

Robert C. Bartlett, (2016) *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press. v + 248 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 9780226394282 (hbk).

Bartlett's aim in the book is to investigate, in its original ancient form, the relativism ('sophistry') that he perceives as dominating the field of political philosophy today (p. 1). This investigation takes the form of a philosophical exegesis of the two main treatments of the sophist Protagoras – 'at once the greatest and the most revealing embodiment of the type' (p. 2) – found in the Platonic corpus: the dialogue *Protagoras* and the first part of the *Theaetetus* (*Theat.* 142a-183c). The book belongs in the Straussian tradition of Platonic scholarship and shares with that tradition both a distinct methodology and a characteristic preoccupation with the themes of philosophical esotericism and the problematic tension between philosophy and society. On Bartlett's reading, Plato's Protagoras emerges as, at his core, a hedonist and an atheist, with a strikingly bleak and cynical outlook on human affairs. But that, crucially, is not how the sophist presents himself. For Bartlett argues that Protagoras' activity as a teacher and thinker was profoundly shaped by his recognition of the necessity of being able to speak differently to different audiences, reserving one's true beliefs and insights for a select few.

On Bartlett's interpretation, Protagoras' great myth about the origins of human society in the *Protagoras* (*Prot.* 320d-324d) represents a prime example of the sophist's ability to appeal to different audiences in different philosophical registers. The surface meaning of the myth is aimed at the ignorant masses: Zeus made political life possible by giving human beings justice and shame ('political virtue'), and he serves as the guarantor and enforcer of those laws and norms embodied in those principles. But the myth also hints at an underlying message, meant for those ambitious young men who make up the pool of potential customers for Protagoras the itinerant teacher of rhetoric. On this 'true teaching', which comes fully to the surface in the subsequent *logos*-part of Protagoras' speech (324d-328c), real virtue lies in pursuing of one's own narrow self-interest when one can get away with it, while crucially allowing the majority to remain committed to those conventional communal virtues that make political life possible in the first place (p. 75). Bartlett interprets the discussion of courage and hedonism, in the later part of the *Protagoras*, as Socrates' attempt to expose the sophist's position on virtue as deeply confused. While reserving a place for 'true' courage in the wise person's pursuit of his own advantage, Protagoras disparages the conventional understanding of the virtue as nothing more than an 'unwise habituation to obedience', forcefully imposed upon the young by their community (pp. 80-81). Socrates' questioning

aims to test whether the sophist is in fact willing to accept the full implications of this denigration of courage as conventionally understood. Applying Protagoras' hedonistic commitments to the case of courage, Socrates shows how the sophist's position strips courage completely of its 'noble, self-sacrificial character' (p. 98). Faced with the prospect of being committed to the view that what distinguishes the coward and the courageous person is merely their assessment of what course of action is most pleasurable, Protagoras blinks. While denigrating conventional communal virtues, including courage, in his true teachings, he nonetheless betrays an utterly conventional attraction to courage as a noble, selfless quality (pp. 96-97).

Bartlett's chapter on the role of courage and hedonism in the argument of the *Protagoras* is among the most interesting and valuable in the book. But his reconstruction of Protagoras' multi-layered position, on which that discussion rests, is not wholly convincing. To be sure, Bartlett seems right to insist that the tension between communal values and self-interest underlies much of what goes on in the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras on the question of the teachability and unity of virtue. But it is not clear to this reviewer that that tension is most plausibly read as reflecting a conscious duplicity on Protagoras' part, as Bartlett suggests. After all, in the *logos* part of his speech Protagoras explicitly portrays his own educational contribution as a natural extension of the 'political virtue' taught by the city, not as a rejection of that virtue (327e-328c, a passage Bartlett does not discuss). So an alternative interpretation seems possible on which Protagoras, just like Gorgias in the dialogue named after him, is simply portrayed as naively unaware of the moral hazards at the heart of his educational activity.

The multi-layered character of Protagoras' teaching also shapes the portrayal of him in the *Theaetetus*, which on Bartlett's reading is as much concerned with politics and religion as it is with epistemology. Bartlett discerns two different forms of relativism ascribed to Protagoras by Socrates in the course of his discussion with Theaetetus and Theodorus. On the one hand, the sophist is made to espouse a moderate relativism, which allows for objectivity concerning what is good and advantageous. On the other hand, Socrates several times hints that Protagoras went further and posited, 'in his most serious thought' (p. 185), a more radical relativism, which included even the good and the advantageous. Bartlett suggests that Protagoras' motive for adopting this radical relativism was to counter the challenge posed by religion, both to his own business prospects as a teacher and to the very possibility of philosophy itself. On moderate relativism, the knowledge of the good that accounts for wisdom, including the wisdom laid claim to by Protagoras, turns out to be a form of knowledge concerned with the future. But this understanding of