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Twenty Questions About Protagorean Wisdom

Q: The sophists were a very heterogenous group; our evidence for them is fragmentary, distorted and opaque; and it's unclear how far they were in the business of having doctrines or theories at all. Given all that, can you say anything useful about the sophistic conception of wisdom?

A: Well, certain themes and notions do recur in our evidence. One of the most prominent – and oddest – is *omnimathy* or omniscience (but the latter term may have misleading connotations for us): the idea that the wise man knows *every* subject. Hippias seems to have represented this idea in its most extreme and crudest form: the *Hippias Minor* depicts him as practising as many crafts as possible for his own use, even making his own jewelry and clothes (368b, 363d). (And in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras apparently accuses Hippias of 'throwing his students back into the crafts' they have tried to leave behind -- though the list of skills there is more elevated, even Platonic sounding: arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music and poetry (318e).) Gorgias is presented by Plato as holding that the good rhetorician can speak on all topics, and defeat experts on their own turf (*Gorgias* 456a-7c). In the *Euthydemus*, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are presented as 'all-round fighters' who can refute anyone no matter what that person asserts (271c-2b); later on they actually claim to know all things – though admittedly, they also claim that Socrates does too, despite his impassioned denial (293b-7a, cf. 271c). Note that the context of the claim is in every case *agonistic*: omnimathy is a boast, at home in the context of a battle for the title of wisdom.

Q: But these 'boasts' are are all very different things! Hippias is presented by Plato as eccentric even by sophistic standards; and the other claims, if they're serious at all, just reduce to the fact that eristic refutation and rhetoric are subject-neutral skills. None of these sound like a serious claim to *omniscience*.

A: We have two pieces of evidence which suggest a stronger claim. One is the passage of Plato's *Sophist* in which the scope of the sophist's activity is spelled out (232b-3c). This follows an earlier sketch in which the Visitor defines controversy [*amphisbêtêtikon*] as fighting with *logoi*, and divides it into two species: long public speeches about the just and unjust, i.e. legal speech [*dikanikon*], and "if it goes on in private discussions and is chopped up into questions and answers", [1] disputation or antilogy [*antilogikon*]. When

[1] Quotations from Plato are as translated by the various hands in the Hackett *Complete Works*, in some cases with revisions (*Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper with D.S.

antilogy is carried on expertly and concerns general issues it is *eristic*, and the expert who engages in eristic for money is the sophist in yet another guise (225a-6a). The Visitor soon returns to give further content to antilogy*:*

> "We said that he [the sophist] is skilled in disputes [*antilogikon einai*], didn't we?
> -- Yes.
> And also that he teaches other people to do the same thing too?
> -- Of course.
> Then let's think: what subject do people like him claim to make others able to engage in disputes about? Let's start with something like this: do sophists make people competent to dispute about issues about the gods, which are non-evident [*aphanes*] to most people?
> -- Well, people say they do.
> And also things that are observable [*phanera*], on the earth and in the sky, and things of that sort?
> -- Of course.
> And when people make statements in private discussions about being and coming-to-be concerning all things [*kata pantôn*], we know that sophists are clever at speaking against [*anteipein*] them and they also make other people able to do the same thing?
> -- Absolutely.
> And what about laws and all kinds of political issues? Don't sophists promise to make people capable of engaging in controversies [*amphisbêtêtikoi*] about them?
> -- If they didn't promise that, practically no one would bother to have discussions with [*dielegeto*] them.
> And as a matter of fact concerning the arts – all of them and within each particular field -- what's needed to speak against any expert himself has been publicized and set down [*dedêmosiômena katabeblêtai*] for anybody who wants to learn it.
> --Apparently you're talking about Protagoras' writings on wrestling and other fields of expertise.
> And on many other things too, my friend. In fact, take expertise in disputation [*hê antilogikê technê*] as a whole. Doesn't it seem like a capacity [*dunamis*] that's sufficient for carrying on controversies about absolutely everything [*peri pantôn pros amphisbêtêsin*]?
> -- It doesn't seem to leave much of anything out, anyway.
> But for heaven's sake, my boy, do you think that's possible?.... whether it's possible for any human being to know everything [*panta episthasthai*].
> -- If it were, sir, we'd be very well off.
> But how could someone who didn't know about a subject say anything sound [*hugies ti*] in speaking against [*anteipein*] someone who knew about it?

Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997)).

-- He couldn't.

And yet, the Visitor goes on to note, the sophists have an amazing capacity: they can "make young people believe they're wiser than everyone else about all matters [*peri pantôn... sophôtatoi*]" (233b1-2). For they "seem to know the things they dispute about", without of course really doing so: and those topics include *everything* (233b3-7).

Q: But this 'sophist' is just a Platonic construct....

A: Actually this depiction of the *antilogikê technê* clearly has Protagoras primarily in view.[2] He's named at 232d9, and is elsewhere the first and foremost figure associated with *antilogikê*, as its inventor and the author of two books of *Antilogies* (DLIII.37, 57, IX.55). And our other evidence confirms that his *antilogikê technê* was understood as universal in scope: "He was the first to claim that there are two contradictory arguments *on every topic* [*peri pantos pragmatos*]; and he used them in questioning, being the first to do this" (DL IX.51=DK80B6a, my emphasis).[3] What's more, the particular topics on which Plato says the sophist practises *antilogikê* can in many cases (underlined in the quotation above) be paralleled by particular Protagorean texts. Diogenes' list lacks *On the Gods*, but he cites its opening lines (DLIX.51, 54). As for 'being and coming-to-be', we have evidence from Porphyry for a Protagorean *On What Is* (DK80B2), of which more later. Natural science is a bit of a gap, but we do have a few allusions to Protagoras as natural philosopher (80A11 = Eustathius *Od.* V.490, 1547.53, 84A3= Cicero *De Oratore* III.32.128, 80A18=Tertullian *De Anim.* 15).[4] For politics, besides the fact that Protagoras was appointed by Pericles to write a constitution for Thurii (DLIX.50, citing Heraclides Ponticus), Diogenes lists a work *On the Constitution*: we also have evidence for political interests from Plato's *Protagoras* and perhaps from a few other mysterious book titles as well (*On Things Done Wrongly by People, On the Original Order of Things, On Ambition, On the Virtues, Guardian Discourse)*. We have plenty of evidence of interest in the *technai* besides the present passage: Aristotle attests to an attack on the geometers (B7), and Diogenes to a *Peri Tôn Mathêmatôn* (IX.55).[5] As for writings on wrestling... well, one can't help but wonder if Theaetetus here misunderstands the metaphor in *Kataballontes* ('Down-Throwing Arguments', apparently an alternative title for Protagoras' *Alêtheia*).)[6] But the title *On Wrestling* does appear in Diogenes' list.

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[2] Cf. Untersteiner 1949, for argument that all the Protagorean 'works' here in view would have been parts of the *Antilogies*.

[3] Καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις· οἷς καὶ συνηρώτα, πρῶτος τοῦτο πράξας. Cf. also A20, B6. Translations of sophistic texts are (where available) by Dillon and Gergel, sometimes with revisions.

[4] Even setting aside texts like DK80A14, from Sextus Empiricus, which are clearly influenced by the 'Secret Doctrine' of the *Theaetetus*.

[5] The Hippocratic *On the Art* defends medicine from the sort of attack the Visitor seems to be referring to: Gomperz speculated, plausibly, that Protagoras is its author, in which case it would presumably be one side of an antilogy separately preserved.

[6] Cf. Heitsch 1968*. NB *katabeblêtai* at 232d7.

Q: Wait a minute, didn't Protagoras say that it's *impossible* to contradict?

A: Plato's *Euthydemus* suggests this (more on that in a moment), but your insinuation is correct: it would be absurdly self-defeating for someone in the *Antilogikê* business to claim *ouk esti antilegein*. What Protagoras' 'opposed arguments' actually involved is still under discussion here, but the *Sophist* makes clear that it involves *attacking* various positions: to *antilegein* is fundamentally to speak *against*. And to say that contradiction is impossible is to say that one *logos* is never *really* 'against', i.e., incompatible with, another.

Q: But doesn't Protagoras deny the law of non-contradiction anyway?

A: Aristotle's Protagoras does, according to *Metaphysics* IV.4-5; but I take him to be primarily a descendant of Plato's Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, and the relation of the latter to the historical Protagoras is problematic. I think we have to think of the *Theaetetus* and *Metaphysics* (and all successor texts, in which Protagoras is seen through these) as distorting filters, and treat them with enormous caution.

Q: But the measure thesis is generally accepted as a genuine Protagorean assertion, indeed the opening of his *Kataballontes* (or *Alêtheia*) (DK80B1): "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."[7]

A: True: but whether we should understand this as an expression of relativism, or 'humanistic' empiricism, or scepticism, or some indeterminate stance suggesting all three, seems to me an open question. The *Theaetetus* uses the thesis to generate a fascinating epistemological theory for Protagoras; but the Protagoras of our other sources (including the *Protagoras*) does not look like the vendor of any epistemological theory. We do have a striking amount of evidence suggestive of a certain kind of *stance* on matters epistemic and ontological. Opposition to talk of the invisible and unempirical (B12, B7, and the texts from Philodemus and Didymus the Blind printed by Dillon and Gergel as T19 and T7 respectively); a recognition of the relativity, indeterminacy and/or subjectivity of various important properties (B1, B7, *Protagoras* 334a-c); hostility to Eleatic talk of the One Being (B2); an empiricist, fallibilist or sceptical caution in talking of divine matters (B4)... these all fit together nicely enough, but they don't add up to any determinate *ism*, except perhaps anti-Eleaticism. (More on this later.) And hostility towards an epistemological theory is not itself an epistemological theory. In any case my focus here is going to be on the picture of Protagoras which emerges if we take him as first and foremost the master of a *method*, *antilogikê* -- not the proponent of an epistemology --, and try to understand what claim to wisdom might have been founded on that method.

[7] πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

Q: But doesn't *antilogikê* imply a certain...

A: Not at all! Argument on both sides neither entails nor presupposes any particular epistemology or metaphysics, let alone a rejection of ordinary conceptions of truth. [8] Admittedly, the most famous descendant of Protagorean *antilogikê* is the Pyrrhonian practice of equipollent argument.[9] And I suppose Protagoras himself *might* have used *antilogikê* to illustrate that all truths are are only true in some relative or relational way, and thus are invulnerable to contradiction by each other. But *epochê* and the endorsement of apparent contradictions are only two of many possible outcomes of the method. Aristotelians use argument on both sides to hone their dialectical skills, and to generate *aporiai* for eventual solution; Philonians like Cicero can use it to determine the more plausible or probable position; even Stoics like Zeno and Chrysippus can use it.[10]

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[8] Denyer defends the attribution of *ouk esti antilegein* to Protagoras as the flip side of his practice of antilogy: "Protagoras held that whenever a sentence is asserted, its negation too can also be asserted with equal truth. That tenet is reported in two different ways: first, as the tenet that it is always possible to contradict; and second, as the tenet that it never is" (83-4). This seems a possible reading, but it implies a very particular conception of the *outcome* of antilogy, namely that the contradiction generated by the opposed argument can always be resolved as merely apparent. Denyer takes the underlying Protagorean idea to be that "what on the face of it are downright contradictory beliefs can nevertheless all be true" (*). This fits well enough with the *Dissoi Logoi*, where the claims really proved by the argumentative strophe (the good and the bad are the same, etc.) and antistrophe (they are different) are indeed compatible if properly understood (though this requires some restatement of the conclusion of each side). But even if this is the right way to read the *DL*, it seems a large and overconfident step to suppose that Protagorean antilogies were *always* presented as capable of this type of resolution. To sort this out we would have to have a clear sense of the status of arguments involving dropped qualifications (especially relational or relativizing qualifications) in sophistic thought: I discuss this and other relevant issues in 'The Sophistic Movement', in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* ed. M.L. Gill and P. Pellegrin (Malden: Blackwell, 2006).

[9] It is presumably no accident that the *Dissoi Logoi* was preserved in manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus. We might also think of Carneades' infamous pair of arguments for and against justice, though I can find no evidence that these were or were seen as Protagorean in inspiration (Cicero *Rep.*, Lactantius *Div. Inst.*). In general, it is slightly mysterious that Protagoras was not adopted as more of a canonical ancestor-figure by both Academic and Pyrrhonian sceptics. My guess (based largely on Sextus' very limited use of Protagoras) would be that this is because the *Theaetetus* (perhaps in conjunction with Ar. *Metaph.* IV) at some point fixed on Protagoras the simple and useful doxographic identity, 'proponent of relativism'. The more nuanced Protagoras of the *Protagoras* and our other evidence -- the inventor of Socratic argument and linguistic analysis, the agnostic, the moralist – is largely shoved aside and ignored.

[10] Our principal evidence here is the admittedly unfair Plutarch's *Sto. Rep.* (1034e-7c),

Admittedly in all these later cases argument on both sides does tend to be used for a *standardized* outcome, one expressive of the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the user. But we have no evidence that Protagoras was constrained in the same way. For all we know, Protagoras himself felt free to avail himself of any and all of these dialectical outcomes -- not to mention the option of leaving the resolution of his opposed arguments as a puzzle for his audience or antagonists.

In any case the doctrine *ouk esti antilegein* is primarily attested as the view of the Socratic Antisthenes;[11] its ascription to earlier sophistic figures is rather tenuous.[12] Our only evidence for the attribution to Protagoras comes (directly or indirectly) from the *Euthydemus*, where Plato has Socrates say that "the followers of Protagoras" [*hoi amphi Prôtagoran*], and "others still earlier" [*hoi eti palaioteroi*] made great use of an argument to the effect that since two *logoi* could only be of or about the same thing by *saying* the same thing, in which case they cannot conflict, both falsehood, understood as 'saying what is not', and contradiction are impossible (285d-6c, cf. 283e-4d).[13] But there are a number of uncertainties and ambiguities here. One is whether we are right to take *hoi amphi* Protagoras as an odd periphrasis for Protagoras himself (cf. perhaps *Meno* 99b6, *Crat.* 400c5). (And the reference to even earlier figures is odd and enigmatic on any reading.) Even if it is, it is not necessary, or even implied by Plato, that those who originated the argument actually held its conclusion as doctrine. (Perhaps it comes to be associated primarily with the Socratic Antisthenes precisely because it could not be fairly attributed in *that* way to anyone closer to its source.)

It's also easy to see how *ouk esti antilegein* might have had its origin in Protagorean argument without being Protagorean doctrine. According to one of Seneca's *Letters* (88.43=DK80A20), "Protagoras said that it was possible to argue on either side on every question equally well [*ex aequo*], *and on this question itself, whether every question is arguable on either side*" (my emphasis). This self-application follows from the general principle obviously enough. (Note the *peritropê* structure: is Socrates' use of that argumentative form in the *Theaetetus* meant to have an echt-Protagorean flavour?) One

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according to which Zeno recommended dialectic in order to solve sophisms (1034e-f); neatly, Plutarch also credits Zeno with a dilemmatic sophism proving that argument on both sides is *never* called for (*Sto. Rep.* 1034e). Chrysippus emphasised that *antilogikê* should be used with caution (1035f-6a, 36d-e), and for the discovery and organization of the truth (1037b); but he was sufficiently given to it that Plutarch reports as a commonplace the criticism that "he is more clever as a prosecutor than as a defender of his own doctrines"(1036d). On Chrysippus' use of argument on both sides, see Long, 'Dialectic and the Stoic Sage'.

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[12] Cf. Prodicus

[13] ἀλλὰ τοῦτόν γε τὸν λόγον πολλῶν δὴ καὶ πολλάκις ἀκηκοὼς ἀεὶ θαυμάζω—καὶ γὰρ οἱ ἀμφὶ Πρωταγόραν σφόδρα ἐχρῶντοαὐτῷ καὶ οἱ ἔτι παλαιότεροι· ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀεὶ θαυμαστός τις δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ τούς τε ἄλλους ἀνατρέπων καὶ αὐτὸς αὑτόν —οἶμαι δὲ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρὰ σοῦ κάλλιστα πεύσεσθαι.

can only speculate as to how Protagoras might have presented such a position; but it's hard to imagine him doing anything so lame as merely arguing that there are *some* positions (which, and why?) which cannot be argued against. Far more interesting and impressive for him to conclude a display of antilogical ingenuity with a tour de force proof *that antilogic itself is impossible*, because there can be no such thing as contradiction. Given contemporary interest in problems of truth, reference and semantics, it would be unsurprising if that argument then took on a life of its own, as it does in the *Euthydemus* and after.

Q: Okay, so Protagoras practiced an *antilogikê technê*. Still, isn't it odd to take him as the target of the *Sophist* passage when it defines *antilogikê* as a subspecies of question-and-answer? After all, Plato in the *Protagoras* depicts Protagoras as a specialist in long speeches [*makrologia*]: Socrates has to stage a methodological temper tantrum to get him to engage in question-and-answer. The refutative question-and-answer described in the *Sophist* is more usually called eristic, and Protagoras isn't particularly associated with that: Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus in the *Euthydemus* are the canonical practitioners, and they aren't labelled as Protagoreans -- some scholars even think they're really *Megarians* (i.e., Socratics).[14]

A: Actually, even setting the *Sophist*'s allusions aside, we have plenty of evidence to associate Protagoras with eristic, indeed to take him as its founder. Look again at DL IX.51: Protagoras produced "two contradictory arguments on every topic; *and he used them in questioning* [*sunerôtân*], being the first to do this" (DL IX.51=DK80B6a, my emphasis). Diogenes also says:

> "He was the first to distinguish the tenses of the verb, and to emphasise the power of the right moment [*kairos*], and to establish speaking contests [*agones logôn*] and to provide sophisms [*sophismata*] for those presenting arguments.[15] He disregarded the thought, and conducted his arguments on the basis of purely verbal distinctions, thus becoming the progenitor of the crowd of disputers [*eristikoi*] who are now prevalent – so that, indeed, Timon says of him:
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> 'Protagoras the mixer,[16] knowing well the tricks of disputation [*erizemenai*]'.
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> He was also the first to institute the Socratic method of argument; and he was the first, as we learn from Plato in the *Euthydemus,* to make use of the argument of Antisthenes which seeks to demonstrate that contradiction is impossible; and he was the first to demonstrate methods of attack on any

[14] Dorion w. references, cf. also Hitchcock; the view goes back to at least Sidgwick and Gomperz (421ff).
[15] On sophisms, see Menn
[16] Following Dillon and Gergel, and accepting Diels' emendation *epimeiktos*: "l'homme de la mêlée" (Brunschwig).

> given thesis, as Artemidorus the dialectician says in his work *Against Chrysippus*."[17] (IX.52-3)

Diogenes also lists a *Technê Eristikôn* among his books (IX.55).

Q: Hmm, but these references to eristic seem to be using it in the vague and pejorative sense in which it just means petty, tricky argumentation used with indifference to truth –- I don't see anything here about question-and-answer as a Protagorean genre.

A: Well, that *is* explicit in IX.52 cited above; and take another look at the *Protagoras* itself. The idea that the Protagoras of the *Protagoras* is no dialectician is just an (impressively powerful) interpretive myth, feeding off the assumption that Socrates and Protagoras must be more crudely contrasting figures than Plato in fact makes them.[18] The methodological dispute at 334d-8e is not about speechmaking vs. question-and-answer as methods but about *who gets to make the decision*, first as to the method of argument, and second as to the rules for question-and-answer it is chosen: if Protagoras is playing answerer, should he not get to answer at the length he deems fit? (Cf. Socrates' own insistence on qualifying his answers at *Euthydemus* 295b-6c.) The real question is who is to be master: "I have had many a verbal contest [*agôna logôn*] with many people, and if I were to accede to your request *and do as my opponent demanded*, I would not be thought superior to anyone, nor would Protagoras be a name to be reckoned with among the Greeks" (335a, my emphasis). Plato's Protagoras is no fool: he is perfectly well aware that an *agôn logôn* (of which he was the inventor, according to DLIX.52) is one of those games in which argument about the rules is a crucial and often decisive part of the game itself. Socrates himself notes that Protagoras is known in other contexts for undertaking to be brief (334e-5a): the question here is whether he or his opponent (or possibly some third party) should have the authority to select the genre of argument and enforce its norms.

When Socrates threatens to quit, and the surrounding observers join him in pressuring Protagoras into question-and-answer, the latter turns out to be perfectly competent as questioner -- as we might already have expected from his carefully calibrated responses to Socrates in the first dialectical round. Look carefully at what happens at 339aff. Taking charge as questioner, Protagoras proposes that they continue to discuss questions of virtue, but in relation to poetry. For:

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[17] Note the sequence of no less than seven 'firsts' here attributed to Protagoras, which is introduced by the claim that he was first to teach for a fee; Diogenes goes on to add that he also discovered a method for carrying sticks (allegedly from his youthful job as a porter) and the parts of speech. One wonders whether Diogenes is drawing on a source in the *prôtos heurêtês* genre (on which see Zhmud).

[18] The blind spot goes at least as far back as Gomperz: "We see his sophists measuring themselves with Socrates and suffering complete defeat.... Those genuine old sophists had shown themselves incapable of adopting the Socratic method of cross-examination" (*Greek Thinkers* p. 420). This is simply false of Plato's own portrayal.

> "I consider, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man's education is to be in command of poetry, by which I mean the ability to understand the words of the poets, to know when a poem is correctly composed and when not, and to know how to analyze a poem and to respond to questions about it." (339a)

Protagoras then poses to Socrates a series of questions regarding an ode of Simonides, one which Socrates knows and agrees to be well made. In that poem Simonides criticises Pittacus' proverb, 'It is hard to be good'. Yet in the same poem Simonides himself says "to become good truly is hard". Socrates agrees that no poem is well made if it contradicts itself; when Protagoras points out that Simonides does so, Socrates says "I felt as if I had been hit by a good boxer".

This passage, together with Socrates' subsequent exegesis of Simonides, raises all sorts of interesting questions about sophistic method and use of the poets, some of which I'll return to later. But for now the point is simple, though generally overlooked by scholars determined not to see how much Protagoras and Socrates have in common: *Protagoras is here shown performing an elenchus on Socrates*. That is: he refutes his respondant through a series of questions and answers which elicit a contradiction in his views -- and does so very neatly at that, though Socrates manages to hold open an escape route by rejecting his conflation of 'being' and 'becoming'.[19]

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[19] This is methodologically noteworthy as being what we might call a *double-decker* elenchus: Socrates is found to have contradictory views by virtue of the demonstration that *Simonides*, whose authority he here endorses, does so. These are uncommon, but cf. arguably *Euthyphro* 7a-9d, *Cratylus* 436c-7d, and the Protagorean criticisms of Homer discussed below. And it may be that Antiphon's *On Truth* presented a similarly structured argument about justice. Fragment 44b claims that justice is following the laws and conventions of one's community. (Our fragment begins with an *oun*, so perhaps this thesis is presented as the conclusion of a now-lost preceding argument.) But 44c points out that *nomos* at once holds (1) that it is wrong to harm someone who has not harmed you, and (2) that it is right to tell the truth in testifying against a wrongdoer, even if that person has not harmed you. In other words, in some situations *nomos contradicts itself*; and so, presumably, does the proponent of the thesis that justice is doing as *nomos* commands. Alas our text is very fragmentary; even our evidence that these two fragments are from the same work (and, for that matter, that the work is Antiphon's *Truth*) is underwhelming. But if these assumptions hold, *On Truth* evidently presented opposed arguments on the question whether justice is a matter of *nomos*, and used a kind of *elenchus* to argue the negative side. All these cases bring out that insofar as the function of the *elenchus* is to refute a claim to authority through the exposure of a contradiction, it can be applied to the dictates of a putatively authoritative institution (laws, gods, names) as well as to an individual; and a double-decker elenchus enables one to examine and refute an institution or authoritative text by proxy.

There's nothing anachronistic or impossible about Protagoras' display of elenctic competence here. Again, we have confirming evidence from Diogenes Laertius, who reports that Protagoras "was first to launch [*ekinêse*] the Socratic kind of argument" (IX.53=DK80A1). (Diogenes thus presents 'Socratic argument' as an instance of *Stigler's Law of Eponymy*: No scientific or intellectual discovery is named after the person who actually first discovered it.) [20]

Now eristic properly speaking (that is, question-and-answer aimed at the refutation of the respondent, principally or exclusively through the eliciting of a contradiction) is formally identical to the Socratic *elenchus*: whatever differences there are lie in the spirit and the goal of the enterprise. So our evidence associating Protagoras with the Socratic *elenchus* also serves to associate him with eristic (and vice versa): and it confirms that we may take our evidence for Protagoras as the inventor of eristic, cited earlier, as applying to eristic properly speaking.[21]

We also have reason to think that Protagoras' poetry-based *elenchus* in the *Protagoras* was the sort of thing the historical Protagoras went in for. For several other claims attributed to Protagoras in relation to poetry look like moves in arguments of this kind. We are told that he originated various grammatical and syntactical distinctions, being the first to "divide the parts of time" (IX.52) and to distinguish speech into four kinds (entreaty, question, answer and command, IX.53). Aristotle credits him with dividing nouns by gender, into masculine, feminine and 'objects' [*skeuê*] (i.e. neuter) (A27); and he claims that Protagoras said that wrath [*hê mênis*] and 'helmet' [*hê pêlêx*] were properly masculine (A28) (cf. *Clouds*). So Homer errs when he orders the goddess to 'sing' in the opening lines of the *Iliad*, rather than praying that she do so (A29=Ar. *Poetics* 19, 1456b15). Protagoras' 'correction' of the gender of *mênis* could be put to exactly the same critical use; and both could easily be mustered in elenctic form [*sunerôtân*, as DL says]. "Is the *Iliad* a great poem?" – "Yes." "Can a poem be great which makes two errors in its very first two words?" – "No." "Well now: what's the first line of the *Iliad*?"…. and so forth.

Just to briefly note the broader implications here, Plato himself thus suggests that Socrates' philosophical innovation was *not* in undertaking elenctic refutation; and neither is there any reason to suppose he was the first to think we might learn positive lessons from such exercises. (Protagoras surely has a contradiction-resolving, lesson-pointing intepretation of Simonides up his own sleeve; apparently Hippias does too.) What is new and distinctively Socratic is rather his repudiation of the poets as a canonical source of ethical theses to be attacked and defended – his insistence that philosophical argument be *detached from exegesis*.

Q: Okay then: Protagoras did engage in question-and-answer refutation, and so fits the bill of the *Sophist* passage. Still -- reverting now to the puzzles raised by that passage --,

[20] Naturally the law applies to itself: Stigler credits its discovery to Robert K. Merton.
[21] On eristic vs. dialectic see Weiss, Nehamas.

it doesn't follow that he claimed any sort of *omniscience* on that basis! And even the Visitor doesn't really claim that he did: this is being extracted as a presupposition or further commitment of his practices, and one which is transparently false once made explicit. Both Platonic moves may be quite unfair.

A: That's a natural reading: Gisela Striker, for one, does think that Plato is being unfair here.[22] But I have doubts about that. For the Visitor's culminating claim is simply that no one would pay good money for the sophist's expertise unless he thought that *antilogikê* were a sufficient demonstration of superior *wisdom* in the various topics treated. But if a claim to universal wisdom is the basis on which the antilogic art is *purchased,* it's not a large step further to say that this is the basis on which it's *sold*. And (remember I promised you two texts) we have good evidence that the sophists themselves *did* sell their wares on that basis, in the *Dissoi Logoi*. This much-maligned anonymous text is clearly Protagorean in origin, though the dialect, probable date of composition and crudeness of expression make it unlikely to be a work of Protagoras himself.[23] (Nothing tells against it being a slightly later, slightly (and poorly) touched-up record of his oral teachings.) The text first presents opposed arguments as to whether the good and bad are the same, and likewise with the fine and shameful, the just and unjust, the true and false, and whether or not the wise and foolish say the same things. The author then appends a few unopposed discourses: he refutes certain arguments against the claim that wisdom and excellence are teachable (a well-known topic of contemporary debate, in which the practising sophist obviously has a stake, as brought out in the *Meno* and *Protagoras*), argues against the assignment of public offices by lot, defines the scope of his craft (though without naming it), and finally sings the praises of memory. It's the second-last discussion which concerns us for the moment: though the text here is unfortunately in a dreadful state, its agenda is clearly asserted in the opening lines:

> "I think it is proper to the same man and to the same art both (1) to be able to conduct short question and answer discussions, and (2) to comprehend the truth of things, and (3) to know how to plead a case correctly in court, and (4) to be capable of making public speeches, and (5) to understand the art(s) of speaking, and (6) to teach about the nature of all things, how they are and how they came to be." [my numbering][24]

He concludes by reaffirming the unity of these capacities in a slightly different configuration:

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[22] 'Methods of Sophistry', p. 8.

[23] See Robinson, Bailey, Taylor...

[24] <τῶ αὐτῶ> ἀνδρὸς καὶ τᾶς αὐτᾶς τέχνας νομίζω κατὰ βραχύ τε δύνασθαι διαλέγεσθαι, καὶ <τὰν> ἀλάθειαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐπίστασθαι, καὶ δικάζεν ἐπίστασθαι ὀρθῶς, καὶ δαμαγορεῖν οἷόν τ' ἦμεν, καὶ λόγων τέχνας ἐπίστασθαι, καὶ περὶ φύσιος τῶν ἁπάντων ὥς τε ἔχει καὶ ὡς ἐγένετο, διδάσκεν.

> "In the case of someone who (2) knows the truth of things, the argument follows readily that (6) he knows everything; and so he is able (1) <also to engage in> brief <question-and-answer discussion> on any subject,<if ever> he is required to answer questions; so (6) he necessarily knows everything."[25]

That is, if (2) then (6), and perhaps (though the text requires too much supplementation to be certain) if (1) then (6) as well. In between this opening and ending, though the details are unclear, we seem to get argument for other pairwise identities, many of them apparently involving (6). (Not, incidentally, a very familiar argumentative form: the best-known parallel would have to be the arguments for the unity of the virtues in Plato's *Protagoras*.) Now the unity of the art which governs speechmaking and question-and-answer would perhaps have been uncontroversial: Socrates attributes both methods to Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, and Hippias and Gorgias claim both as well (*Gorgias* 447c, 449b-c, *Lesser Hippias* 363c-4d). Socrates in the *Protagoras* certainly exhibits himself in both capacities, despite purporting to be restricted to question-and-answer. (Perhaps Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are an example of what happens when the two really do come apart.) Where the going gets interesting is with the claim that this *technê logôn* also incorporates knowledge of the things about which it speaks – which means knowledge of *everything*. Here we see that Plato's *modus tollens* in the *Sophist* (and for that matter the *Gorgias*, 453d-5a) began as the sophist's *modus ponens*. Because the sophist speaks successfully on all subjects, he evidently must know them all. Plato takes the consequent as obviously absurd and so denies the antecedent. There must be something wrong with sophistic discourse: it persuades without really informing, deals with appearances rather than realities and so forth. The sophist, on the other hand, happily concludes that he must indeed be an expert on all subjects. Not a bad selling point for a freelance teacher of wisdom![26]

Q: But a claim to omniscience on the basis of verbal skill is still *crazy*. Why wouldn't it have sounded just as crazy then?

A: How crazy it is depends what we build into 'knowing all things'. In the *Euthydemus* Socrates does make a show of asking whether, for instance, the allegedly omniscient Dionysodorus knows how many teeth Euthydemus has; and of course he can only be met with bluster and bluff. But neither side seems to think that this *kind* of objection -- an empirical counterexample to any claim of total factual information -- is decisive (294c-d). The sophists' claim to omniscience doesn't really seem to be intended to be taken that way (and not just in the sense that it's not intended to be refutable). The relevant omniscience isn't a claim to know every fact, or even to know every fact that a

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[25] ὅς γα <μὰν> τὰν ἀλάθειαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐπίσταται, εὐπετὴς ὁ λόγος, ὅτι πάντα ἐπίσταται· ὡς δὲ <καὶ κατὰ> βραχὺ <διαλέγεσθαι δύναται, αἴ κα> δέηι νιν ἐρωτώμενον ἀποκρίνεσθαι, περὶ πάντων· οὐκῶν δεῖ νιν πάντ' ἐπίστασθαι.

[26] The relative powers of rhetorical skill and technical expertise in successful speaking is still a worry in Quintilian et al. (*).

technitês would know about his subject. What's at stake here is a claim to *wisdom*: that is, a claim to know something which is *better and more important* than what the *technitês* knows, and to know it *universally,* i.e. in the case of *every technê.* [27] We tend to be dubious about this sort of claim as well, not least because of Plato's influence: we find claims of universal expertise especially suspect when they are based on ('merely') verbal facility. But the more general idea of a universal expertise which outruns and is more valuable than what the specialist has is perfectly familiar and still broadly acceptable: it's the idea behind the MBA (or, for that matter, the investment expert who operates across the full range of businesses and industries). An MBA as such doesn't know the details of any particular line of business as fully as the practitioner of that trade knows them; yet he (purportedly) knows better how to manage *every* line of business than the specialist practitioners do (hence the prevalence of MBA's at management consulting firms), presumably because of a deeper grasp of certain all-important principles common to all businesses. Claims about knowledge in an agonistic context are really claims about wisdom; and claims about wisdom are claims about the *value* of a certain kind of knowledge and the consequent authority of its practitioners.

Sophistic claims to 'omniscience' thus belong to a complex fifth- and fourth-century debate about the prospects for and nature of a *master science* – a knowledge which would warrant a claim to the honorific title 'wisdom' and give its possessors authority (in some sense) over the practitioners of the ordinary crafts and sciences. Which *technê* knows what is most important, so as to command the others as it wills? Gorgias would say rhetoric, because it *does* enable its practitioners to put the other crafts at their disposal (*Gorgias* 452a-e, 455d-6e). Dionysodorus and Euthydemus would claim supremacy for their own art of refutation, which is sufficient to provide wisdom and virtue: having discovered it, they have left behind all their other skills, even the art of generalship, as comparatively trivial (273c-4a, cf. 271c-2c). Socrates would more humbly offer his formally similar art of interrogation and examination: after all, it does afford him the ability to test and judge claimants to apparently greater kinds of wisdom, and the 'human wisdom' issuing from it is in fact the best available to us.[28] Plato eventually proposes a more constructive and broadly conceived *dialectic* as the master art in the *Republic*: the *dialektikos* and the *politikos* turn out to be the same person, inasmuch as only the former can really *know* the good which it is the job of the latter to pursue. It is only with Aristotle that the dream of a master art is more or less dissolved, by its dismantling into several carefully distinguished kinds of expertise. The Aristotelian *politikos*, who knows the good which is the end of human life and of the polis, is entitled to direct the other crafts on the basis of his knowledge, as set forth in *NE* I.1-2. But the theoretical sciences are wholly distinct from this; it is the function of the philosopher to investigate all things (*Metaph.* 1004a35), and there is a further

[27] Xenophon tells us that Dionysodorus presented himself at Athens as a teacher of the art of generalship -- without (so far as we can tell) any particular record of personal military responsibility or success, and without actually teaching anything beyond tactics (*Memorabilia* III.1).

[28] Isocrates proposes...*

distinction to be drawn here between the *dialektikos*, who can argue about all things, and the metaphysician, who *understands* them insofar as they are beings.

The *Sophist* passage gives us a glimpse of the *antilogikê technê* understood as a candidate – the Protagorean candidate -- for this enormously contested role of universal master science. (Note incidentally that the topics *antilogikê* is said to cover pretty much exhaust those which might have grounded a claim to wisdom by any precursor or rival: the gods (speciality of poets and mythologers), the earth and heavens (the *phusikoi*), being and becoming (Eleatics), politics (sophists, rhetoricians, Solon-style *sophoi*), and the *technai* (their practitioners).) Unfortunately, the *Sophist* passage isn't really a serious attempt at presenting and refuting that candidacy, and doesn't give us much help in reconstructing Protagoras' own case for it. But it would be a mistake to write it off as mere polemical exaggeration.

Q: I'm still confused, though, as to exactly what the *antilogikê technê* does. The *Sophist* seems to be talking about *antilogikê* in the sense of 'speaking against' someone, and more specifically in the sense of refuting a person (e.g., an expert in a craft) through question-and-answer. But you began by talking about Protagoras as a producer of 'opposed arguments', and these sound more like matched *speeches* for and against some proposition. Those are pretty different activities; and even if the *Dissoi Logoi* argues that the same person can do both, it seems worth asking which constitutes *antilogikê*.

A: There are actually a number of formal differentiae available here: the distinction between speechmaking and interrogative forms is arguably relatively superficial, since it's not so hard to turn a set of leading questions into a continuous argument or vice versa. In fact DLIX.51 seems to say that Protagoras did the latter (*logous... antikeimenous allêlois hois kai sunêrôta*; cf. also *SE* 34, quoted below). Perhaps a deeper question is whether *antilogikê* is normally conceived as one-sided or two-sided, and that question could be posed at a number of levels: in relation to the format of an *agôn logôn*, to the content of Protagorean texts, and to the end of the *technê* itself. Is the point of the exercise always to produce arguments (whatever their form) on *both* sides of some question; or is it primarily to *speak against* (the literal meaning of *antilegein*) the proponent of any given thesis? It makes a difference which we take to be the sophistic default. Think for instance of the *On the Art*. This Hippocratic text is clearly a sophistic exercise in the *defense* of a *technê*, specifically medicine, against attack. It opens by announcing that purpose:

> "There are some who have made an art out of vilifying the arts, though they consider, not that they are accomplishing the object I mention, but that they are making a display of their own knowledge. In my opinion, however, to discover that was unknown before, when the discovery of it is better than a state of ignorance, is the ambition and task of intelligence, and so is to bring to completion what was already accomplished in part."[29]

[29] Trans. W.H.S. Jones, revised. Εἰσί τινες οἳ τέχνην πεποίηνται τὸ τὰς τέχνας

The author goes on to accuse his antagonist of displaying a bad nature and lack of art, and to defend medicine against his criticisms. Now the *Sophist* depicts the sophist as showing you how to speak *against* an expert and his *technê*; and our scraps of information about Protagoras on the crafts (his attack on the geometers, his disdain for Hippias' polymathic curriculum) point in the same purely critical direction. So perhaps *On the Art* is a rebuttal of Protagoras (or of an imitator) -- by Hippias, say.[30] On the other hand, if the norm in antilogy was to produce arguments on *both* sides, then *On the Art* is best read as an incomplete text, an *antistrophê* to a lost attack *by the same author* – and why not by Protagoras himself?[31] (The language of personal belief and commitment here is no obstacle: the *Dissoi Logoi* relies heavily on the first-person too, as if *strophe* and *antistrophe* represented the conflicting commitments of different speakers. Presumably the way to think of these texts is as *scripts*, like the idealized courtroom speeches of Antiphon's *Tetralogy*, with distinct roles which could be taken on by one or more speakers.)

Q: Well, what's the answer then -- what form did *antilogikê* take?

A: I fear I'm going to insist on 'both'. To be a bit less wishy-washy about it, it seems to me easiest to understand our variegated evidence if we suppose that Protagoras and his followers took their craft as *essentially* a power to generate arguments on both sides; but that particular agonistic contexts might often call for the smaller genre of a one-sided 'speaking against', and one-sided arguments might also take on an independent existence in print. (Think again of the *Dissoi Logoi*, which presents both two-sided and one-sided arguments.) The one-sided, continuous species of 'speaking against' would tend to merge imperceptibly into rhetorical *epideixis*; when set against some position too obvious to need defence (e.g. Gorgias' *Defense of Helen* and *On Not Being*), it would amount to 'making the weaker argument the stronger' as per the ancient accusation (DK80A21).)

Q: And what about that last of those 'firsts' you quoted earlier: "he was the first to demonstrate methods of attack on any given thesis, as Artemidorus the dialectician says in his work *Against Chrysippus*." [32] How do these *epicheirêseis pros tas theseis* fit into *antilogikê*? And who the heck is Artemidorus the dialectician?

A: *Sonst unbekannt* according to Diels-Kranz, and that seems unlikely to change.

αἰσχροεπεῖν, ὡς μὲν οἴονται οἱ τοῦτο διαπρησσόμενοι, οὐχ ὃ ἐγὼ λέγω, ἀλλ' ἱστορίης οἰκείης ἐπίδειξιν ποιεύμενοι. Ἐμοὶ δὲ τὸ μέν τι τῶν μὴ εὑρημένων ἐξευρίσκειν, ὅ τι καὶ εὑρεθὲν κρέσσον ᾖ ἢ ἀνεξεύρετον, ξυνέσιος δοκέει ἐπιθύμημά τε καὶ ἔργον εἶναι, καὶ τὸ τὰ ἡμίεργα ἐς τέλος ἐξεργάζεσθαι ὡσαύτως·

[30] For points in favour of the ascription to Hippias, see Jones (Loeb)

[31] Cf. Gomperz*

[32] καὶ πρῶτος κατέδειξε τὰς πρὸς τὰς θέσεις ἐπιχειρήσεις, ὥς φησιν Ἀρτεμίδωρος ὁ διαλεκτικὸς ἐν τῷ Πρὸς Χρύσιππον.

Artemidorus sometimes gets listed as a member of the Dialectical school, but there's no reason to suppose that *ho dialektikos* in DL is a school name.[33] And *epicheirêseis pros tas theseis,* 'points of attack against theses', does belong to the technical language of dialectic (and rhetoric). Aristotle in the *Topics* repeatedly speaks of making an attack [*epicheirein, epicheirêma* etc.] on a thesis [*pros thesin*] (110a11, b12, 161a22, 163a37-b1, 163b5, cf. 111a11, 159a3, 160b15); the form *epicheirêsis* seems to become more popular later on, e.g. in Alexander's commentary on the *Topics* (27.15-20, 164.5, 559.12, 585.5, 12). Now Aristotelian topics are rules or recipes – procedures for generating (refutative, dialectical) arguments; the term *topoi* suggests that we think of them as a general system of argumentative *strategies*, 'places to look' in order to devise an argument against any given thesis.[34] As Brunschwig says, "Le lieu est donc *une machine à faire des prémisses à partir d'une conclusion donnée*."[35] And *epicheirêseis* seem to be the particular arguments against this or that *thesis* which the *topoi* enable us to generate. So it's tempting to understand *epicheirêseis* here as a reference to this method, and Artemidorus as in effect imputing to Protagoras the discovery of the *topoi*. And this *seems* to be confirmed by passages in Cicero and Quintilian which credit Protagoras with having composed *loci communes*. In the *Brutus*, Cicero, citing Aristotle as his source (perhaps the lost *Sunagôgê Technôn*), claims:

> Protagoras prepared written discussions of important matters, now called *loci communes*.[36] Gorgias did the same, composing eulogies and invectives against particular things, because he regarded it as especially the function of the orator to be able to increase merit by praising and to diminish it again by invective. Antiphon of Rhamnus had similar compositions written out.[37]

But there are at least two obstacles to attributing *topoi* to Protagoras. First, Cicero's *loci communes*, as extensively discussed and exemplified in the *De Inventione*, are very different both from Aristotelian *topoi* and from the *loci* (simpliciter) he himself discusses in the *Topica*. (How far Ciceronian *loci* resemble and are derived from Aristotle's *topoi* is a thorny question I will here duck.) *Loci communes* are not strategies or recipes but actual set-piece mini-*logoi*: "arguments which can be transferred to many cases" (*De Inv.* II.xv.48). In other words, they are 'commonplaces' or boilerplate: substantive, and resolutely banal, chunks of argument on standard topics, to be inserted with a light rewrite wherever called for -- the 'PowerPoint Content' of their day.[38]

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[33] epicheir thes: DL 5.24, 49, 9.92, Placit Hipp. 2.4.12,25,28, 2.5.3, 74,2.8.5, Topics 110a11, 111b12, 112a6, 158b25, 159a3, 160b15, 161a22, 163b1, 163b5, late rhets, Alex – re Topics,

[34] Cf. Robin Smith

[35] p. xxxix

[36] "scriptasque fuisse et paratas a Protagora rerum inlustrium disputationes, quae nunc communes appellantur loci".

[37] Kerferd trans., revised

[38]

The second objection dovetails with this. At the end of the *Sophistici Elenchi* (which, though this is controversial, I take to be a conclusion to the *Topics* as a whole, to which the *S.E.* belongs as a final book),[39] Aristotle says that in contrast to practically every other area of inquiry, including rhetoric, he has had to start from scratch in discussing dialectic:

> Of the present inquiry, on the other hand, it was not the case that part of the work had been done thoroughly before, while part had not. Nothing existed at all. For the training given by the paid professors of contentious arguments [τῶν περὶ τοὺς ἐριστικοὺς λόγους μισθαρνούντων] was like the practice of Gorgias. For he used to hand out rhetorical speeches to be learned by heart, and they handed out speeches in the form of question and answer, which each supposed would cover most of the arguments on either side.... they used to suppose that they trained people by imparting to them not the art but its products, as though ... one were not to teach a man the art of shoe-making... but were to present him with several kinds of shoes of all sorts. (184b34-5a7, my emphasis)[40]

Even discounting for some self-serving exaggeration here, Aristotle is very clear about being the first analyst and systematic expositor of *dialektikê*.[41] And he notes that his predecessors, to the extent that they taught the same art, (a) did so under the name *eristic*; and (b) demonstrated and taught the art by means of sample or paradigm *logoi* in question-and-answer form (a very odd way to put it, by the way, unless the difference between continuous argument and question-and-answer was seen as merely superficial), rather than by the kind of explicit analyses of general strategies offered in the *Topics*.

Putting all these recalcitrant pieces together, we get the following picture. Protagoras was the first to study systematically the art of deductive refutative argument (dialectic, as it comes to be known, or pejoratively eristic); and he produced *Antilogiai* which were intended to serve as paradigms or templates for the production of refutative arguments on any topic whatsoever. But since the *Antilogiai* themselves were presented not in the form of general rules but as exemplars, they had a closer resemblance to Ciceronian *loci communes* than to *loci*,[42] and Aristotle might reasonably present himself as the first to

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[39] The difficulty is that 183a27-36 seems to cast what follows as a conclusion to the *SE*, but 183a37-b14 points to the *Topics* + *SE* as a whole. The contrast between rhetoric and dialectic (as a whole, apparently) at 183b25-4a also points in the latter direction.

[40] Quotations from Aristotle are in the ROT translations, sometimes revised.

[41] On the other hand, Aristotle also credits Zeno as the first dialectician (cf. Kerferd pp. 59-62, 85).

[42] Moreover, there is some reason to suspect that the author of the *Anonymus Iamblichi* is Protagoras (*); and this text looks very much like Ciceronian boilerplate. One can practically identify the headings under which each fragment of the *Anon. Iamb.* could be inserted into a set-piece speech -- success, reputation, benefit, self-control, pleonexia,

teach the art in a fully theorized way. So for instance Protagoras' analysis of the modes of speech would have been deployed in certain set-piece arguments, designed to bring out their utility in refutation-generation ('Is the *Iliad* a great poem'...'Is it correct to command a goddess?'); but he never articulated a *formula* for that use along Aristotelian lines ('If the thesis relates to the giving of a command, see whether the command is correctly given').

Q: This is all very speculative --

A: Well, these references to *loci communes* and *epicheirêseis* have to mean *something*. I have an even more speculative argument which might help...

Q: Take all the rope you want.

A: It takes a bit of explanation. Eusebius' extracts from Porphyry's *Literary Lecture* [*Philologos Akroasis*] include an extended discussion (in dialogue form) of plagiarism in ancient authors. Porphyry's speaker, an unknown Peripatetic Prosenes, tops the previous speakers by saying that even their hero Plato 'borrowed' a lot from his predecessors.[43] He adds:

> 'The books of those who lived before Plato are scarce: perhaps one might otherwise observe more of the <borrowings of the> philosopher. But I, having come across it by chance, read Protagoras' discourse *On Being*, and found him using objections of this sort against those who introduce a One Being. For I made a point of memorizing the things he said in his own words.'

Eusebius adds, evidently of Porphyry: "And saying this he sets down proofs at length."[44]

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law-abidingness -- and they're not far removed from the topics on which Cicero thinks *loci communes* should be prepared. On the other hand, it's hard to imagine the *AI* being used as a paradigm or template for refutation-generation.

[43] Cf. Favorinus and Aristoxenus on the *Republic* (below); also Plato's alleged plagiarism of Philolaus (DL 8.85, DK44a8, cf. Huffman 12ff.); and of Aristippus, Bryson (Ath. 11.508c-d), and Epicharmus (DLIII.9-17) (Burkert 226-7). Clearly there was an ancient polemical tradition (or traditions?) along these lines, which I need to learn more about....

[44] *Praep. Ev.* 10.3.24-5=DK80B2. "Καὶ ὁ Προσήνης· 'Τοὺς μὲν ἄλλους', ἔφη, 'κλέπτας ἐφωράσατε· ὅτι δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς οὗτος ὁ ἥρως Πλάτων, οὗ τὴν ἐπώνυμον ἑορτὴν σήμερον πανηγυρίζομεν, πολλοῖς καταχρῆται τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ (αἰδοῦμαι γὰρ τῷ τῆς κλοπῆς ὀνόματι ἐπὶ τούτου χρῆσθαι), οὐκέτι κατειλήφατε.' 'Τί λέγεις;' ἔφη ὁ Καλλιέτης. 'Οὐ λέγω μόνον', φησίν, 'ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν πίστιν τῷ λόγῳ παρέχω. σπάνια δὲ τὰ τῶν πρὸ τοῦ Πλάτωνος γεγονότων βιβλία, ἐπεὶ ἴσως πλείους ἄν τις ἐφώρασε τοῦ φιλοσόφου. ἐγὼ δ' οὖν, ᾗ κατὰ τύχην περιπέπτωκα, Πρωταγόρου τὸν Περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἀναγινώσκων λόγον πρὸς τοὺς ἓν τὸ ὂν εἰσάγοντας τοιαύταις αὐτὸν εὑρίσκω χρώμενον ἀπαντήσεσιν· ἐσπούδασα γὰρ αὐταῖς λέξεσι τὰ ῥηθέντα μνημονεύειν.'" Καὶ ταῦτ' εἰπὼν διὰ πλειόνων

In short, Porphyry evidently had to hand a text *Peri Tou Ontos* (purporting to be) by Protagoras, which anticipated certain Platonic arguments against the Parmenidean One Being.[45] Now as John Palmer notes, the intriguing question here is *which* Platonic attack on the Eleatics is here in view: he suggests that "the First Deduction of the *Parmenides* would seem one of the more likely possibilities".[46] This is suggestive for our purposes because of the highly abstract and schematic character of the Deduction: its arguments turn on common properties (indeed, Aristotelian *koina*), often forming pairs of contraries suited to dilemmatic refutation: part and whole, beginning middle and end, limited and unlimited, shape, location, motion and rest, sameness and difference, likeness and unlikeness, equality and inequality, sameness and difference in age, coming-to-be and ceasing to be, being, unity, and being the object of thought and speech. And as Palmer notes, there is significant overlap here with the schematic contrariety-based dilemmas Gorgias poses regarding Being in his *On Not-Being*.[47]

Now this text is intriguing and potentially important in a number of ways. (Not least, obviously, as confirming evidence of an anti-Eleatic bias in Protagorean argument: we certainly have no evidence of an antistrophic *defense* of the One Being!) But my point here is that it can help to clarify the ways in which Protagoras did and did not present *epicheirêseis pros tas theseis*. For the kind of abstract and schematic argument we find in the First Deduction and the *On Not-Being* is a sort of missing link between mere sample arguments offered as paradigms (the 'pairs of shoes' criticised by Aristotle) and Aristotelian *topoi* framed in wholly formal and strategic terms. So perhaps Protagoras anticipated both Gorgias and Plato in arguing against the Eleatics that a One Being could be neither limited nor unlimited, neither at motion nor at rest, neither same nor different, and so forth. And perhaps the broader point of the exercise was to establish a schema of pairs of contrarieties usable as *epicheirêseis*, points of attack, against *any* ontological thesis.

Q: 'Anti-Eleatic bias'... aren't you now as good as admitting that Protagoras *had* substantive philosophical views? Why not say more about them, then: was he a

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τίθησι τὰς ἀποδείξεις.

[45] One complication immediately suggested by this tantalizing text is that it would have been a rewarding (and endlessly entertaining) trade to reverse-engineer forgeries of books along the lines at which Porphyry hints. Cobble together a primitive paraphrase from some work of famous philosopher B, present it as the little-known work of earlier philosopher A, and advertise it as shocking proof of plagiarism by the great B, neatly turning the otherwise fishy similarities stemming from one's own plagiarism into a positive selling point. One wonders how many of the ancient charges of plagiarism are inspired by this sort of activity, and how many by the needs of the conflicting histories of philosophy deployed in inter-school polemic.

[46] *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*, 116, n. 36

[47] Cf. Palmer 108-17. And there is no reason to suppose that all of Gorgias' arguments originated with him: cf. *MXG* *

relativist? An agnostic? An empiricist? What did the measure thesis *mean*?

A: Concerning Protagoras' substantive views, I am not in a position to know either that they exist or do not exist, nor of what sort they are. For many are the obstacles to knowing: the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.... the scrappiness of our evidence and the fact that almost anything attributed to him might be part of an 'opposed argument' yanked out of context. The fragment on the gods is a good example, even more tantalizing than the measure thesis:

> Where the gods are concerned, I am not in a position to know that they exist or that they do not exist, or of what sort they are in appearance. For there are many obstacles: the obscurity <of the matter> and the shortness of human life. (DK80B4)[48]

But how are we to take this? It *could* be the result of an exercise in *antilogikê* (announced in advance, presumably, since Diogenes says it is the opening of a work (IX.51)), to be reached by arguing on both sides of the question whether the gods exist and on both sides of the attribution of various visible properties to them. (In that case, Protagoras uses *antilogikê* in the Pyrrhonian fashion on at least some occasions -- at least if it's fair to take "I am not in a position to know whether P or not-P" as equivalent to a suspension of judgement as to whether P or not-P.)[49] But it might just as easily be a credo supported by one-sided argumentation (perhaps like that of Xenophanes) for an agnostic-sceptical-empiricist stance towards the gods. (It is worth noting that, contra the uncharitable reading of Diogenes of Oenoanda (80A23), this need not be read as a gesture towards atheism; what matters is whether one *nomizein* the gods, not whether one claims to *eidenai* anything about them.) Or it might just be a *recusatio*, explaining why the *Peri Theôn* to follow consists of something other than positive theological argument (edifying myths, perhaps?). Or, or....

Q: But what about ethical and political views? Protagoras in the *Protagoras* has very robust and interesting substantive ideas; the Great Speech doesn't *look* like one side of a Protagorean exercise in 'opposed arguments'. And it's hard to believe that Pericles would have handed the lawgiving of Thurii over to someone who lacked substantive views, whose *sole* claim to wisdom was his mastery of *antilogikê*.

A: Fair enough; and I don't see why Protagoras couldn't have had substantive ethical and political views *something like* what Plato attributes to him in the *Protagoras*, the

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[48] περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἥ τ' ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

[49] It's also striking that so read the argument must have had a Gorgianic regressive structure, like that of the *Palamedes* and the *On Not Being*: even if the gods *do* exist, we do not know what properties they have. (The pairing of *estin* and *hopoion estin*, on the other hand, sounds proto-Platonic; but Plato's question is usually *ti esti*, not *eite estin eite ouk estin** .)

Great Speech included.[50] On the other hand I can't imagine Plato simply reproducing Protagoras *wie er eigentlich war* for posterity: the Great Speech is bound to be an agonistic-satirical-appropriating *play* on the style, ideas and perhaps some particular work of the historical original. And I just don't see any hope of subtracting Plato's transformations with sufficient precision and confidence to arrive at that original.

But yes, as I argued earlier, mastery of *antilogikê*, even as the basis of a claim to wisdom, neither requires nor forbids the taking of substantive positions. After all, it's the most natural method imaginable for figuring out where the balance of reasons in fact lies: hence its use by Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and even Zeno and Chrysippus....

Q: Wait a minute – its use by *Plato*?

A: Sure. The *Meno* and *Protagoras* are both exercises in argument on both sides of the question whether virtue can be taught. The *Cratylus* is clearly *antilogikê* on the question whether there is a natural correctness of names. The *Phaedrus* centres on *antilogikê* on whether *erôs* is harmful or beneficial. The *Republic* is very lopsided *antilogikê* on the question whether justice is beneficial. In fact, did you know that Aristoxenus and Favorinus both claimed that "almost all" of the *Republic* was taken from Protagoras' *Antilogiae* (DK80B5=D.L. III.37, III.57)? The few scholars who don't greet that claim with stunned silence usually suggest that this is somehow just a reference to the arguments of Book I; but who knows....

Q: Any more vague handwaving you'd like to close with? Provocative speculations? Desiderata for future research?

A: I'm not sure how much more we can hope to extract from our frustrating little DK80 'fragments' of Protagoras. But I do think that *On the Art*, the *Anonymus Iamblichi* and the *Dissoi Logoi* would each repay more serious study, study firmly founded on the hypothesis that they are (in some sense) Protagorean texts and that Protagoras was a very good philosopher. I also think that a lot remains to be properly appreciated about Plato's very subtle, complex, variegated presentation of various sophists. And finally, I think we should take very seriously the implications of the claim that Socratic argument is Protagorean argument, taken in conjunction with Plato's depiction of the latter as focussed on the study of literary texts. I've never seen a satisfactory account of *why* Plato's Protagoras would think that 'the greatest part of a man's education is to be in command of poetry', or what implications that educational programme has for his conception of wisdom. But at any rate it suggests that when we look for the ancestors of philosophical argumentation as we find it in Plato and his successors, we should look less to Presocratic natural science and courtroom rhetoric, and more to ancient practices of literary interpretation. For the evidence gives us some reason to believe

[50] We also have good evidence of substantive, if banal, views on teaching and learning: in addition to the *Protagoras*, cf. B3, B10, B11, and the similar views of *Anon. Iamb.*1.1-3 *Dissoi Logoi* 6.

that *philosophical dialectic arose from practices of debate and problem-solving in the interpretation of contested literary texts*. It would be very interesting to look closely at our evidence for the 'literary' side of figures like Anaxagoras and Democritus; at the reasoning of the *Derveni Papyrus* and other pre-Platonic exegetical texts; at the uses of poetic and other authoritative texts by sophistic figures in Plato; and, taking all this evidence together, try to assess how far the forms and strategies of argument used by Plato and Aristotle may have came from practices of fifth-century interpretive debate. Because let's face it, they can't have learned much about rational argument from the *phusikoi* --

Q: -- and I'm cutting you off right now.