Commentary on Woodruff

Marc Witkin

Professor Woodruff makes use of certain pairs of speeches in Thucydides’ history in an effort to reconstruct the thought of Protagoras. Woodruff holds that in writing these paired speeches, Thucydides gives indirect testimony to Protagoras as pupil to teacher. Whether this testimony is witting (115) or unwitting (117) is unclear, but Woodruff believes it is less biased than that of such “enemies” of Protagoras as Plato, who is unable or unwilling to acknowledge his debt to “the critical and inventive culture that grew on foundations laid by teachers he labeled sophists” (117).

The basis for Woodruff’s proposed reconstruction of Protagoras via Thucydides in this paper is a remark of Aristotle in the Rhetoric (II.24.11). There Aristotle could be taken to suggest that Protagoras’ use of paired speeches to argue both sides of an issue and make “the weaker speech the stronger” hinges on his use of false or illusory eikos arguments. In using Aristotle’s remark about Protagoras to interpret Thucydides, Woodruff says “Aristotle follows the usage of Thucydides and the sophists more closely [than Plato] in treating eikos as a stab at

1. Aristotle’s reference to Protagoras comes without warning at Rhetoric 1402a24-5: “And this is the making of the weaker case the stronger one, for which reason people were rightly disgusted with Protagoras’ profession. For it is false, and not a true, but rather an apparent eikos, and not found in any art except rhetoric and sophistic.” Woodruff maintains that the ‘this’ in question is the reconstruction of Protagorean eikos he proposes in this paper. By ‘this,’ however, Aristotle seems to have in mind the Coraxian habit (1402a17ff) of relying on accepted eikota when convenient, but also attempting to show how unreliable they are when that is convenient.
Marc Witkin

the truth that sometimes misses" (116). However, Woodruff believes Aristotle is "not equipped to recognize the way in which inferences from eikos are actually defeated" (134; cf. 137) i.e., falsified, in real life. Woodruff suspects this deficiency leads Aristotle to underestimate Protagoras. Thucydides' use of "Protagoras' and the sophists' method" of pairing speeches (117-8), and Thucydides' way of opposing eikos statements within those speeches, Woodruff claims, show that Thucydides is so equipped, and that therefore Protagoras probably was as well.

While Woodruff agrees with Aristotle that an eikos is "a general proposition that is true for the most part, but not without qualification" (116, 134, Rhetoric I.2.15), Woodruff's definition of eikos as an "expectation that is reasonable relative to certain background considerations" (135) is his own, not Aristotle's.²

2. In the Rhetoric, eikota are just one of several means to a speaker's achieving what Aristotle calls the persuasive account (to pithanon) (Rhetoric I.2.11). Coherent arguments (enthymemes) are constructed of signs (semeia), certain signs (tekmeria), and examples (paradigmata), as well as of eikota (I.2.14-19). No one of these means alone constitutes the clinching argument Woodruff envisions when he speaks of both the "unreliability" of eikos and the "good or bad faith" in assessing background considerations he says makes "eikos inferences" more or less reliable in Thucydides (cf. note 23 below). Instead, an eikos is a statement proffered because it will appeal to the listener as stating what everyone understands to be the normal or usual course of affairs in matters of the kind under discussion. It is made in a context where both the speaker and his audience are already persuaded the eikos is true as a rule, and no one expects that the background considerations for its being true as an eikos will be articulated. Woodruff's entire discussion, however, conflates eikos and "eikos inferences" (cf. 134: "Aristotle's view is that a statement is eikos if it is a generalization (or perhaps if it is derived from a generalization) [my emphasis]..."). This conflation mistakenly implies that a plausible account offered by a speaker in a particular situation, and an eikos-statement of the normal course of things that speaker may use in such an account, are the same thing. Not only does Woodruff thereby treat eikota in the Thucydidean speeches as equivalent to "predictions," but he also claims that actual outcomes, in confirming or refuting the prediction, confirm or negate the original eikos as an eikos by revealing which were the correct background considerations. As a consequence of these errors, Woodruff in effect makes an eikos as Aristotle understands it indistinguishable from a future singular as Aristotle understands it (cf. "there will be a sea battle tomorrow," De Interpretatione IX). Thus Woodruff's "rule c for Aristotle" (134) does not show, as he claims it does, that Aristotle is "not equipped to recognize the way in which inferences from eikos are actually defeated." Rather it shows that the only way to controvert a statement as an eikos is to show that it is not usually true, as Woodruff notes that Aristotle himself says in Rhetoric II.25.11.

147