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THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

The aim of Plato's dialogue is to show the educational aspirations of the sophists, centred around the title character of Protagoras,[1] in the light of Socrates' critical remarks.

In his work, the sophist claims that a virtue, understood as the practical ability to manage one's own household and the state, can be learned. According to Plato, Protagoras assumed that we learn via senses, and perception is equivalent to knowledge, for it always concerns the entity. On this basis, inspired by Heraclitus, Protagoras rejected the existence of a single entity of Eleates and proclaimed the constant changeability of reality. This led him to believe that reality is contradictory in itself and that it is therefore possible to make contradictory judgments about it. Thus, every man who

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[1] He was a Greek philosopher, the most important among sophists (480-411 BC). However, little is known about him. He taught in Athens and was a friend of Pericles. Similarly to Socrates, he was convicted of impiety and for this reason he had to flee from Athens in 411. Only several fragments of his numerous works have been preserved. Protagoras conducted philosophical deliberations, he also dealt with rhetoric, grammar and the theory of education. His work *Truth or Refutations* (*Ἀλήθεια ἢ καταβαλλόντες*) began with the famous thesis: "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not" (the so-called *homomensura*: πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν. Hermann DIELS, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, hrsg. von Walther Kranz, vol. I (Berlin, 1956), fr. 80 B 1, hereinafter cited as DIELS-KRANZ). This thesis was discussed in more detail in the dialogue *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates summarises Protagoras' views.

makes a judgment on the basis of what he sees is right. This thesis found practical application in the art of antilogy, which was the ability to argue for each of the opposing or contradictory claims. It is also possible that Protagoras dealt with the issue of religion. This can be deduced from the preserved beginning of the work *On Gods* (*Περὶ θεῶν*): "Of Gods I can say neither that they exist nor that they do not exist" (περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν).[2] The philosopher had a great influence on the shape of Greek philosophy, in particular on late scepticism.[3]

His protagonist, Socrates, is considered one of the most eminent philosophers of all time. Since he left no writings, he is known only from the accounts of Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes and Xenophon. Almost seventy-year-old Socrates was accused of impiety and spoiling the youth, for which he was sentenced to death. The Platonic academy, Cynics, Cyrenaics and the Megarian school referred to his views. Socrates' importance consisted primarily in giving a new direction to philosophy, which according to his concept was to focus solely on the search for the ideal of a good life, just as before the main area of philosophical considerations were cosmological problems. The Socratic understanding of wisdom: "I know that I know nothing" was related to a specific educational programme. Socrates claimed that he did not teach anything, but only helped the others to make their thoughts more specific. Thus the dialogue, the method of his philosophy, was to serve this particular purpose. Dialogue had a twofold purpose—to reveal a lack of knowledge and to jointly seek a solution. Hence, two methods are distinguished: elenctic and maieutic. The first involved refuting the views and beliefs that are not well-founded. Socrates accepted any form of expression and subsequently showed what consequences, sometimes absurd, would result from it. The maieutical method (lit. "obstetric") was intended to bring to light, by asking questions, the views that have already been gestating in the speaker. These questions often concerned concepts, they were questions about the definition, by which Socrates undoubtedly contributed to the development of dialectics by Plato and Aristotle. It was from him that Plato adopted the concept of knowledge as dialogue and recollection. According to Socrates, virtue is the most important thing, and only virtue is a real good. One should also take care of one's own soul through moral education. Among the virtues, Socrates enumerated wisdom, fortitude, moderation,

[2] DIELS-KRANZ 80 B 4.

[3] See K. NERCZUK, in *Słownik filozofii*, edited by Jan Hartman (Kraków: Krakowskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2006), 362.

piety and righteousness. He also claimed that one cannot cultivate one virtue but omit the others. A special place was given to the virtue of wisdom.[4]

Protagoras is a special dialogue among Plato's works. Its uniqueness is determined by, among other things, its structure. At first glance, the beginning of the work does not differ from other dialogues. The young Hippocrates, who wants to take lessons from the eminent sophist—Protagoras, comes to Socrates' house for advice. Socrates, in his own way, wants to know what the young man desires to learn. Then ensues the characteristic Socratic debate. However, it is only—to use a musical term—a two-voice invention, preceding the great polyphonic work—the fugue. This polyphony will be composed of the voices of the most eminent men of the Greek world of that time, including Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias. The meeting place of these eminent minds is also special. It is not a harbour or a street, but the home of the richest Athenian man, Callias. The use of three forms of expression is also unique: *mythos* (the so-called Great Speech of Protagoras, or the myth of Prometheus), *logos* (a lecture on the meaning of political virtue) and *poiesis* (fragments of Simonides as an exemplification). The first two deserve special attention.[5]

Protagoras uses both in his speech, and he perfectly combines the two in one speech—the Great Speech, in which he explains to Socrates how he makes his pupils into political experts and good citizens (320 D). The first form is *mythos*. It is worth noting that Protagoras chooses it consciously. K. Morgan proves that this myth is strictly Protagorean,[6] telling about the emergence of the society. After the gods created mortal beings from the earth and fire, they appointed Prometheus and Epimetheus to bestow upon them various qualities and abilities. Prometheus gave in to his brother's requests and allowed him to finish the work:

> This was agreed, and Epimetheus made the distribution. There were some to whom he gave strength without swiftness, while he equipped the weaker with swiftness; some he armed, and others he left unarmed; and devised for the latter

[4] See Wojciech J. BOBER, ibid., 375 f.

[5] After analysing the song of Simonides, in further discussion Socrates says: "but I would rather have done with poems and odes, if he does not object, […]. The talk about the poets seems to me like a commonplace entertainment to which a vulgar company have recourse; who, because they are not able to converse or amuse one another, while they are drinking" (*Protagoras by Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956)). With these words Socrates criticizes poetry as a foreign voice in the discussion.

[6] Kathryn MORGAN, *Myth and philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2000]), 132.

> some other means of preservation, making some large, and having their size as a protection, and others small, whose nature was to fly in the air or burrow in the ground; this was to be their way of escape. Thus did he compensate them with the view of preventing any race from becoming extinct.
>
> And when he had provided against their destruction by one another, he contrived also a means of protecting them against the seasons of heaven; clothing them with close hair and thick skins sufficient to defend them against the winter cold and able to resist the summer heat, so that they might have a natural bed of their own when they wanted to rest; also he furnished them with hoofs and hair and hard and callous skins under their feet. Then he gave them varieties of food, —herb of the soil to some, to others fruits of trees, and to others roots, and to some again he gave other animals as food. And some he made to have few young ones, while those who were their prey were very prolific; and in this manner the race was preserved.
>
> Thus did Epimetheus, who, not being very wise, forgot that he had distributed among the brute animals all the qualities which he had to give,—and when he came to man, who was still unprovided, he was terribly perplexed. Now while he was in this perplexity, Prometheus came to inspect the distribution, and he found that the other animals were suitably furnished, but that man alone was naked and shoeless, and had neither bed nor arms of defence. The appointed hour was approaching when man in his turn was to go forth into the light of day; and Prometheus, not knowing how he could devise his salvation, stole the mechanical arts of Hephaestus and Athene, and fire with them (they could neither have been acquired nor used without fire), and gave them to man.[7]

But people could not defend themselves against wild animals. They were also fighting against each other, treating each other "unfairly." All this because they did not have πολιτικὴν τέχνην (322 b 8). Zeus, seeing this, sent Hermes to give shame (αἰδός) and justice (δίκη).[8] These qualities are equivalent to the political virtue.

As previously stressed, this myth is probably not a Platonic but a Protagorean myth. Plato puts it in the mouth of the author. We know that Protagoras wrote *Περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως* (Diels-Kranz 80 A1), which might have served as a source for Plato. This is particularly important in view of the aim that Protagoras wanted to achieve. The obvious reason for rejecting the logos here and choosing a parable as an apparent exposition is the seniority privilege. As we know, Protagoras is older than the other listeners; in fact, Protagoras was Socrates' senior by a dozen years (but Plato deliberately exaggerated the age difference). Another reason is the fact that although mythologizing has its charm, it also "saves" the sophists from the dilemma and allows them

[7] *Protagoras by Plato*.

[8] As in the writing by Heraclitus and Empedocles, Zeus is here the cosmic law, social harmony and Logos.

to take their place "in the middle." It is not accidental that the philosopher made Prometheus the protagonist of the parable, which will be shown to us by its social interpretation.[9] It is immediately followed by an equally consciously chosen argument—*logos*.

One could assume that *mythos* is equivalent to *logos* and vice versa. However, here *logos* is not an alternative but a consequence of the first one. Moreover, both of these forms of expression not only occur in parallel, but the uniform structure of the speech suggests that *mythos* forms the basis of the whole argument. *Mythos*, not *logos*, is the most important proof. *Logos* only lifts and develops what *mythos* predicts. It seems that in this case the stereotypical "from mythos to logos" can be easily changed into "from logos to mythos," which is not foreign to modern science. It is also worth noting that *mythos* is structured here by *logos*. In the opinion of the author of the parable, Epimetheus makes a, perhaps foolish, division and distinction based on his own reason.

In the Great Speech, Protagoras speaks in his own words, as does his protagonist, Socrates. In addition, Plato quite clearly separates the roles: Socrates—the philosophical Prometheus, Protagoras—the philosophical Epimetheus.[10] When Epimetheus persuaded Prometheus to allow him to make division, he asked his brother to inspect after the distribution (ἐπίσκεψαι—320 d7). We observe that Socrates often uses the same verb(ἐπισκέπτομαι) to describe the philosophical "search" (investigation). Most part of the dialogue is devoted to this "search" for the meaning of Protagoras' point of view on the political virtue. On the mythological level, Epimetheus-Protagoras suggests that Prometheus-Socrates should inspect. The "Promethean" attitude, however, has here some Epimethean features (thinking "forward" is based on thinking "backward").

The purpose of the parable as the main argument of Protagoras was to show the listeners that it is he who plays the role of Prometheus in the

[9] We know that in the 5th century there was a "proliferation" of theories concerning the beginning of the society and its organization. Thus, Protagoras belongs to the mainstream. However, it is not known whether the earlier versions included Prometheus. See Kathryn MORGAN, *Myth and philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, 135–136. Such social myths are also present in the comedy *Savages*, which Pherecrates staged during the Lenaias. During this festival the Athenians were "driving away" wild behaviours by portraying them in the comedy. The Athenian comedy responded to the current anti-social behaviour by "making it more fictional." Therefore, the Protagorean myth pushes injustice into the mythological past and thus "makes it more fictional." Hence, it is a compliment to the Athenians, because Protagoras himself was not an Athenian.

[10] See Kathryn MORGAN, *Myth and philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*, 147.

society. However, the incompetent construction of his own myth does not allow it. Why does Prometheus consent to his "backward thinking" brother distributing abilities? He, as the "forward thinking," should have foreseen the consequences.

Socrates was sentenced to death because for various reasons he was considered a sophist. In turn, Protagoras lived long and happily.[11] Like Prometheus, Socrates knew his fate. He knew that if he continued in his desire to help people (in the philosophical sense), he would die, and yet he did that and just as Prometheus in Protagoras' parable, he suffers from the mistakes of Epimetheus (i.e. Protagoras, *ergo* sophists). Considering the division of these roles by Plato and by Protagoras himself, it is difficult to state unequivocally who is Epimetheus and who is Prometheus, and whose Prometheus, Hesiod's or Aeschylus'. This depends on the individual sociological and philosophical preferences of the reader of the dialogue.

That is the social aspect of the myth. Can we also find another plane of interpretation? We may look at the parable from the mythological perspective. Greek mythology gives us many versions of the myth of Prometheus, from which we learn the following about the hero:

1) Prometheus, son of Iapetus, created men in the image of gods (Hes., *Th.* 507 ff.).
2) The son of the Titan Eurydemont or Iapetus and the nymph Clymene (brothers: Atlas, Epimetheus, Menoetius) was undoubtedly the smartest representative of his people. Remembering that he was present when he was born from Zeus' head, Athena taught him architecture, astronomy, mathematics, navigation, medicine, metallurgy and other useful skills, which he in turn passed on to humans. Zeus, however, who decided to exterminate all people but spared them by succumbing only to Prometheus' persistent praying, was angry to see how much their strength and skills develop (Pl. *Ti*. 6).
3) When there was a dispute in Sicyon about which part of the sacrificial bull should be devoted to gods and which should be kept for men, Prometheus was invited to settle the matter. He cut up the bull and made two sacks out of its skin. He put the meat in one sack and hid it under the stomach, the least attractive part of the animal, while in the other sack he put bones hidden under a thick layer of fat, and then asked Zeus to make a choice. Zeus was easily deceived and chose the

[11] Ibid., 152.

sack with bones and fat, still a part for gods, but wishing to punish Prometheus, who laughed at him behind his back, Zeus did not give fire to men. "Let them eat raw meat," he said (Hes. *Th.* 521–564).

4) Prometheus immediately went to Athena and asked her to let him in through the kitchen stairs to the Olympus, which the goddess did. After arriving to the Olympus, he lit a torch from the fiery chariot of the sun, broke off a piece of the glowing firebrand and threw it into an empty interior of a giant fennel stem, then he extinguished his torch and unnoticed by anyone he gave fire to people (Serv. *In Vergilii carmina commentarii* VI, 42).
5) In an act of vengeance, Zeus ordered Hephaestus to make a woman from clay. It was the most beautiful being ever created. She was sent to Epimetheus under Hermes' protection. However, Epimetheus, warned by his brother, refused to accept the gift. Enraged Zeus chained Prometheus to a pole in the Caucasus, where the vulture was eating his liver that was constantly regenerating (Hes. *Op.* 42–105; *Th.* 565–616).
6) Medea gave Jason a bottle of liquid—the bloody red juice of saffron-coloured Caucasian crocus with two stems. This liquid was believed to protect against the fiery breath of bulls, because the flower of such extraordinary power grew from the blood of tortured Prometheus (Apollod. I 9.23).

As we see in the fragments of the myths presented above, Prometheus appears to be an opportunist who openly despises the will of the most powerful of the gods. This is what makes him so popular with people. It is very characteristic trait in the Greek society. Whoever opposes authority quickly becomes the subject of admiration or even worship (Prometheus had an altar at the Academy of Athens, where the Games were held in his honour, in which participants ran with flaming torches from that altar to the city, avoiding their extinction; this race was held during the so-called Lampadoforia, the festivities in honour of Athena, Hephaestus and Prometheus, commemorating the fact that people received oil from Athena, fire and lamps from Hephaestus, and Prometheus stole fire for people from the Olympus[12]).[13] Each attempt by Prometheus to help men was met with gods' wrath, even the act of the creation of the man. It is therefore puzzling why in his parable

[12] See *Słownik mitologiczny*, edited by Alojzy Osiński, vol. I, 1806 and vol. II, 1808 (reprint).

[13] According to the so-called ritualists, this was the case with Dionysus and the Greek tragedy, or Orpheus.

Protagoras presents Prometheus as the messenger and the one who is not only to create the mankind, but also to make its life easier. This is an example of a non-typical (although typical for borrowings from foreign mythologies[14]) inversion. It is even deeper as Prometheus assigns this activity to his brother. He himself plays the role of the Master who only checks (and in this case corrects) the work of his student. Prometheus becomes here the executor of Zeus' will. It could even be colloquially said that they are both on the same side. This is not the only place where Zeus and Prometheus are a "duo." A similar statement can be found in Plato's *Letter II*, in which the author presents other "duos" of antiquity, although this is an ironic statement, which speaks even more for the fact that it is not Plato but Protagoras who is the author of these words.

The above examples reveal that only one thread connects all the heroes of Protagoras' parable. It is a kind of passion of Prometheus, which ends with his eternal punishment—an act of Zeus' revenge.

It is also worth noting the etymology of the names of the heroes of the dialogue. The name Prometheus comes indirectly from the verb προμηθέω, which means "to be cautious," "to care," "to prevent," while Epimetheus derives from ἐπιμηθέομαι—"to wonder after the action, fact." The juxtaposition of these two names is a play on words. It resembles (although it certainly is not) the Orphic symbols, e.g. σῶμα—σῆμα (body—grave), ὕει—κύει (to rain—to bear) etc.

Since we drew attention to the Orphic play on words, it may be worthwhile to consider the features that bear Orphic traits. One such trait we find already at the beginning is the Student-Master relationship. It also appears in the Great Speech. The first such relationship is the relation between Hippocrates and Socrates, then Hippocrates and Protagoras, Socrates and Protagoras, and other listeners and Protagoras. Protagoras teaches by speaking. A similar situation is described in Column X of the Derveni Papyrus, which is considered to be an Orphic document:

> ((Orpheus)) believed that speaking and making sounds is the same thing.
> Speaking and teaching means the same thing.
> One cannot be taught without saying the things,
> Which are taught through words.[15]

[14] For instance, the Iranian inversion.

[15] Based on the Polish translation by Katarzyna Kołakowska.

Socrates, as befits a caring Master, is concerned not to spoil Hippocrates' young and susceptible soul. Similar concerns are expressed by the author of the papyrus in Column XX:

> I am less surprised that those of the people who participated in the mysteries in the city and saw the sacred rituals do not understand them. Because it is impossible to simultaneously hear and learn what is being said. And those who received the sacred rituals from those that perform ((this)) art are worthy to be admired and arouse pity. To be admired, because, by believing that, before taking part in the mysteries, they know, having taken part, they leave before they learn, and they do not ask questions, as if they understood something of what they saw or heard or learned. And to evoke pity, because they do not have enough money to pay, but they also go away thoughtless.
> They hope that, before they take part in the mysteries, they will learn, and having taken part, they leave, also deprived of hope.[16]

Although it is true that the above fragment concerns mysteries, the procedure is similar. In order to be initiated and learn the secrets of the ritual, one has to pay. The same applies to the teaching of "political wisdom." A fragment of the papyrus clearly criticizes trading in mysteries. In *Protagoras*, Socrates criticizes "selling" of knowledge, which in his opinion is unlearnable and therefore unsellable. The title character himself admits that he understands Socrates' concerns,[17] and explains that the art he is practicing has been cultivated for a long time, and states:

> I, too, say that the art of the wise men is ancient, but those who had cultivated it, the ancient men, fearing of what discourages people in it, covered it under false appearances and some hid behind poetry, such as Homer, Hesiod and Simonides, and others hid behind the sacred mysteries and oracles; those from the circles of Orpheus and Musaeus [...].[18]

Socrates compares Protagoras to Orpheus already at the beginning of the dialogue:

> When we entered, we found Protagoras taking a walk in the cloister; and next to him, on one side, were walking Callias, the son of Hipponicus, and Paralus, the son of Pericles, who, by the mother's side, is his half-brother, and Charmides, the son of Glaucon. On the other side of him were Xanthippus, the other son of Pericles, Philippides, the son of Philomelus; also Antimoerus of Mende, who of all the disciples of Protagoras is the most famous, and intends to make sophistry his profession.

[16] Based on the Polish translation by Katarzyna Kołakowska.
[17] *Protagoras*, 316d.
[18] Cf. PDerv., Col. XX, 7-8.

> A train of listeners followed him; the greater part of them appeared to be foreigners, whom Protagoras had brought with him out of the various cities visited by him in his journeys, he, like Orpheus, attracting them his voice, and they following.[19]

No wonder that Pericles himself succumbed to this charm and commissioned Protagoras in 444 to write the laws for Thurii, a well-known Orphic centre.[20]

After a thorough analysis of Protagoras' Great Speech, we conclude that Plato has risen to the heights of his writing skills. It is the main focus of the entire dialogue. Due to its closed structure, it could be a separate work. Plato perfectly combines and interweaves *mythos* with *logos*, showing that they are inextricably linked. Although Protagoras is the author of this ingenious statement, a detailed analysis of the text reveals how subtly Plato makes a tribute to his Master, Socrates, who, while listening in silence, becomes the main protagonist in the parable told by his protagonist.[21] Of course, there is no shortage of irony, typical of dialogues. Protagoras is convinced that he is Prometheus, while for the listeners and for us—the readers—it is no longer that obvious.

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[19] *Protagoras*, 315a.

[20] Thomas R. MARTIN, *Starożytna Grecja od czasów prehistorycznych do okresu hellenistycznego*, translated by Tomasz Derda (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 1998), 158–59.

[21] One could argue that this was a deliberate attempt to ridicule Protagoras in an extremely intelligent way. Plato's attitude towards Protagoras is evidenced by a fragment from *Theaetetus:* "Shall I tell you, Theodorus, what amazes me in your acquaintance Protagoras? [...] I am charmed with his doctrine, that what appears is to each one, but I wonder that he did not begin his book on Truth with a declaration that a pig or a dog-faced baboon, or some other yet stranger monster which has sensation, is the measure of all things; then he might have shown a magnificent contempt for our opinion of him by informing us at the outset that while we were reverencing him like a God for his wisdom he was no better than a tadpole, not to speak of his fellow-men-would not this have produced an over-powering effect? For if truth is only sensation, and no man can discern another's feelings better than he, or has any superior right to determine whether his opinion is true or false, but each, as we have several times repeated, is to himself the sole judge, and everything that he judges is true and right, why, my friend, should Protagoras be preferred to the place of wisdom and instruction, and deserve to be well paid, and we poor ignoramuses have to go to him, if each one is the measure of his own wisdom? Must he not be talking ad captandum in all this? I say nothing of the ridiculous predicament in which my own midwifery and the whole art of dialectic is placed; for the attempt to supervise or refute the notions or opinions of others would be a tedious and enormous piece of folly, if to each man his own are right; and this must be the case if Protagoras Truth is the real truth, and the philosopher is not merely amusing himself by giving oracles out of the shrine of his book. [...]" (*Theaetetus by Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (London: Collier Macmillan, 1892)).

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THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

Summary

Protagoras is an exceptional dialogue of Plato as it uses two modes of expression: *mythos* and *logos*. Both are used by Protagoras in *Great Speech*, but the first one seems to be the most important. Protagoras chose the mythical mode of expression when he described to Socrates how he makes his pupils good citizens and politicians. The famous sophist told the story about two brothers: Prometheus and Epimetheus. It is easy to notice that Protagoras identifies with the clever Prometheus. However, the attentive reader can notice that Prometheus from Protagoras' myth made a decision with fatal consequences. He entrusts his brother Epimetheus with a too responsible task. If Prometheus had been clever he should have predicted the dramatic consequences of his decision (see the etymology of his name). It might have been a conscious and intentional effort of Plato who wanted to ridicule Protagoras, the main opponent of Socrates. The resulting effect is so strong because Protagoras, who identifies with Prometheus, told the myth by himself in which Prometheus is in fact the less clever of the two brothers.

Key words: Plato; *Protagoras*; myth; Prometheus; "Great Speech."

Translated by Rafał Augustyn

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