even though Protagoras' announcement creates the impression that he is going to answer all of Socrates' arguments (320 C 2–7)—does not even refer to the main thrust of Socrates' first argument ([1] 319 D 6–7), since the aspect of whether or not virtue can be taught is not directly mentioned in the myth. Instead, the myth (320 C 8–322 D 5), its interpretation (322 D 5–323 A 4) and the additional

⁸ Cp. also [Plato] *Alc.* I, 118 C 7–119 A 5.

arguments (323 A 5–C 2) lead to the thesis that—in contrast to technical accomplishments—each human being shares in the abilities necessary for societies to exist; this is presented as a universal belief, and hence the Athenians and other peoples act correctly when they grant everybody access to political issues. Only after a clearly marked new start (and without any backward reference to the argumentation of the myth), does Protagoras engage with Socrates' conclusion from the behaviour of the Athenians, namely the question of whether or not virtue can be taught (323 C 3–324 D 1).

Even though at this point the Platonic Protagoras has actually abandoned the form of *μῦθος* long since, the explicit transition to a *λόγος* happens much later (324 D 6–7), when Protagoras turns to Socrates' second argument ([2] 319 D 7–320 B 3). Protagoras' whole discussion of Socrates' first argument (319 B 5–D 7) thus seems to be determined by the myth, but this does not apply to its entirety and precisely not with regard to the actual question of whether or not virtue can be taught. This arrangement of Protagoras' speech as a whole does not invite the assumption that it is the result of Plato's inability, in the sense that he invented a myth for Protagoras that does not agree with the question at issue. It is more likely, therefore, that the inconsistent structure of Protagoras' speech has been caused by the fact that an existing myth was to be used, even if not entirely appropriate, because it was characteristic of the historical figure.

That the myth has not been completely integrated into Protagoras' speech and, beyond that, into the argument of the whole dialogue is corroborated by another observation: in his exposition subsequent to the myth, the Platonic Protagoras introduces being pious (*ὅσιον εἶναι*, 325 A 1)⁹ as analogous to *σωφροσύνη* and *δικαιοσύνη* and thus reckons the former among the indispensable abilities for living in a community. Consequently, Socrates later regards being pious as a virtue and calls it *δσιότης* (329 C 5). In the myth, however, being pious is not connected with the gifts from Zeus (*αἰδώς* / *σωφροσύνη* and *δίκη* / *δικαιοσύνη*). Instead it is already present (though not named explicitly) even prior to the differentiated technical development, since humans are the only living beings who believe in gods and erect altars and statues of gods (322 A 3–5).¹⁰ It follows that the Platonic Protagoras views people's religious

⁹ Cp. also *Prot.* 325 D 4.

¹⁰ Protagoras' exposition of human belief in gods does not contradict his theological agnosticism (DK 80 B 4, II.265), as has been shown by Müller (1976, 316–318): it is most likely a mythical transposition of the *homo mensura*-doctrine (DK 80 B 1, II.262–264) to the world of the gods, as the notion of human belief in gods is a projection or a mirror image of human

behaviour in the myth differently from the way he does elsewhere in the dialogue, without this difference being made use of for the argument.¹¹ This fact too suggests that the myth is based on the historical Protagoras rather than on a Platonic fiction.

There are obviously good reasons for ascribing the basic ideas of the myth to the historical Protagoras; an analysis of its structure and meaning therefore becomes all the more important.

2. STRUCTURE OF THE MYTH

The myth (320 C 8–322 D 5) consists of two major sections: the first one aims at distinguishing between creatures not equipped with reason (ἄλογα) and human beings, in so far as other living beings are sufficiently equipped through the faculties (δυνάμεις) that Epimetheus had distributed among them, whereas human beings can only exist by means of cultural techniques based on the knowledge that Prometheus had stolen from Hephaestus and Athena and given to men (320 C 8–322 A 2). The second section outlines the basic differentiation between these cultural techniques and the social abilities of human beings, and points out the absolute necessity and superiority of the latter: they derive from Zeus, the supreme god (322 A 3–D 5).

Comparison of the activities of Epimetheus with those of Prometheus results in a stark contrast between ἄλογα and human beings (321 C 1): while the former are equipped with 'natural' faculties (δυνάμεις), which allow them to cope with the demands of life, a similar set-up is not available to

affairs.—Irrespective of his own views about the gods, the historical Protagoras could not pass over the phenomenon that humans believe in gods and honour them by various cult practices.

¹¹ This difference is an argument against Van Riel's view (2012, 159–162) that the myth included a Platonic thesis to the effect "that religion—an effect of the possession of fire—is more deeply rooted in human nature than sociality" (161), particularly since the Platonic Protagoras does not simply explain the veneration of gods as an "effect of the possession of fire", but more fundamentally as a result of the relationship of human beings to gods (322 A 4; i.e., owing to ἐντεχνος σοφία, linked to the use of fire and deriving from Athena and Hephaestus, cp. 321 D 1–2); see also Manuwald 1999, 191–193. Besides, it is methodologically problematic with respect to the myth, defined as an utterance by Protagoras (irrespective of the fact whether it has been written as Protagorean or is modelled on the historical Protagoras), to try to prove that there is "a thoroughly Platonic content" (162) on the basis of individual similarities and differences between the myth and statements in other Platonic dialogues (cp. esp. *Prot.* 322 D 4–5 ~ *Politicus* 308 E 8–309 A 3; Van Riel 2012, 155–156).

human beings, since the δυνάμεις had already been used up for the ἄλογα. Human beings therefore have to rely on cultural techniques. And that their basis derives from the gods indicates—outside the mythical framework—that techniques based on knowledge are fundamentally different from the δυνάμεις of the ἄλογα.

A closer look at the narrative structure of Protagoras' myth reveals that the story of the origin of living beings and the development of mankind is mainly characterized by a combination of traditional mythical elements and 'scientific' discoveries.¹² 'Mythical elements' include the belief that living beings are created and given form by the gods (320 D 1–3) or by the divine orders given to Prometheus and Epimetheus (who, however, assume functions not attested for them in earlier literature: 320 D 3–6). Further, gods appear associated with their traditional spheres (Athena and Hephaestus: 321 D 1–E 3), and the myth closes with Zeus' helpful intervention by means of his messenger Hermes—narrated via a verbatim rendering of the speeches by Zeus and Hermes (322 C 1–D 5).

These mythical details in Protagoras' myth are supplemented by features which may be regarded as 'scientific elements': the doctrine of the (four) substances implied in the creation of living beings (320 D 2–3), the idea of equality in the sense of biological stability effected by the distribution of faculties over the individual creatures, which is based on a rational method (320 D 8–321 B 6),¹³ as well as aspects of a doctrine of cultural development (of the ascending type). Protagoras adds this doctrine in order to prove that social abilities are superior to and more important than technical ones (322 A 2–B 8).¹⁴

What is particularly interesting is how these 'scientific elements' have been connected with the myth. For instance, the idea of biological stability is traced back to the activities of Epimetheus, who—in spite of his name—carries out a provident and tailored distribution of the δυνάμεις, which ensures the

¹² The (somewhat problematic) expression 'scientific' has been chosen for simplicity's sake. It is intended to denote elements of the myth that originate in empirical observation or philosophical and ontological speculation and that by virtue of their form or content could occur also in contexts other than a myth (and at least in part are attested in other contexts).—This distinction is not meant to ascribe less importance to the mythical elements in relation to the non-mythical ones—neither for Protagoras' myth nor for other myths in Plato—, but simply to indicate that the myths contain elements of different types.

¹³ A similar thought is found in Herodotus 3.108–109 (καί πως τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ πρόνοια, ὥσπερ καὶ οἰκὸς ἐστὶ, ἐοῦσα σοφὴ (...), 3.108.2); on this parallel and on the question of the origin of this theory cp. Demont 1994.

¹⁴ For further details see Manuwald 1999, 172 ff.; also 2006, 93 ff.

survival of the species for non-human beings.¹⁵ His only 'mistake' (criticized by the narrator) is that in the distribution of these δυνάμεις none has been left for human beings. However, this turns out to be a *felix culpa*: for only as a result of this oversight do human beings get the chance to enjoy the 'divine' faculties that are necessary for their lives and are granted to them by Prometheus and ultimately by Zeus.¹⁶

So Protagoras' myth turns out to be structured in a complex way: there is a combination of an appeal to a traditional belief in anthropomorphic gods, whose speeches can be rendered verbatim, combined with constructs that have been derived from theories about the emergence of living beings and their ways to cope with life, and from empirical observation of the technical abilities and the social behaviour of human beings; this results in a convincing and well-illustrated exposition of the intended argument. In order to demonstrate the necessity of αἰδώς / σωφροσύνη and δίκη / δικαιοσύνη for the existence of human communities, cultural-theoretical considerations are immediately linked with the aim of the argument, as the speaker shows that the lack of these characteristics causes universal war (322 B 6–8).

Because of this blending of traditional and scientific ideas and more generally of the presence of 'non-mythical' elements in the myth it is unlikely that μῦθος and λόγος are real alternatives for Protagoras, and that he is being made to choose the μῦθος since he would be unable to give the reasons for his theory outlined in the μῦθος through a λόγος.¹⁷ A more plausible explanation is that Plato wished to present the historical Protagoras as a

¹⁵ Consequently, there is no 'experimental phase', during which species are being produced that are unfit for survival according to the principle of 'trial and error' (cp. Lucretius 5.837–877).—Hence Epimetheus is not "very unwise" with regard to non-human beings (so Zilioli 2007, 98).

¹⁶ For the purposes of the myth as a narrative, it is 'necessary' for Epimetheus to make a mistake; it is not indicated how Epimetheus could have distributed the δυνάμεις otherwise, so as to leave something to the humans. In fact, nothing must be left, since then the special position of humans could not be illustrated.

¹⁷ Thus, however, Morgan 2000, 138–147.—Protagoras' claim, implied by his procedure, that he is *able* to provide proof either by a μῦθος or a λόγος cannot be regarded as refuted (as Morgan seems to assume) by the fact that *actually* in the *epideixis* as a whole μῦθος and λόγος are not used alternatively and that Protagoras' subsequent considerations build on conclusions arrived at by the myth. Also, the myth is immediately followed by a non-mythical argument with the same aim (i.e., the τεκμήριον, 323 A 5–C 2). If this section does not deal with 'matters of fact', but rather with what human beings say and regard as correct (cp. Morgan 2000, 139–140), Protagoras sticks to the level of argumentation that Socrates had prescribed, or into which he had enticed Protagoras (319 B 3–D 7, cp. esp. οἶονται, C 2 and 7, ἡγοῦνται, D 7).—On the logical problems of Protagoras' exposition see Manuwald 1999, esp. 169–170, 194, and 2006, 89–91; but these problems are independent of the question of 'μῦθος or λόγος'.

typical representative of the sophists, when the figure in the dialogue is introduced as claiming to be equally able to offer a *μῦθος* or a *λόγος*, and at the same time to incorporate a Protagorean myth that builds on contemporary discoveries.

It goes without saying that the distinction between 'scientific' and 'mythical' is no more than a formal schematization, for the sake of a convenient description of the facts. Whether the historical Protagoras actually wished to adopt an independent 'scientific' standpoint in the contemporary discussion of cultural development and collective ethics¹⁸ or held an independent position beyond an "antropologia 'tecnologica'" and an "antropologia della pleonexia e della adikia"¹⁹ remains a problem to be discussed. Although it is obvious that the myth uses elements from doctrines of cultural development and some anthropological assumptions that certainly do not agree with traditional religious beliefs, one must be cautious with basic categorizing of this kind. An analysis of the specific combination of the single elements in the context of the myth is more promising.²⁰

3. MEANING OF THE MYTH

Indeed, against the background of what is known about doctrines of cultural development from elsewhere, Protagoras' myth turns out to be a rather bizarre construction. A closer inspection reveals that the emphatic distinction between *δημιουργική* and *πολιτική τέχνη*²¹ is rather artificial: social-communicative phenomena such as religion and language (322 A 3–6) seem to be subsumed under *δημιουργική* by Protagoras, at any rate not under *πολιτική τέχνη*, because in his scenario human beings have already developed religion and language before founding *πόλεις* (322 B 1) and before Zeus grants them the *πολιτική τέχνη*, which—according to Protagoras' description—consists in an undifferentiated fusion of the art of running a city and of the

¹⁸ As Most (2002, 10, 12) thinks: according to him, Protagoras' myth deals with "Anthropologie der Politik" and "Entstehung politischer Gemeinschaften".

¹⁹ This is Vegetti's view: 2004, 153–154.

²⁰ For further details and problems in the analysis of the text see Manuwald 1996; also Manuwald 1999, 168–236; 2006, 89–112.

²¹ On the changing meaning of *πολιτική τέχνη* in Protagoras' myth (referring both to the capacity to organize and to defend a city, 322 B 5, and to interpersonal relations expressed in terms of *αἰδώς* / *σωφροσύνη* and *δίκη* / *δικαιοσύνη* 322 B 7–C 3) cp. Adkins 1973, 5–12; Manuwald 1999, 194.—These variations, which are essential for the interpretation of Protagoras' speech as a whole (see Manuwald 1999, 210–213), are not taken into account by Zilioli (2007, 96; 99) nor by Van Riel (2012).

possession of αἰδώς and δίκη (322 B 7–C 3). As he wishes to highlight the importance of πολιτικὴ τέχνη or of αἰδώς and δίκη, Protagoras passes over the detail, relevant even in his time, that there is a close connection between religion and human behaviour towards one's fellow citizens.²²

In addition, the sequence of (unproblematic) technical and initially unsuccessful social developments as assumed by Protagoras is contradictory in itself. On the one hand, a fairly sophisticated stage of development is presupposed for the threatening lack of σωφροσύνη and δικαιοσύνη (322 A 5–8; B 3–4); this stage is characterized by an organizational structure of shared labour in a community where, for instance, one doctor is sufficient for a great number of people (cp. 322 C 6–7); on the other hand, men are not able to ward off wild animals (322 B 1–2; 4), a problem that cannot have appeared only in this phase.

The discrepancies in the myth of the Platonic Protagoras become even more obvious against the background of other ancient models for the development of mankind. In the scenario transmitted by Diodorus (1.8.1–9, DK 68 B 5.1, II.135.32–136.15) the initial bad plight of human beings affects all areas to an equal extent, and the technical and the social developments (which include the use of language) proceed at the same pace. Whereas Protagoras' version stresses that there are no problems for human beings in the area of δημιουργικὴ τέχνη and that the development (as is indicated with respect to the progress of speech) is completed within a short span of time (ταχύ, 322 A 6), other doctrines of cultural development have emphasized a temporal element, from Xenophanes onwards.²³ There are no indications that the almost canonical principle of gradual development held over centuries was replaced by a different view in the time of Protagoras, since such an alternative concept is implausible in itself.

²² Firmly rooted in Greek thought is the idea that a deed of bloodshed needs to be expiated; cp. e.g. the story of Adrastus in Herodotus (1.35) and the myth of Orestes (Aeschylus, *Ch.* 1027–1039; 1059–1060; *Eu.* 276–283).

²³ DK 21 B 18, I.133.12–14 (Stob. 1.8.2): οὗτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖς ὑπέδειξαν, | ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον.—In the extant fragments of Democritus a relevant term is not attested, but factually he also seems to have assumed a lengthy development (DK 68 B 144, II.170 = Philod. *De mus.* 4.31, 108.29 Kemke; also 68 B 154, II.173 = Plut. *De sollert. an.* 20, 974 A). The author of the Hippocratic treatise *De vetere medicina* presupposes a long development for the area of nutrition (3, 38.3 Heiberg). Isocrates knows of a gradual development (*Panegyricus* 32). According to Philemon, time, not an instructor, has taught the arts (fr. 136 K.-A.). In Moschion time is mentioned as a decisive factor (*TrGF* 97 F 6.18–22). The idea of a long-term development is also present in Epicurus (*Epist. ad Hdt.* 75–76) as well as in Diodorus (1.8.2, 3 and 7).

Another remarkable feature of Protagoras' myth is his assertion that human beings were still living separately even after (technical) development had made some progress (322 A 8–B 1). The separation or the lack of communities is typically a sign of a primitive early stage, prior to all technical (and also linguistic) development.²⁴ Such models of cultural progress are only attested from a later period onwards, but inherently they offer a more convincing concept.

Irrespective of these discrepancies, numerous connections can obviously be established between individual points in Protagoras' myth and specific doctrines of cultural development known from elsewhere; these suggest that Plato's Protagoras was familiar with such theories. Therefore one is justified in assuming that this knowledge would have allowed Protagoras to present a more consistent theory, had this been his intention. Hence it follows that the myth is geared up for another goal; and on this assumption all inconsistencies disappear, and other principles of organization become evident.

Firstly, the myth reveals that human beings seem at a disadvantage owing to Epimetheus' failure in comparison with beings not equipped with reason; in fact, they are far superior to animals because they are 'cultural beings' by virtue of their 'divine' abilities, acquired partly by Prometheus' theft and partly by Zeus' intervention. The consequence of this construction is that both the technical and the social faculties are 'divine' (and thus distinguished from the δυνάμεις of the ἄλογα) and at the same time have a different status, since the social faculties were beyond Prometheus' reach (321 D 5–7) and could only be granted by the supreme god (322 C 1–D 5). As is particularly clear in the λόγος section of Protagoras' speech, which follows the μῦθος, these 'god-given' social faculties consist in abilities that can and must be developed by education (cp. 324 D 2–326 E 5). As a consequence, they belong to an area that might be acted upon by a sophist teacher. This is especially true for the evident superiority of πολιτικὴ τέχνη or ἀρετή (322 B 5, 8; E 2–323 A 1) over δημιουργικὴ τέχνη, which is shown to be insufficient in the myth. Protagoras obviously regards the basic ability for social interaction, made possible by αἰδώς / σωφροσύνη and δίκη / δικαιοσύνη, as this τέχνη or ἀρετή, which he—according to Plato—claims to be competent to teach (319 A 3–7; 349 A 2–3).²⁵

The importance of the element of education for the myth as a narrative is also indicated by the following point: according to Zeus' will αἰδώς and δίκη

²⁴ Cp. Diodorus 1.8.1; Lucr. 5.958–959.

²⁵ 319 A 4 πολιτικὴ τέχνη, 349 A 3 ἀρετῆς διδάσκαλος.

are to be distributed among all human beings (in contrast to the technical faculties); yet at the same time a law from Zeus is in force, ruling that those who are unable to participate in αἰδώς and δίκη are to be killed, as they constitute a plague (νόσος) on the city (322 D 1–5). This contradiction does make sense if Zeus' utterance is not primarily interpreted as a statement saying that all human beings are by nature equipped for social behaviour,²⁶ but rather as an indication of the absolute importance and necessity of social behaviour, which everyone has to strive for by all possible means so as to avoid being excluded from human society. Such a reading is supported by Protagoras' subsequent argument: with the prospect of possible exile or death, if one does not comply with the rules of society, a life-long education to ἀρετή will actually be taking place (324 D 2–326 E 5).

There is some tension, however, between, on the one hand, Protagoras' view that everyone must share in both αἰδώς / σωφροσύνη and δίκη / δικαιοσύνη (322 C 2–323 A 4) and that everyone can be a teacher of ἀρετή (327 E 1–2) and, on the other, the claim of the sophists that it is they who make their students successful in private and public life (316 B 8–C 2; 318 A 2–319 A 7). In Plato's dialogue, Protagoras solves this discrepancy by saying that he is able to support his students more than anyone else (328 A 8–B 5), since he, being a 'sophist', is more competent. For present purposes it is irrelevant whether this solution is convincing;²⁷ the dialogue *Protagoras* as a whole at any rate suggests that in Plato's view this assertion fails to convince. Yet this does not tell against the interpretation that the historical Protagoras basically viewed his role as Plato had the dialogue's character outline it.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis yields the following results for the myth: it is not conceived as a doctrine of cultural development—a doctrine that would be inconsistent—, but as an entirely consistent advertising speech of a sophist. The elements derived from doctrines of cultural development and scientific theories used in the myth serve the single aim of proving the area for which the sophist claims to be responsible, to be the most important and indispensable for the πόλις, an aim that is further developed

²⁶ In that case it would have to be available to all human beings without exception, as, for instance, the ability to fly is to all beings of the relevant type (cp. 320 E 3–4).

²⁷ Protagoras does not distinguish between qualities necessary for complying with rules that enable societies to exist and others that qualify individuals for a position of leadership.

in the following sections of Protagoras' speech (cp. esp. 328 A 8–B 5). By the mythically flavoured exposition of his subject, Protagoras introduces himself as somebody who—in contrast to other sophists²⁸—teaches abilities of which any human being must have a share at least to some extent; in this way he presents himself as the ideal teacher for democratic Athens. This clearly focused aim of the myth and the complex manner in which Plato has his Protagoras include the myth in his speech suggest as the most plausible reading that the myth in its core originates from the historical Protagoras rather than from Plato himself.²⁹

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²⁸ Cp. 318 D 7–319 A 2.

²⁹ The final draft of this paper was finished in March 2008; some bibliographical references were added during revision in summer 2012.

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