



Ancient Philosophy

**Philosophy is Education is Politics:  
A Somewhat Aggressive Reading of *Protagoras* 334d-338e**

*Jonathan Cohen  
University of Maine Farmington*

**ABSTRACT:** The passage in question begins with a breakdown in the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras because of disagreement about what its ground rules will be and concludes with the discussion's restoration. Though formally a mere hiatus from the main line of argument, this passage in fact contains a parable about politics, addressing the question, "How can people of differing abilities and preferences come together to form a community?" Since the passage appears in the middle of a dialogue explicitly concerned with education, the parable extends to education as well. The passage thus provides a springboard for insight into some essential interconnections between and among philosophy, education, and politics. On the one hand, a genuine practitioner of any of the three is *ipso facto* engaged in the other two at the same time. And on the other hand, the three share an internal structure which is reflexive and transitive at the same time.

In the passage in question, the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras has broken down in disagreement about what its ground rules will be. After some angry saber-rattling from the principals, and some well-meaning intervention from the onlookers, order is restored and the dialogue continues. For all its vivid, memorable banter, the passage is thus apparently no more than a hiatus from the dialogue's main line of argument.<sup>(1)</sup> A commentary may skip over it lightly;<sup>(2)</sup> an anthology may omit it entirely.<sup>(3)</sup> However, I claim that the passage is more than mere literary entertainment, and has significance beyond the methodology of Socratic dialogue. In this essay I would like to give a reading of the passage which shows it to be not only a dispute about philosophical methodology but also a parable for politics. I will then go on to show that this political parable, placed as it is at the center of a philosophical work in which education is explicitly at issue, suggests some essential interconnections between philosophy, politics, and education.

The discussion between Socrates, the dialectician, and Protagoras, the speech-maker, began in a friendly fashion (317e), but by 334d it has broken down entirely. Socrates's *elenchus* has exposed some problems in Protagoras's position, and Protagoras seems to realize that things go better for him when he makes a speech (as at 320d-328d). When he extricates himself from a tight spot into which Socrates has backed him by giving a short speech

(334a-c) which brings him applause, Socrates realizes that Protagoras does not wish to engage in dialectic.<sup>(4)</sup> Thus our passage begins with the two principals at loggerheads. The way Socrates wants the game to be played, both questioner and answerer must keep their points brief; the idea is that the logic of positions and the arguments which support them emerge from the entire series of responses. The way Protagoras wants the game to be played, the answerer (and presumably the questioner) may speak at whatever length he thinks "necessary" (334e).

It seems clear that Protagoras's statement of how he wants to play the game is primarily, if not exclusively, governed by eristic considerations (see 335a3). Still, whatever his motivation, Protagoras is proposing a counter-method of philosophical discussion which seems *prima facie* to have a legitimacy of its own. "Necessary" would be short for "necessary to make his point or cover adequately the matter at hand." The underlying claim would be that subject-matters have a pre-existing structure of their own; a description which ignored this structure, say by breaking it down into smaller pieces for analysis, would thus of necessity be inaccurate. While certain questions can be answered briefly, other topics require lengthy answers in which the full context, the *gestalt*, can be given. Protagoras would then, in effect, be challenging the Socratic assumption that the *elenchus* is adequate to uncover the truth in every situation.<sup>(5)</sup> Whether Protagoras is actually appealing to a serious philosophical method or just making trouble for the sake of eristics, there is a genuine incompatibility between the brevity required by the *elenchus* and the (sometime) length required by context-giving (if I may call it that). This incompatibility cannot be resolved without giving philosophical (as well as eristic) advantage to one side or another; the contest, and the philosophy, will be determined at the start, by what the ground rules will be.<sup>(6)</sup> There is thus no apparent way to settle the dispute, and Socrates stands to go (335d).

Several of the others present, however, jump in at this point. Callias pleads with Socrates to stay, but Socrates responds that it is up to Protagoras to change his style—as the faster runner, he is able, as the slower is not, to modulate his pace so that they remain in tandem (335e-336a). Callias wonders why each man cannot speak however he sees fit (336b); this provokes Alcibiades to argue that *laissez faire* would give Protagoras an unfair competitive advantage (336c-d). Critias notes that all present wish the discussion to continue, and Prodicus offers some of his typical verbal distinctions (336e-337c); the latter, though somewhat laughably pedantic, are in fact quite significant, as we will see below. Finally, Hippias offers a solution: the length of speeches will be moderated by a third person, an impartial umpire (337d-338b).

Socrates rejects this, however, since (1) if the person selected were inferior to Socrates and Protagoras, it would be inappropriate for him to supervise them, (2) if he were of equal ability "he will do the same as we would and be superfluous," and (3) there could be no one superior to Protagoras (338b-c). Though this last point is dripping with irony, an un-ironic version of the point is available: someone superior to Protagoras (and/or Socrates) would presumably be best utilized not by moderating but by replacing him in the discussion. Socrates then proposes his own solution: Protagoras, who has not answered in proper fashion, will ask the questions instead, thus participating in the discussion in a way which requires brevity. Socrates meanwhile will answer, thus showing Protagoras how it's properly done (338d). Though Protagoras grumbles about this arrangement, he feels compelled by the unanimous approval of the plan by those assembled to participate under these conditions (338e). Thus restored, the discussion continues.<sup>(7)</sup>

While this passage is formally a digression from the main discussion, offers a fascinating look at some of the personages of the time, and has great significance for our understanding of Socratic *elenchus* (as well as great entertainment value), I claim that it works too as a parable for politics. The discussion having broken down for lack of agreed-upon ground rules, the situation in which the interlocutors find themselves resembles that of the formation of political community: in the absence of governing rules, how can people of different preferences and unequal abilities come together to engage in a common enterprise? There are, in essence, three solutions proposed to this problem in the passage. The first, that of Callias, is to let each do according to his nature. This perfect freedom, however, the freedom of anarchy, though appealing in its way, would allow natural inequality to run rampant, thus destroying the weak and so, in effect, the very existence of a community. The second solution, that of Hippias, maintains the community by empowering a magistrate to enforce equality. However, since the magistrate will necessarily be inferior to the strongest elements in the society (for if not his moderating efforts will be superfluous, i.e. simply reinforce the superiority of the strong), this equality will be purchased at the price of quality. The third solution, that of Socrates, requires the strong themselves to take responsibility for the continuance of the community by committing themselves to engage in its workings; once involved in this way, they will learn civic virtue from the other members of the community.

That Plato himself intended for this parable to be read into this passage is of course impossible to demonstrate; I claim only that it is there to be read. There are, however, several textual points which back up my reading and make it at least likely that Plato deliberately wrote the episode in such a way as to suggest the parable. First is the very participation at this point in the dialogue of several speakers besides the principals. We get here a sense of a community, of a group enterprise, rather than of two individuals engaged in some private activity.<sup>(8)</sup> Critias is the first to hint at this when he says "*We should...join* in requesting them both not to break up *our meeting* prematurely" (336e2, emphasis added). By the end, Socrates has appealed directly, and crucially, to the presence of this community when he ends his proposal by urging all those present to "supervise together" (*pantes koine epistatesete*, 338e). Hippias too introduces his solution to the impasse by addressing those present as "kinsmen, intimates, and fellow citizens (*politas ha-pantas*)" (337c8). Finally, Prodicus's first distinction is between listening to the speakers "impartially" (*koinous*) rather than "equally" (*isous*) (337a4-5); this is significant not only for another appearance of *koin-*, indicating community (especially political community), but also for the connotation of something being done in a way which is fair to all rather than strictly the same for all; this is primarily a political notion. His second distinction, between eristics and friendly debate, rests on a distinction between enemies and friends which surely has a political connotation as well (337b1-3).

A political reading, then, does seem to have been at least suggested by Plato. The parable conveys to the reader a conception of philosophy as an inherently political enterprise, in (at least) two important senses. First, in terms of *practice*, philosophy is a group activity. This message may seem to be otiose in light of Plato's selection of the dialogue form for his writing, since that form conveys already the message that philosophy is interpersonal as opposed to solitary. In the parable, however, Plato is adding an additional dimension. Not only does the philosopher require an interlocutor to challenge, suggest, and affirm the various theses of an argument, as the dialogue form shows. Here Plato is further observing that when philosophizing takes place in the public realm its significance extends further than the two interlocutors alone.<sup>(9)</sup> It is then not a private interaction between two people but a group activity.<sup>(10)</sup> Like any group activity, philosophy requires rules to function, and

thus the question of what is proper philosophical methodology becomes political. Certain rules of the game will favor certain approaches and perhaps even exclude others altogether. Protagoras is right to fight tenaciously to resist the use of dialectic; he seems to understand that it renders illegitimate his very participation, *qua* Sophist, in the philosophical enterprise.<sup>(11)</sup>

Second, and more importantly, philosophy is political in terms of its *product*. For when it takes place in the public realm, philosophy works to establish the values the entire community (not just those actively philosophizing) live under. Indeed, if we understand politics as the question not of *who* shall rule but of *what values* shall rule, it is clear that philosophy is the ultimate form of politics. In this sense Plato's *Republic*, though it may well have been a plan for the establishment of an actual utopian society, can be seen as outlining a deeper sense of political activity for philosophers. Whether recognized as rulers or not (the parable of The Cave indicates that they will rather be jeered), philosophers, by determining through philosophical activity what the highest values are, are in fact directing the politics of the society of which they are a part.<sup>(12)</sup>

Thus philosophy and politics are seen to be inherently linked and, when philosophy takes place in the public realm and politics is understood in terms of the ruling values of a society, even indistinguishable. But it is no accident that this parable is delivered by Plato in the midst of a dialogue concerned with education. For education, by dint of its links with both philosophy and politics, makes the connection between them even stronger. To be sure, education is explicitly present in the methodology passage only at the very end, when Socrates says that by playing the role of the answerer in their renewed discussion, he will show Protagoras how to answer properly (338d). But education is implicitly present as a consequence of the passage's central position in a dialogue whose governing question is the teachability of virtue.

Protagoras is renowned as a teacher; Socrates claims not to teach. Thus when the dialogue begins with Protagoras saying virtue is teachable and Socrates saying it is not, it is clear that they both have in mind teaching as done by a Sophist. This sort of teaching involves a relationship in which it is clearly recognized that one person, the teacher, has knowledge which the other, the student, does not. Teaching in this sense consists in the teacher placing knowledge in the head of the student or, in the standard image, pouring from a full vessel into an empty one. This is a common enough view of teaching; in this dialogue, it sets up the paradox with which the dialogue closes. For at the end, Protagoras has taken the view that virtue is not knowledge, while Socrates is maintaining that it is. These positions do not seem to square with their earlier stands about the teachability of virtue, and thus the dialogue ends in *aporia*.

What the aporetic paradox at the end of the dialogue provokes, however, is the recognition that there is another way to teach.<sup>(13)</sup> Without being told, it is clear that we are to think of dialectic as that other way. That is, what the dialogue is about is the replacement of Protagoras by Socrates as the teacher of Greece, and this replacement is less about the two people involved than it is their teaching methods. Rather than conceive of a teacher as a full vessel, someone with some definite body of knowledge to convey to the student, we are to think of the teacher as a questioner, a leader, a provoker, a midwife of the student's own answers and intuitions. Thus although the plain meaning of Socrates's statement at 338d is that he will show Protagoras how to answer questions in the dialectic, the real effect of the resolution of the methodological crisis is that Socrates will demonstrate how the dialectic as a whole can function as a teaching method.

Thus it turns out that the debate about philosophical method is at heart a debate about educational method. Here the parable works as follows. Sophist-style education not only allows for inequality—for people will surely be of different abilities in terms of learning this way—but indeed assumes inequality for its teachers—hence Protagoras’s claim to be the best at teaching (see 318b & e). This inequality then carries over into a vision of a competitive, non-cooperative society, for a Sophist-style student has no interest in sharing his knowledge any further. Indeed, since the virtue Protagoras claims to teach will provide a competitive advantage to the student, both in his private and his public affairs, a Sophist-style student will be happiest if he can monopolize the Sophist’s knowledge. Thus on Callias’s *laissez faire* view, education will be a haphazard affair (as indeed it seems to have been in ancient Athens) in which all learn (or not) at their own pace. The result, as in the political version of the parable, is that there is no social cohesion. This time, however, the problem is not only lack of common ground rules but rather a lack of common culture and values. On Hippias’s view, education will be common to all, but only at the cost of high quality—i.e., enforcing equality of education will keep everyone together, but it will also keep the best students from moving ahead. While this last view might be analogized to an industrial-era vision of state schooling, Socrates’s solution to the problem looks in the educational sphere a lot like John Dewey’s vision of collaborative education. The best students must be involved in the educational enterprise in such a way that their ability benefits the group. Though apparently in the role of teachers, they are actually in position to learn as well—as Protagoras is to do from Socrates with regard to answering questions briefly—from their supposed inferiors. Thus the parable works on the educational level as well.

And thus we are pointed to look for essential interconnections between philosophy and education and between politics and education as well. In regard to the former, we should keep in mind that philosophy, as the love of, and consequently search for, wisdom, is indeed synonymous with education in the sense of an individual’s search for learning. But philosophy, as we noted above, is not only search for wisdom but conveying of that wisdom to others as well, and thus corresponds also to education as teaching. Dewey goes so far as to define philosophy as "the general theory of education."<sup>(14)</sup> This double sense of education, as either a reflexive or a transitive activity, helps at the same time to reveal its essential interconnection with politics. For politics too can be a matter of either governing oneself or governing others. At its best, governing others is a matter of educating them; thus in Plato the law is often spoken of as an educational tool. And, by the same token, to be educating oneself is to be autonomous.

Thus we see philosophy, education, and politics to be inherently linked. The "is" of my title recalls similar formulations found often in the *Protagoras* (starting at 331b) such as "Justice is pious." Gregory Vlastos, in a well-known article, analyzes these formulations at great length and declares them to be "Pauline predications."<sup>(15)</sup> That is, Vlastos understands such lines as "Justice is pious" on the model of Paul’s "Charity is kind." What is indicated is not that the abstract noun itself has a certain quality, but instead that the particular instances of that abstraction have the quality. A person or action which is just is at the same time a pious person or action. To this extent my title is Pauline as well, for I mean to say not that the three terms are synonymous but that someone engaged in philosophy is willy-nilly involved in education and in politics as well, that an educator must be a philosopher and take part in politics, and that someone engaged in politics (in the sense of value-formation) must philosophize and educate. However, though the association with Vlastos’s work on the *Protagoras* is welcome, what I mean by such predication here is slightly different. I am asserting a further connection between the three abstract nouns, namely that, as the above

discussion shows, they have each the same internal structure, revealing both a reflexive and a transitive sense. Thus to be a philosopher is both to seek an education and to be an educator, and to provide values both for oneself and for one's political community. To seek an education one must both love wisdom and be autonomous; to be a teacher one must lead one's students to examine their own assumptions and, whether one appreciates it or not, one's activity works to affect the formation of values in one's society. To effect political change, finally, one must educate and philosophize, both for others and for oneself.

Protagoras did right to dig in his heels. For in claiming to have knowledge, he in fact undermines his ability to teach, and in claiming to improve his students (318b) he in fact denies them their full autonomy. Note his view that the masses follow their leaders blindly (317b); sure enough, the view of education as a matter of depositing information into the head of the student has been characterized as the "banking" theory of education by Paulo Freire, and Freire argues persuasively that this view blends well with fascism.<sup>(16)</sup> Protagoras is thus properly uncomfortable engaging in Socratic dialectic, which is indeed a democratic mode of doing philosophy. For Socrates insisted that people think for, and thus rule, themselves.

## NOTES

(1) So Michael Frede in his Introduction to the Lombardo and Bell translation of the *Protagoras* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992), xxvii. I have relied on this translation throughout while checking it against the Greek.

(2) So C.C.W. Taylor, in the Clarendon Plato Series *Protagoras* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), *ad loc.*

(3) So *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle*, ed. Cohen, Curd, and Reeve, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), *ad loc.*

(4) This renders ironic Socrates's earlier comment, following Protagoras's great speech, that "Protagoras here, while perfectly capable of delivering a beautiful long speech, as we have just seen, is also able to reply briefly when questioned, and to put a question and then wait for and accept the answer—rare accomplishments these" (329b), but then the *Protagoras* is full of such ironies.

(5) In "The Naturalistic Fallacy," found in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, ed. Sellars and Hospers, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), William Frankena draws a distinction between "definists" and "intuitionists" and notes felicitously that if "definism" fails "the method of analysis is as useless as an English butcher in a world without sheep" (110). While Protagoras's challenge does not seem to be that drastic, nevertheless Frankena's distinction in this article fits this dispute between Socrates and Protagoras surprisingly well.

(6) Alexander Nehamas has shown effectively, in the very case of Plato and the Sophists, that giving a particular definition of what philosophy is must needs at the same time privilege a particular philosophy. See "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7:1 (January 1990), 3-16. Nehamas points out that, ironically, Plato's attempt to separate himself from the Sophists (in his later philosophy) requires him to categorize Socrates together with the

Sophists (p.13, cf. *Sophist* 231b). Here in the *Protagoras*, of course, an early and, at least for the most part, Socratic dialogue, Plato is contrasting Socrates with the Sophists. While it may be true that, as Nehamas argues (pp.5-9), there is no one method of sophistry, I claim that here, at least, Socrates and Protagoras are portrayed as committed to differing methods. (Nehamas notes Protagoras's claim to be able to answer briefly (p.5), but does not go on to consider the significance of his refusal to do so at 334e-335a. Though Protagoras couches this refusal in eristic terms, I take it that this move would be utterly ineffectual if he were not at the same time claiming legitimacy for context-giving. Thus on my reading the refusal shows the earlier claim to be a sham; it is here, in the methodological passage, that Protagoras is showing his true colors.)

(7) In perhaps the most egregious irony in a dialogue filled with reversals, this compromise lasts barely a Stephanos page before Socrates breaks out into his long explication of Simonides's poem (342a-347a); when he is done, discussion resumes with Socrates again asking questions of Protagoras (349d ff.). The failure of the compromise to hold may cast ironic light on the parable, which I will draw in the next paragraph, but it does not block the parable itself.

(8) Compare the beginning of the *Phaedrus*, when Socrates and Phaedrus leave the city walls.

(9) The existence of the *Phaedrus* shows that Plato does not take philosophy to always have this significance. Thinking of the *Phaedrus* as private philosophy as opposed to public does allow for a convenient way to interpret its much celebrated "reversal" on the legitimacy of *maniar*—*mania* is an acceptable basis for life and for poetry in the private realm, though not in the public.

(10) The distinction I have in mind here is somewhat similar to that employed by Arendt in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) between "social" and "public."

(11) Again, see the Nehamas essay cited above.

(12) Keep in mind Socrates's claim at *Apology* 32a that he, in (what is putatively) the private sphere, was actually engaged in a higher form of politics than those who went to the public assembly.

(13) And of course readers of Plato will recognize this idea from the *Apology* as well: Socrates de-nies explicitly that he teaches (19e and 33a), yet it is clear that he is probably the most provocative and effective teacher of all time. When he denies that he is a teacher, therefore, both in the *Apology* and the *Protagoras*, he must mean "teach" in the Sophists' sense. Indeed, at *Apology* 35c he finally accepts explicitly the notion that what he is doing is teaching. Having just denied it two pages earlier (the Greek is *didaskein* both times) in the Sophists' sense, he must therefore mean the term in a different sense when he accepts it at 35c.

(14) *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Free Press, 1916), 328.

(15) "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*," *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1972), 415-58, reprinted in *Platonic Studies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 221-265.

(16) See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Ramos, (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), especially Chapter 2.