

## The Midwife's Rhetoric: Reflections on Plato's *Theaetetus*

“Rhetoric” is too narrowly conceived when construed as a technique, a skill, or even an art (*technê*). The word tokens more than “the art of persuasion” (or of “speaking well”), for it is better understood as a genuine worldview; as, that is, a comprehensive picture of human being in its relationship to the world.

In his study of Protagoras, Laszlo Versényi has described this worldview well. He interprets the Sophistic movement of the 5<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against those “natural philosophers” whose concern was atoms, seeds, ultimate substances or first principles, rather than human being. Protagoras’ great achievement, he argues, was to declare that “human being is the measure of all things.” By doing so “he recalled man back to himself” (13), and thereby placed the “merely human, relative and conditioned” (14) onto center stage. In denying that we know whether the gods exist or not, he shifted the restricted the epistemic horizon to what is human and away from “things considered in and of themselves.” What takes center stage instead is the KAIROS; the contingent moment constituted by particular characters, situations. Becomes basic to rhetorical theory. Not just logos but ethos and pathos.

For all these reasons, Versényi describes Protagoras as the first “humanist” in the West.<sup>1</sup>

Plato understands this point well. When he has Socrates argue against teachers or practitioners of rhetoric, whom we may call “Sophists,” he knows that the opponent isn’t merely a teacher of the art of persuasion.<sup>2</sup> Nor is the opponent merely politically or morally suspect- as, say, a manipulator of the opinions of the many. Instead, the opponent represents a powerful intellectual option and challenge, for he is a proponent of

a worldview seriously at odds with Plato's own. For at the heart of Platonism of course lie the Forms, those immutable entities whose salient feature is precisely their independence from, and imperviousness to, human intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps no dialogue does a more thorough job of articulating the inadequacy of the Sophistic or rhetorical worldview than the *Theaetetus*. Socrates begins his refutation of the definition, "knowledge is perception," by equating it with the Protagorean dictum "human being is the measure of things," which in turn he takes to be the exoteric version of the Heraclitean doctrine that denies "anything is one and self-identical." These positions are then reduced to absurdity, and so the Sophistic worldview is refuted.

But in the Platonic dialogues, the story is never quite so simple. For as I will argue that the *Theaetetus* itself takes place entirely within the horizon of the human. It is thoroughly saturated in humanity. This is its horizon. If so, then the line between the Philosopher, the advocate of the non-human Forms or some other principles of intelligibility, and the Sophistic humanist isn't as sharp as one might expect. Perhaps it isn't as sharp as one might like.

I hope to clarify by offering a brief reading of a 3 passages.

(1) The first comes from Socrates' initial characterization of the Heraclitean position he claims is the 'secret teaching' underlying Protagoreanism:  $\omega\upsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}\ \alpha\{\rho\alpha\ \epsilon\}\nu\ \mu\epsilon\iota\nu\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\theta\ \eta\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\eta\delta\epsilon\iota\nu\ \epsilon\eta\sigma\tau\iota\nu$  (152d2-3). The most questions that must be asked about this formulation is whether it is a genuine presupposition, or implication, of the "human being is the measure" dictum?<sup>4</sup> (And is this dictum actually the same as "knowledge is perception.") Key: denial of "metaphysical absolutes." Key

is the pronomial formulation, the hallmark of metaphysical language: Itself by itself. In the humanistic world of Protagoras, nothing is. Everything is dependent. Many ways of expressing this. But the denial is meant to capture it.

After offering a series of arguments on behalf of “Heraclitus” (153b-d), Socrates applies this position to the issue of perception, more specifically to the sense of sight. What we call “white” does not exist either outside or inside the eyes as a stable quality. Instead, it is the result of colliding motions that occur “in-between” the visible object and the seeing eye. And these are *idion*, unique to each perceiver. Indeed, each perception is unique to every perceiver. After all, a consequence of Heracliteanism is *soi; a;utw/~ taujto;n dia; to; mhdevpote oJmoivw1 aujto;n seautw/~ e[cein*. No color appears the same to “you” because “you” are never a stable entity. Never an “itself with respect to itself.”

At this stage of the dialogue, it’s not clear whether Socrates thinks himself to be refuting Protagoras here, by suggesting a *reductio*, or not. Theaetetus doesn’t see it as a problem.

Socrates then further explores the position. He describes to Theaetetus what would be required to investigate it. He warns him away from a battle of positions which he takes to be characteristic of the Sophists (154e2). Instead he recommends this:

*nu~n de; a{te ijdiw~tai prw~ton boulhsovmeqa  
qeavsasqai aujta; pro;1 auJta; tiv pot j ejsti;n a}  
dianoouvmeqa (154e3-4).*

Plato is playing on words here. First, *idion/idiotai*. Perceptions are *idion*, but we are *idiotai*, laypeople, nonprofessionals, non-Sophists. Our job, unlike theirs, is not to

defend theoretical positions and engage in battle, but to test each other because we wish “to see” these things with respect to themselves whatever they are that we’re thinking.

There is a transfer. The pronomial phrase is imported into the human psyche. This. In order to have positions that can be rationally inspected, there must be treated as stable. Furthermore there must be a self itself.  $\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha; \tau\omega/\sim \omicron[\text{nti } \eta\mu\alpha\sim_1 \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon;_1 \epsilon\chi\epsilon\tau\alpha\upsilon\upsilon\omicron\tau\epsilon_1$

This pattern is continued with the puzzles generated from the Protagorean framework. 1. Nothing becomes greater or less in bulk or number while it remains equal to itself. 2. That to which nothing is added or subtracted either grows or shrinks, as it is always equal to itself. 3. It is impossible that what was not before latter is without having become or coming into being.

About these three propositions Socrates says this:  $\omicron\mu\omicron\log\eta\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\alpha \tau\upsilon\upsilon\alpha \mu\alpha\upsilon\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota \alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha; \alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\iota\delta \epsilon\chi\eta \tau\eta/\sim \eta\mu\epsilon\tau\epsilon\upsilon\tau\alpha \gamma\upsilon\chi/\sim 155b4-5$ . Notice again how there is a play on MACHE. There are two kinds of battles. Sophistic and internal. But the internal requires a competition of the soul itself. Sophistic battle precisely implies change nothing stable itself by itself. For the battles are won then lost, the weaker logos becomes the stronger, as Protagoras teaches us.

If one pursues “flux” to its logical conclusion, Socrates argues, then one is compelled to renounce any name that implies fixity. One ought not to grant that there is a “something” or an “of something” or an “of me” (157b4). But there must be an “of me” if the content of my thoughts is to be open for rational examination and testing. If there is to be dialogue.

Even if we are playing around with the possibility that there is no stable self. For that itself, would be a position. Here of course we have the language of the peritrope, which becomes explicit at...xyz as an explicit reductio of Protagoras' position. It would eliminate dialectical investigations. Here, however, a more limited point can be gleaned. In order to have a human activity take place, it is required to reject

conclusion: the argument seems to be taking place within a human horizon. Not a metaphysical argument.

Protagoras himself says something like this at 168a about dialegesthai. Take responsibility. This is not metaphysical. It's a human stance. A practical stance  
(2) The second passage is the source of this paper's title: the midwife passage.

The most striking feature is knowledge of matchmaking. It's not surprising that Theaetetus is surprised when he hears this, because matchmaking really has nothing to do with midwifery. The latter requires obstetrical knowledge of women's bodies. One need not know anything about men in order to perform the midwife's task well. One does need to be able to discern the needs, character, future prospects of a human being.

149c9: the midwives prescribe pharmakia and chant. Like Gorgias' description of rhetoric.

149d10: knowledge that is greater than cutting the standard techniques of the matchmaker. Who belongs with whom. For the purpose of the best breedings 149d7. Sounds like eugenics.

151a4: the daimonic thing stops him from taking back some students.

151b3: γνούvι ο{τι ουjde;n ejmou~ devontai...realizing/gignoskein the key word/ that they don't need me. How would you realize this? Have to know the person pretty well. This has nothing to do with knowledge of the forms. Either closer to phronesis or what the rhetoricians know.

151b4- topazo/guesses with whom someone might benefit. Requires a knowledge of character. Which Socrates possesses. I recognize Theaetetus; being playful is not Theodorus' way. C.f. 155d1

151b5: some people would benefit by studying with Prodicus. What sort of person would benefit by studying with Prodicus? That's a hard question. That's harder to answer than the theory of forms.

Three types of people: not-pregnant, pregnant with false, pregnant with true? Philosophy is not for everybody. E.g., the materialists...who aren't allowed to hear the conversation 155e. They are sklerous, amousoi...character traits.

151b7- uJpopteuw se...wjdivnein. Socrates can tell/realize that Thea. is suffering pain. How do you do this? Sympathy.

151c5- it will be necessary for Thea. not to become angry if Socrates investigates him, finds his answers to be images, and then throws them out. Thea. can't get too attached, as those who give birth for the first time get attached. This is an emotional quality.

All of this is human knowledge; knowledge of humans. It's precisely the sort of knowledge one would expect from a Protagorean. Socrates has it, as exhibited by deeds; and he describes it in the midwife passage. To be a midwife is to practice a form of rhetoric.

Other examples: the defense of rhetorical. Of course, this is rhetorical. Soc. doesn't hold this position. He's doing this for pedagogical reasons, so that he tough Theaetetus up. But it's worth looking at the position he constructs.

Health replaces truth. But isn't this what the midwife is concerned about: the health of her patient, and the patient's offspring.

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<sup>1</sup> Versenyi. Also see Fish.

<sup>2</sup> "Sophists" is actually too broad.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously ignore question of whether Plato somehow abandoned the Forms in the late dialogues.

<sup>4</sup> other questions: does it capture heraclitus accurately?