

Protagoras — or Plato?

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In an earlier article,¹ I argued that Plato had manipulated the discussion in *Republic* I to move Thrasymachus from a political position he may in fact have held² to the un-Thrasymachean moral position he himself wanted to consider in the rest of *Republic*.³ The move is made in 343 c 3 by linguistic bridging; i.e., by juxtaposing (1) “advantage of the stronger” and (3) “another’s good” as if they were synonymous,⁴ though (1)— as interpreted by (2) “obedience to the ruler’s law”— is in fact quite incompatible with (3); and it is only with (3) that the moral discussion can be opened. The reason is that it alone can apply to everyone, ruler as well as subject, and in it alone “justice” means something like “acceptance of equality” rather than simply “obedience to (any) law”, which is called “justice” — by the ruler.

In the light of this apparently cavalier attitude by Plato toward historical accuracy in using for his own purposes the doctrine of the Sophist, Thrasymachus, it seems worthwhile to ask whether he is similarly cavalier in using the doctrines of other historical personages; and if he is, whether he employs a similar method of bridging. Specifically, does he do this with, e.g., Protagoras in *Theaetetus*?

In one area at least, there is no doubt that he does, though his bridging there may seem, at first glance, to be chiefly verbal. Our pattern seems to recur three times in *Theaetetus*: (1) in the Dialogue as a whole, where the definition of knowledge as perception (151 d-186 e) leads to the definition of knowledge as true belief or judgment, *doxa* (187 a-201 c) — whether accompanied by a *logos* (201 c-210) or not — by means of

¹ “Thrasymachus ... or Plato?”, *Phronesis* 16 (1971), 142-163.

² Namely, “the just” is (1) the advantage of the stronger = ruler, because it is (2) obedience to the ruler’s self-serving law.

³ Namely, the advantage of the virtue of justice to its possessor.

⁴ And this juxtaposition is followed immediately by the outrageous ambiguity in c 5-7 where “injustice” means *both* the advantage of the subject, as being disobedience to the ruler’s self-serving laws (in the first clause, ... τοῦναντίον), and the advantage of the ruler, as being the exercise of *pleonexia* (in the second clause, “and rules over the truly simple and just”).

the discussion in the first segment about what “seems” (τὸ δοκοῦν, δόξα) to individual or community about “the healthful” and “the advantageous”, as well as about “the hot, dry, sweet” and “the just, unjust, holy, unholy” (171 e-172 b, 177 c ff.); (2) in the first segment devoted to the definition of knowledge as perception (151 d-186 e, especially 151 d-179 c); and finally (3), in miniature, within the so-called “Apology of Protagoras” (166 c-168 b).

With respect to (2): 151 e begins with Theaetetus’ definition of knowledge as perception (αἰσθησις). Socrates then (152 a ff.) identifies this definition with Protagoras’ formula: “as things appear to one, they are (for him)”. Thus, he concludes φαίνεται = αἰσθάνεται, φαντασία = αἰσθησις (152 b-c). If *phainetai* is Protagoras’ word, and if *phainetai* = *aisthanetai* is a too specific equivalence for Protagoras, introduced mainly to allow his formula to serve as bridge from the subject to the object of perception (Heraclitean Flux) by suggesting the latter’s lack of stability,⁵ Plato’s problem is clear. Knowing that Protagoras included in “appearances” (φαινόμενα) what he himself (and his readers) would call objects of “opinion” or “judgment” (*doxai*), he had to move, somehow, from one to the other. Indeed, even if *phainetai* is not Protagoras’ only term, and he used *dokei* as well in his original formula,⁶ Plato’s problem would be the same. In that case, having for his own purposes arbitrarily limited the formula at the outset to *phainetai*, he would have had to restore *dokei*

⁵ Though in fact, as we shall see, the formula says nothing at all about the nature of the object and prescind from it.

⁶ We cannot be sure about the term Protagoras used. There seems to be no evidence for *δοκεῖ* alone (unless 169 e 7-170 a 4 can be so considered). But both Arist. *Met.* 1009 a 8 ff. and 1062 b 12-19, and Sext. *Math.* VII 60 (*Vors.* II, p. 262, 30 ff.) use both *δοκοῦν* and *φαινόμενον* together in discussing Protagoras. They may be right. However, this seems to be *their* terminology; it follows, anyway, from Plato’s analysis in *Theaetetus*, as we shall see; and more significant than Sextus *Math.* VII 60 may be Sext. *Pyrrh.* I 216, which implies *φαίνεται*. Moreover, *phainetai* alone appears in *Crat.* 386 a 2 (the *δοκεῖ* of 386 c 3 occurs in an argument *against* Protagoras similar to that in *Theaet.* 170 a ff., which also employs *δοκεῖ*; and it has been elaborately prepared for by the repetition of *δοκεῖ σοι*; *μοι δοκεῖ*, etc. throughout the immediately preceding dialogue: 386 a, 3, 7, 8 f.; b 3, 5, 8). *Φαίνεται* alone appears also throughout the interpretation of Protagoras’ statement as Heraclitean in *Theaet.* 152 d-160 e – at 153 e, 154 a, 158 a – everywhere except in the anticipatory reference to *ὁ δοκῶν* in 158 e 6, and in 158 b, where *δοξάζουσι*, *ὄλωνται*, and *διανοῶνται* refer to the hallucinations of mad-men and dreamers and, beyond that, seem to be preparing for the insinuation of τὸ δοκοῦν in 158 e and 161 c ff.