CHAPTER EIGHT
PROTAGORAS’ MYTH IN PLATO’S PROTAGORAS: FICTION OR TESTIMONY?

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

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

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1 Lampert (2010, 50 n. 54) defines the following as “scholarly consensus”: “the speech Plato gives Protagoras faithfully represents the historical Protagoras’s views”. Van Riel, who argues that “the doctrines of the myth” are largely Platonic, at the same time regards it as possible that Plato has adapted a text by the historical Protagoras (2012, 162). On Van Riel’s interpretation see also notes 11 and 21 below. Denyer 2008 does not address the problem in how far the myth may represent ideas of the historical Protagoras; neither does Calame 2012.
absolute historical truth. On the other hand, mere fiction is equally unlikely: Plato would have been considered unreliable by his contemporaries, who still had access to the writings of the historical Protagoras, if he had made him voice beliefs that sounded implausible when attributed to Protagoras. Therefore it is most likely that Plato has his Protagoras advocate positions that he and his audience would have regarded as possible views of the historical figure.

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

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

1. The Great Speech and the Incorporation of the Myth

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

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

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