CHAPTER NINE

EUBOULIA AS THE SKILL PROTAGORAS TAUGHT*

Paul Woodruff

When Socrates asks Protagoras what it is that he would teach a young man, according to Plato, Protagoras eventually responds with what evidently is his standard public offer:

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τὸ δὲ μάθημα ἐστὶν εὐβούλια περὶ τῶν οἰκείων, ὡς ἄν ἄριστα τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν διοικῆται, καὶ περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως, ὡς τὰ τῆς πόλεως δυνατῶτατος ἄν εἶη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν.

My lesson is good judgement about things domestic, so that he [the student] may best manage his own household, and about things of the polis, so that in things of the polis he may be most able both in action and in speech.

Plato Prot. 318 E 5–319 A 2 (DK 80 A 5, II.256.24–26)

This article attempts a philosophical reconstruction of the virtue Protagoras proposed to teach, on the basis of the slight historical evidence available to us. My aim here is to answer the question: “What might an ancient Greek teacher have proposed to teach by which he could reasonably expect to endow students with this virtue?”

1. PROTAGORAS ON EUBOULIA

“Good judgement” translates euboulia, and this names a virtue which Plato and most other philosophers treat lightly or ignore,1 but which was evidently central to the teaching of Protagoras. Protagoras supposes that his teaching is not only sufficient (318 E 5–319 A 2, above) but also necessary for the good management of household and city:

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*I am grateful for many suggestions on an earlier form of this paper proposed by members of the conference in Leiden, July 5–7, 2007 and also to the editors of this volume. An earlier version of this paper appeared in print as Woodruff 2008.

1 On the concept of euboulia in other authors, see par. 2 below.
If Protagoras taught *good management*, he might have meant either or both of two things—management that is (A) profitable for the manager, or (B) beneficial for home or city. Some readers have supposed (in accordance with A) that Protagoras proposed to teach you how to wring wealth or power out of your city. But A cannot be quite right, because profit-making skill would have no clear parallel in household management—one does not want to wring wealth or power out of one’s own home, but rather to make the home prosper. In pursuing this goal, one might well profit oneself, but that would be incidental to the goal. So this consideration supports B.

If Protagoras meant his teaching to aim simply at personal profit, then the lesson that was supposed to lead this way might well have been persuasive speech, which he was widely believed to teach, and which (according to Aristophanes) some credulous people supposed to be a tool for achieving power and wealth or, at least, for escaping from creditors. Aristotle implies

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2 δυνατώτατος ... καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν ("most able both in action and in speech", 319 A 1–2, above) could mean ‘most powerful’, and is often translated that way. But that does not fit the use of that phrase in Thucydides for Pericles (λέγειν καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος, 1.139.4), where the historian is commenting on Pericles’ ability rather than his power, and seems to assume that the ability is advantageous to Athens.

3 In Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, Strepsiades explains his goal in studying: “to twist justice and wipe out my creditors” στρεψοδικσαι καὶ τοὺς χρήστας διολισθεῖν (434). Less credulous students probably went to teachers such as Protagoras with other aims, knowing that artfulness in speech is not effective. On the aims of the sophists’ teaching see Gagarin 2000. Most Greek literature, from Homer on, represents artfulness in speaking as unpersuasive. Consider the embassy scene in *Iliad* 9, in which Odysseus’ artfulness is trumped by Ajax’s bluntness, the frequent failures of clever speakers in Greek tragedy, and the many failures of the art in Thucydides. The finest defence speech he had ever heard, for example, failed to save Antiphon, the artful speechwriter (Thuc. 8.68.2). In the *Clouds*, also, Socrates’ pupils do not fare well.