Short Essay #1 On Plato's Protagoras

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pLATO'S pROTAGORAS:

POETRY AND ITS RELATIVE EFFECT ON THE SOUL ACCORDING TO THE CHARACTER BY WHOM IT IS ESPOUSED

Among a multitudinous arrangement of equally fascinating themes, Plato's *Protagoras* pits Socrates against (or alongside) the sophist who is immortalized as the eponym of this *middle dialogue* in a dialectical quest to discover the *essential*[1] relationship between knowledge, teaching, and excellence. The specific facet of their exploration that is under examination in this essay is the interchange of poetic interpretations closely following Protagoras' *Great Speech.* Eager to return to properly short-winded back and forth, Socrates and Protagoras tackle an apparent contradiction in the words of the Ceosean poet Simonides (338e-339d). Their conflicting interpretations not only display their respective

[1] *Essential* as denoting something's essence.

characters, but point to the immense efficacy of poetry and poetic interpretation in the cementing of ideas into the psyches of its *interlocutors*[2] for either the bettering or worsening of their soul. There exists a continuing scholarly debate over the genuity of Socrates' intentions when he engages in poetic interpretation, as it was routine practice for sophists, and severely criticized by him in other dialogues (mainly the *Republic*). For the purposes of this essay, I will be operating under the assumption that Socrates, and consequently Plato, engage in poetic interpretation with genuine noetic intention, as opposed to the possibility that Plato includes this section as a mere golem of parody, or an attempt to pick apart Protagoras without displaying his own view. Socrates' distinction between *being* and *becoming* (340b-340e) accords too neatly with the larger Platonic schema for me to be comfortable claiming that Socrates is being disingenuous in this exchange. That much assumed, Plato's inclusion of poetic interpretation in the *Protagoras* serves the purpose of highlighting poetry's immense potential to

[2] The Platonic schema allows one to call the reading of poetry a kind of dialogue between the poet and the reader.

either corrupt or enlighten, depending on the respective characters of the poet and the interpreter.

Simonides' ode contains two lines that, once spoken, remain the subject of the entire exchange. The first is "For a man to become good truly is hard," and the second is "Nor do I regard Pittacus' statement as sound . . . when he says that 'tis hard to be noble" (339b-339c). Protagoras holds these statements to be contradictory, arguing that Simonides cannot consistently claim that attaining goodness is difficult while chastising his fellow poet Pittacus for saying the same thing about nobility, which Protagoras has agreed is synonymous with excellence (339d-339e). Protagoras' entire interpretation is predicated on this purported contradiction in Simonedes' ode and the ode's consequent lack of beauty. Protagoras has no interest in the lesson at play within the ode, which is centered on the relationship between difficulty and goodness—rather he is intent on debating its aesthetic quality in order to prove his proficiency over Socrates as a literary critic. Protagoras holds victory to be the erotic object of dialogue, and thus searches for a chance at reputation enhancement as the goal of his poetic interpretation. This teleological

presupposition rests on all three of Plato's pillars of erotic corruption, which include power and wealth in accordance with the aforementioned *reputation*. These are the desired ends of civic affairs, the realm in which Protagoras expertises. Protagoras argues that excellence, goodness, or nobility, as he conceives of *it*[3], can and ought to be taught inasmuch as they develop civic proficiencies such as respect and judicial justice (322a-324b). Protagoras seeks the same ends in his poetic interpretation as he does in his general practice of sophistry, which explains why he uses it as a medium during his *Great Speech* to make his position on the teachability of excellence more emotionally gripping (320c-322d). Poetry possesses instrumental value to Protagoras, and he uses it as an effective tool to convince his audiences of his wisdom. As soon as his purported wisdom comes under the scrutiny of the elenchos, however, it is shown that he has no real knowledge to offer, and no capacity to engage in noetic dialectic. Double ignorance, which is the fulcrum of corruption within the Platonic schema, is the total foundation of Protagoras'

[3] I use a singular pronoun because these terms are treated as more or less synonymous throughout the dialogue.

pedagogic platform, and his confrontational treatment of Simonides' ode displays the capability of poetry in corrupting the epistemically vulnerable student when it is interpreted by a vicious character.

Instead of making his best effort to attain a victorious reputation as he polemically disemboweled Protagoras and his feebly supported accusation of internal inconsistency, Socrates cautiously excavates the truth from within Simonides' ode—leaving Protagoras gutted as a secondary consequence as opposed to a primary project. Employing Prodicus as backup, Socrates highlights the distinction between *becoming* good and *being* good, proving that Simonides does not actually contradict himself at all (340b-340d). Following this masterful retort, Socrates develops what I believe to be a facet of his genuine thought on the phenomenology of goodness using the medium of poetic interpretation. In essence, the schema is as follows: Being good requires perfection, flawlessness, and unyielding reserve, thus it is impossible for mortals to *be* good. If one can never be good, then one must either always be in the process of becoming good, or be bad. Good people, that is those who are becoming good, can

become bad, but bad people can never become bad, for they are already bad. This picture appears convoluted and verbose, but Socrates luckily provides us with one of his favorite allegorical situations to demystify this concept. The shipmaster (the good person), who is necessarily skilled at sailing, survives at sea long enough to battle an unfaltering storm, while the unskilled sailor (the bad person) was thrown overboard at the first waves. Even though the shipmaster is eventually defeated by the storm, symbolizing their inability to *be* good in all circumstances of fortune, they were at least capable of being defeated, symbolizing their continuous effort to *become* good. The unskilled sailor does not even make it to the storm, symbolizing their inability to become bad due to their pre-existing badness, or inability to sail in the first place (344c-344d). There are two consequences springing forth from the lesson that Socrates highlights in his interpretation of Simonides' ode. The first is that every person can become good—a position held by Protagoras that Socrates ends up agreeing with over the course of the dialogue. The second export is that only good people can become bad, which is the foundational motivation behind Socrates' apprehension towards

poetry as a dialectical device. Alongside Protagoras, Socrates identifies the instrumental value of poetry and its interpretation, yet is cognizant of its corruptive properties when employed as a means to gain a phenomenal advantage.[4] Instead, Socrates utilizes it as a framework of enlightenment in his search for noumenal truth.[5] In the act of refuting Protagoras' corrupt poetic interpretation with his own enlightening interpretation, Socrates displays poetry's dualistic potential as a dialectical instrument and evidences the profound quality of his character in proportion to the ignorant, cornered, and morally prostrate Protagoras.

Plato's love for poetry far exceeds the depth and complexity of even Shakespeare's most romantic thought, shining forth through his pages of incessant cognization like the blinding rays of absolute being itself. Despite his burning passion for the corpus' of Homer and Hesiod, Plato was painfully aware of just how powerfully these stories held sway over his soul. Just as Socrates accompanies Hippocrates to the corrupter's den, Plato guides the contemporary sojourner through their

[4] *Phenomenal advantage* refers to the aforementioned three pillars of corruption—the typical results of practicing sophistry in Ancient Athens.
[5] *Noumenal truth* refers to the absolute concepts of goodness, virtue, excellence—the Good.

screen of eight billion Protagoras' with an equivocally empathetic presence, and on that account, a hubristic gut punch every time we begin to write our own myths starring ourselves as Zeus.[6]

With Peace,

-Asher

WORKS CITED:

Plato. *Protagoras*. Foundation For Platonic Studies. Translated by David Horan. (2021).

[6] This is in reference to Protagoras' *Great Speech* wherein he positions himself as the *Father of Gods and Men*.