

HOMO FABER, HOMO SAPIENS, OR HOMO POLITICUS?
PROTAGORAS AND THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS

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I

WHEN NIETZSCHE CALLED MAN THE YET UNFINISHED ANIMAL, he echoed a phrase that had remote origins. In classical German philosophy, the idea of man as a *Mängelwesen*, a lacking and underdetermined being, was shared by Herder, Kant, and even Hegel and Marx, among others. It was brought to clear expression by Schiller when he wrote: "With the animal and plant, Nature did not only specify their dispositions but she also carried these out herself. With man, however, she merely provided the disposition and left its execution up to him."¹ What distinguishes man from animals, according to these thinkers, is the unfinished character of the gifts he is endowed with by nature; at the same time, this underdetermined quality is responsible for human openness and adaptability. To play on the myth of the birth of eros in the *Symposium*, one could say that for man poverty is resourcefulness.

In *L'évolution créatrice* (part 3), Bergson argues that, unlike animals repeating the automatisms of their species, man constantly re-creates his existence. Bergson contrasts animal instincts, which are highly specialized and fulfill their particular function perfectly but have an immutable structure, with man-made machines, which are inorganic and imperfect but can be fully grasped and changed at will, and open up an indefinite field of operation. Artificial tools allow man to inhabit a world of his own making, a world that can be modified and enriched indefinitely. In such a world, man's intelligence is devoted to action, and action is inventive. The definition of man as *homo faber*

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¹Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," in *Essays Aesthetical and Philosophical* (London: Cassino, 1884).

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thus acquires the dignity that was typical of *homo sapiens*, for making is no longer opposed to knowing.

The twentieth century has seen efforts to root this understanding of humans as the unity of morphological poverty and practical ingenuity in biology. Gehlen, the exponent of one of the remarkably few full-fledged philosophical anthropologies of this century, who quotes and discusses some of the aforementioned authors,² has recourse to the findings of embryological, biological, and ethological research (Bolk and Lorenz first and foremost) to develop a philosophical view of man as a being whose "instinct deprivation" affords him a special position in nature among mammals. Man, lacking specialized organs and instincts, is not naturally adapted to specific functions; he is poorly equipped, has no particular means of defense or flight, is born naked, and takes several years to reach a maturity which is granted other animals in an incomparably shorter period of time. Further, man is not consigned to one specific environment; he builds his home in the most diverse geographical and climatic conditions. He has to make nature artificial, to transform it into a handy second nature so arranged to limit his vulnerability and compensate for his biological lack of resources. This is the ground for man's receptivity and "world-openness," a phrase that Gehlen adopts from Scheler.³

Therefore man depends vitally on his initiative and action to survive. Man must take charge of his destiny in a sense that no other animal must; and the way he does so is by building a stable background, institutions, and codified habits providing shelter from the infinite stimuli, threats, and provocations of nature. Man cannot be simply the rational animal of the traditional definition because this does not account for the peculiar relation between his body and his mind.

² Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch* (Wiesbaden: Quelle und Meyer, 1940); for an English translation (from the 1974 German edition), see *Man*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 25, 73.

³ See Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Darmstadt: Reichl, 1928). For Heidegger in the same years world-openness, the defining character of Dasein's relation to the environment (*Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1927], 210), is contrasted with inorganic beings (that are *weltlos*) and animals (*weltarm*) in the seminar of 1929-30, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1983), 350. The phototropism of the flight of bees is the example discussed there.

In a view like this, intelligence is essentially practical; the hands are no less important than the mind. Hands allow for a pivotal form of mediation, hence of distance and removedness, between our intentions and aims and externality. Man does not build a house the way a bird does a nest. Man's projects replace animal instincts; man plans, that is, directs his energies to what is removed and not present in time or space. To return to Gehlen's *Der Mensch*, the conclusion we read there is that unlike animals, living in the present, man lives in the future, as an anticipatory (*vorsehend*) being. For this reason, he suggests, man can be characterized as Prometheus, a name which literally means foresight or forethought.⁴

Marx had developed his contrast between bees and architects along the same lines. Men are capable of rational design and thought-out projects; animals are content to satisfy their immediate needs. Human work is free from physical needs and the given surroundings. To take this contrast a step further, whereas animals reproduce themselves, man can produce the whole of nature, as we read in the 1844 manuscripts. Nevertheless, Marx also criticized Hegel's definition of man as the working animal; he thought it necessary to contextualize the description of work. For work is not only the source of wealth and the symbol for man's conquest of nature, but also the source of alienation; the understanding of work we keep in view changes as do the quality and conditions of labor.

Hence, man is not by nature the working animal or *homo faber*. In this connection, in the *Das Kapital* Marx writes that Aristotle's definition of man as a citizen by nature is as adequate to classical antiquity as Franklin's definition of man as tool-maker is to "yankeedom."⁵ Without an adequate historicization of the notion of work and of the relative definition of man, one risks hypostasizing one's epoch's understanding into an abstract ideological construct.

⁴ *Man*, 25; see also Gehlen, "An Image of Man," in *Anthropologische Forschung. Zur Selbstbegegnung und Selbstentdeckung des Menschen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1961).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, in *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 23 (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1983), 346 n.: "Aristoteles' Definition ist eigentlich die, daß der Mensch von Natur Stadtbürger. Sie ist für das klassische Altertum ebenso charakteristisch als Franklins Definition, daß der Mensch von Natur Instrumentenmacher, für das Yankeetum."

This paper analyzes the myth of Prometheus in Plato's *Protagoras*.⁶ It takes its bearings from the necessity to proceed to a similar qualification and contextualization, without which the significance of practical intelligence and of one of its favorite champions, Prometheus, is bound to remain essentially ambiguous and escape us. We will contrast Protagoras' Prometheus with other pictures of Prometheus, especially Greek, and show the function and purpose of the invocation of Prometheus on Protagoras' part. Understanding the essential and defining traits of the figure of Prometheus will allow us to see to what degree modern characterizations of man have their antecedents in classical Greece.

II

Exactly who is Prometheus? What does he do for us humans? What do we mean when we talk of Promethean qualities in humans? Is the fire brought to us by Prometheus the means for human industry to manipulate and mold matter, or is it the symbol for the light of *logos* that finally dawns on humans? If intelligence has to be taken as practical and cunning, is it also scheming and deceitful as was Prometheus in Hesiod's *Theogony*? If practical intelligence guides our interaction with the environment, does it amount to technical command? If the answer is affirmative, is *technē* a natural individual quality, a knack or science that one is predisposed to by nature, as classical Greek thought would have it;⁷ or is it the subversion of nature's order and an imposition of a human order upon it, as modernity seems to hold? And further: is *technē* sufficient to assure a well-organized community, or does it need to be supplemented by a specifically political dimension, which is not part and parcel of our Promethean

⁶The best, richest, and most comprehensive overall account of the myth of Prometheus can be found in Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); English translation by Robert M. Wallace, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1985), especially 299 and following. See also Jean Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs. Etudes de psychologie historique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1965), chapter 4; and Jean Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne, *Les ruses d'intelligence: la Metis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); English translation by Janet Lloyd, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

gifts? If Prometheus symbolizes mankind's emancipation, what does he emancipate us from? From nature, from our nature, or from a temporary material condition which happens to be to our disadvantage? These are some of the questions we have to keep in mind as we approach different versions of the myth.

The myth of Prometheus has been one of the most enduring and successful stories that men have told each other about themselves and their origin. Its meaning, however, has changed over time in significant ways. To us, Prometheus conjures up human beings' exit from the state of tutelage and minority in which, to reverse Kant's words, they have *not* put themselves. With Prometheus' gifts, mankind can finally take charge of itself and its destiny through the arts and sciences and overturn its predicament. Prometheus is in this view the monument to rebellion and legitimate deceit spurred by his love for mankind. He symbolizes the victory of civilization over nature, of ingenuity and self-reliance over a hostile fate or uncaring gods;⁸ or, the noble example of the self-sacrifice and generosity of a titan over the lack of precisely what the Olympian Zeus was meant to exercise, *epimeleia*, concern and care for us.

Often we do not realize that we identify Prometheus less with the Hesiodic or the Aeschylean titan than with such modern, proto-romantic hero as we find, for example, in the Goethean dramatic

⁷Arts have natural boundaries given by the needs they are meant to satisfy (for example, Aristotle, *Politics* 1.8–9; chrematistic is a perversion of nature for it does not satisfy natural needs). In Aristotle, making is subordinate to using as production is subordinate to action; the end of a product continues and integrates the end of nature. Artisans, when bringing about products, confer a given *eidōs* to matter and thus work in the service of nature. Their knowledge of the form to be produced is imperfect, however, for it is the users who know the function and form of the product. Part of the incompleteness of art for Aristotle is determined by the difference between maker and user; when subject, means, and end coincide, we have action, a complete activity, not production. If labor is rooted in a natural individual predisposition to an art, it must be divided according to the capacities of each and the needs of the city; this is why politics is the architectonic science governing all production for both Plato and Aristotle. See the chapter on work and nature in Vernant.

⁸Hegel expresses this view in exemplary manner in his comments on Prometheus' theft of fire for men, and on the origination of the arts: "In this way the Greeks have called their attention to every progress of human education and preserved and shaped it in myths for consciousness." See his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl M. Michels, vol. 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969–71), 38.

fragment of his early, *stürmisch* period. In this fragment, Prometheus is the negation of the principle of authority, the rebel with a just cause: the promotion of autonomy and freedom for himself and his creatures. His Zeus is a violent tyrant, not the prototype of the Hesiodic just god or of the serene and happy Epicurean (or Winckelmannian) gods; but Prometheus is also far from the titan of the traditional versions of the myth. He denies being a god;⁹ yet he is an absolute demiurge.¹⁰ He defiantly shows Zeus his creation, forged according to his own image, against which Zeus is now impotent. Interestingly, Prometheus' own image symbolizes precisely the race that can "suffer, weep, enjoy, and cherish itself," without awe or respect for Zeus' race.¹¹

Goethe radically transforms the myth into a violent father-son conflict. He makes Prometheus say that only his holy, young, and ardent heart,¹² his individual passion and goodness, have saved him from the titans (while he himself is none other than a titan in the Greek myth); from death (while he was immortal in the Greek myth and, at least in Hesiod, it was only after Pandora's scattering of evils to humans that death came to mark the gap between men and gods); and from slavery (which he did not escape in the Greek myth until Heracles killed the eagle and liberated him from the chains fettering him to the rock of Caucasus).¹³

⁹ "Ich bin kein Gott und bilde mir soviel ein als einer"; *Goethes Werke in zwölf Bänden* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1981), 3:110.

¹⁰ As such he had been compared by Shaftesbury, in the *Advice to an Author*, to the figure of the poet. Tertullian had affirmed that the Christian God was the true Prometheus, for he had created humans from the earth (*Apologeticum* 18.3). The Christianization of the figure of Prometheus is widespread in the Renaissance: Bovellet, Charron, Budé, Pomponazzi, Ficino, all identify Prometheus with the inner fire or *inquietudo animi* that makes us transcend finitude and elevate the earthly man into the heavenly man; Prometheus is an exclusively positive model, representing contemplation, philosophy, and wisdom. Compare Emmanuel Faye, *Philosophie et perfection de l'homme. De la renaissance à Descartes* [Paris: Vrin, 1998], 103–50, and Eugene F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958], chapter 4, "The Wisdom of Prometheus."

¹¹ "Sieh nieder, Zeus/auf meine Welt: sie lebt!/Ich habe sie geformt nach meinem Bilde/ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,/zu leiden, weinen, zu genießen und zu freuen sich/und dein nicht zu achten/wie ich!"; *Goethes Werke in zwölf Bänden* 3:117.

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What Goethe's vision seems to imply is that when the existence of humans is at stake, the tragic hero can only be someone who does away with all the illusions and superstitions that the gods have used to subjugate humans. Accordingly, in an enlightened move which is almost a premonition of Feuerbach, and which had a tremendous impact on Lessing, Jacobi, and the *Spinozismusstreit* in Germany in the last third of the eighteenth century, Prometheus liberates men from what makes them children and beggars: "stolid hope." Let us recall that "blind hope" is precisely the *pharmakon* that Prometheus gave mortals in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in order to spare them the sight of death.¹⁴ Whereas, then, for the Goethean Prometheus hope stands as one of the main obstacles on mankind's way to self-reliance, for the Aeschylean Prometheus there is no such problem with hope, for there is no question of humans aspiring to such autarchy. Humans need to think in advance, to care and be concerned about their future, precisely because of their ignorance of the future. Prometheus *knows* the future, even better than Zeus, and it is only because he knows the threat befalling Zeus' recently acquired power but refuses to reveal his secret that Zeus eventually unleashes his thunderbolt against him.¹⁵ For Aeschylus, humans cannot be Promethean alone; they are Janus-faced, containing in themselves both Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus, responsible for careless deeds or omissions ensuing in the most destructive consequences for mankind. In other words, anticipation and belatedness, foresight and afterthought, are equally present in humans, and hope is the other side of the ignorance of the future. Here Prometheus has emancipated humans from fear of the unknown, the exclusive passion which gripped them at the thought of what is yet to come. He has not made them autarchic, but he has made it possible for them to shape and direct their future.

It is the enlightened image of Prometheus which Leopardi chastises, in a Rousseauian vein, when he denounces the barbarism of the

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civilization brought about thanks to Prometheus, which he, Prometheus, has to acknowledge retrospectively in his wager.¹⁶ Much ado—strife, pain, and rebellion—for nothing, concludes Leopardi. But Leopardi does not simply repeat Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* or Bacchilides' fifth *Ode*, that, "for mortals, the best thing is not to be born and not see the light of the sun." Prometheus does not give us a pitiful veil to cover the meaninglessness of human existence but the inane bustling about trying to silence the nineteenth century version of it: the despair of *tedium vitae*.¹⁷

We could continue with numerous variations on a common theme across western cultures and literatures and across centuries. If we turn to the Greek tradition, we notice that the myth is used and exploited in different directions and by various authors, following Hesiod and Aeschylus. In the Platonic dialogues, Prometheus also has a remarkable variety of functions. In the *Gorgias*,¹⁸ in the myth of final judgment, Socrates has Prometheus prevent men's foreknowledge of their death, which is the main reason for the ill-judgment of the dead in Kronos' age. In the *Statesman*,¹⁹ Prometheus is invoked but plays a subordinate role: the Eleatic Stranger's mention of the traditional account of his theft of fire and of Hephaestus' crafts has no real bearing on the myth of the reversed cosmos. In the *Philebus*, by contrast, Socrates says that Prometheus, "or one like him,"²⁰ gave humans not only fire, but also the most valuable cognition, that all things consist of a one and a many and have in them a combination of limit and unlimitedness.

However, the largest and most far-reaching use of the myth in the dialogues is not made by any of Plato's supposed spokesmen but by

¹⁶ "La scommessa di Prometeo," in *Operette morali*, ed. Sergio Solmi (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 52–61.

¹⁷ The inane bustling to which Leopardi refers helps us understand a Promethean disease, one type of obsessive neurosis which pushes some people to keep the future in check. Trying to plan or predict all possible developments of a situation so that nothing will find them unprepared is a way for them to manage fear of the unexpected and transform it into active feverish preoccupation for what is within their reach. Once things take a wrong turn, they blame themselves for lack of foresight. Here Prometheus is not an emancipator but a block, manifesting a misconstrued sense of the self, of its magnitude and boundaries.

¹⁸ *Gorgias* 523e.

¹⁹ *Statesman* 274d.

²⁰ *Philebus* 16c.

Protagoras. The identity of Prometheus in the dialogues seems more than elusive; it lends itself to several manipulations. In a remarkable passage in the second letter, Plato illustrates the mutual attraction of wisdom and power celebrated by poets and people in general when they bring together, among others, Anaxagoras and Pericles, or Zeus and Prometheus. "The poets also show how in some such cases the two characters became enemies—in others, friends—how in some cases they were first friends and then enemies."²¹ Protagoras will afford an egregious example of manipulation of this dangerous liaison, as we will see.

One of the many implications of this passage is that Plato's theory and practice with regard to this myth are very free: it shows no trace of piety, either toward the established mythical and religious tradition or toward the very strife among the gods, which is bent to different uses in different contexts. Plato is by no means an exception: there is a gulf between the picture of Prometheus in Hesiod and that in Aeschylus (not to mention the further difficulty that of the trilogy devoted to Prometheus only the *Prometheus Bound* is extant). In other words, the myth is not to be found in an original blueprint which would be later rephrased in different forms but was from the outset a rich and multiform account of the genesis of mankind. Not only of mankind, but of mankind in its relation to the gods. For it is clear as early as Hesiod that humans and gods have the same origin,²² and that humans at first were utterly imperfect and not yet separate from the gods.

What is common to most Greek versions of the myth is that Prometheus took it upon himself to separate mortals from immortals and to improve the human condition. He did that through two deceitful and mischievous artifices, the sacrifice of the ox and the theft of fire. According to yet other versions of the myth, typical of Hellenistic times, Prometheus shaped humans by modeling earth and water: humans come from mud.²³ But, whether Prometheus modeled mud or endowed an already formed being with gifts, the demiurgic creation of humans always goes hand in hand with the theme of strife and violence. Humans owe their origin to two acts of injustice perpetrated by

²¹ *Second Letter* 311b.

²² *Erga* 108.

²³ Compare Apollodorus and Pausanias in Karl Kerényi, *Die Mythologie der Griechen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997; reprint of the 1951 edition), 1:157.

a titan against the king of the Olympian gods. Zeus, in turn, has just acquired the power to rule thanks to the help of titans like Prometheus and after violently usurping his father's throne, as Aeschylus never tires of reminding us in his emphasis on the contingency and chance of the current Olympian rule. In the *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus' last words lament that Zeus' violent hand makes him suffer unjustly. But Zeus is not only unjust. No less importantly for our purposes, he is not omnipotent, for he is subject to Necessity; neither he nor the arts can change what the three fates and the remembering furies have determined.²⁴

In Aeschylus' play, Prometheus incurs Zeus' rage and punishment for his theft of fire. Kratos, Might, asks Prometheus what good it is to him to have foreknowledge, as his name implies, when he offers his gift to the "ephemeral," the creatures who live but one day.²⁵ Hephaestus, for his part, reminds Prometheus that only his love of mortals is responsible for his current torments.²⁶ What we are not told is why Prometheus loves an ostensibly wild herd of helpless beings. We are led to imagine, however, that Prometheus sees in them more than their present appearance: the possible development, the future, of a different condition.

In Hesiod, Prometheus' theft is responsible for the irreversibly growing distance between men and gods, and between men and nature, and marks the introduction of the utmost degeneration in the age of iron, with its toil, pain, and old age. Work as fatigue is one of Pandora's evils, sent to humans by Zeus as revenge upon Prometheus; from now on, no goods will be available without efforts, beginning with life itself, no more born of the earth but of a woman's travail and bound to end in pain and death. In Aeschylus, instead of being simply the impious cause of troubles to men, Prometheus is the tragic master of his own actions. The strife does refer to the titan's love for men, but men remain in the background, and the strife takes place among Prometheus, Zeus, and Fate—that is, at a divine level. The tension between *ēthos* and *daimōn* does not result in the wrongheaded hubris of a human pretending to rise above his condition: Prometheus' hubris (as Might calls it at line 82) is self-righteous, and his pain is the

²⁴ "Moirai trimorphoi mnēmōnes t'Erinues"; *Prometheus Bound*, l. 516.

²⁵ *Prometheus Bound*, l. 83.

²⁶ *Prometheus Bound*, l. 28.

immortal and moving pain of a god punished by an arrogant, jealous, and unjust god.

Later on, Prometheus explains that he has succored the mortals in their plight and given them thought. Men had eyes but did not see, ears but did not hear; they were like dreams. Prometheus gave them the first cognition, number, written signs, memory, the ability to subdue animals for their toil and to sail ships, medicine, divination of prophecies, and dreams. In a word, he gave them thinking.²⁷ Prometheus concludes his impassionate speech by saying that man owes to him all of the arts.²⁸ Unlike later in Plato and Aristotle, there is no distinction here between arts and wisdom; all knowledge has a practical use. For his knowledge, Prometheus is called by Hermes a "sophist";²⁹ but his cognitions have not helped him escape the consequences of his deeds.³⁰

In Sophocles' *Antigone*,³¹ in turn, the chorus advances a picture of man as the most wonderful of things (*deinos* is an ambiguous praise, though, meaning both terrible and terrific), for his "many resources."³² In this picture, man is a protagonist. The hiatus between gods and men supposedly initiated by Prometheus has reached the point that in this stasimon the gods have disappeared from the scene. Man is left entirely to his own devices—to his wits, but, more importantly, to his responsibilities. In this connection, it is significant that here the arts are inferior to the laws, the *nomoi*, which make associated life possible: man is at first the technological animal, but in view of becoming the political one.³³ In a move that will prove very important for Protagoras, *homo faber* gives way to *homo politicus*.

With all the differences we have seen, the lowest common denominator shared by all mentioned versions is human beings'

²⁷ *Prometheus Bound*, ll. 443–5.

²⁸ *Prometheus Bound*, l. 506.

²⁹ *Prometheus Bound*, l. 944; compare l. 62 and l. 1039.

³⁰ Might tells Hephaestus: "now encase the other, that he may learn that, for all his arts [literally "despite being a sophist"], he is no match for Zeus"; *Prometheus Bound*, l. 62.

³¹ The *Antigone* was first represented in 441, that is, a few years before the encounter between Socrates and Protagoras portrayed in Plato's dialogue would have taken place.

³² Or *pantoporos*—cunning, ingenuity, and thinking which help him subjugate animals, sail ships, cure ills, and face the future without fear. See *Antigone*, ll. 330–59.

³³ *Antigone*, ll. 360–9.

development out of their primordial being, a gain or loss that is clearly perceived as irreversible.

III

The myth of Prometheus told by Protagoras in the homonymous Platonic dialogue has none of the dramatic strife and violence that colored the titan's determination, his willful choice to incur the consequences of his actions, and the divine punishment, in Hesiod and Aeschylus. Also, Zeus is not hostile to humans; since he cares about their preservation, one is even left wondering why Prometheus had to steal fire and the arts from the gods for the sake of humans in the first place. In any event, the perspective is human, not theological. The invocation of the gods is instrumental: the account is directed to the origin of our race alone, and the gods are not the point of the myth (which would not be too surprising coming from Protagoras, who claimed that we cannot know them³⁴). The gods are not unjust, revengeful, jealous, scheming, and mischievous, or even sublime in their suffering. Rather, the impression is that they are pretty careless, absent-minded, and prone to letting things slip out of their hands. Xenophanes could hardly have found a more anthropomorphic projection of all too human weaknesses; but Protagoras does not seem to take them too seriously himself.

To review the context in the dialogue, Hippocrates, the son of a well-to-do family, a young, ambitious, even impetuous boy (his name means "horse-power") can barely be restrained in his desire to go and meet Protagoras. He has just heard that the celebrity is in town; he goes to Socrates hoping that he might help him become a student of Protagoras. Socrates, who has known about Protagoras' presence in Athens for two days, is singularly unimpressed; he shows no trace of eagerness or interest to see him. He is not bothered by being awakened before the break of dawn by an adolescent seemingly out of control, who bangs his stick on Socrates' door (yet who is not at all silly or devoid of wits, as his answer at 310d5-6 shows); what irritates Socrates is Hippocrates' naiveté, his seduction by the sophist's fame.

³⁴ See Herman Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1922), 80b4; Theaetetus 162d-e; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions*, 9:51.

Hippocrates wants to become wise; but, it turns out, he does not know what a sophist is, and yet he is willing to entrust his soul to Protagoras without realizing the risks involved.

Socrates and Hippocrates walk to Callias' house, knowing that Protagoras spends most of his time indoors. Socrates has to convince the eunuch guarding the closed gate that they are not sophists; they are let in. Socrates then describes the scene and the people present ("mostly foreigners").³⁵ He highlights Protagoras' vanity and the subservient way listeners follow him around (like Orpheus, he enchants the people he gathers through cities). Finally, Socrates approaches Protagoras on behalf of Hippocrates. Protagoras' reply is abnormally long and self-centered: he tells Socrates that the sophist's art is ancient and that it arouses jealousy and hostility. This is due to the youths' abandoning their families and associations with others to follow strangers,³⁶ not to what sophists teach (Socrates had just alerted Hippocrates to the care with which one must examine the content of teachings before being systematically exposed to them, for the soul is like a vessel which is affected by the fluids poured into it). According to Protagoras, sophistry is so ancient that even Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, Orpheus, and countless others are to be considered sophists. They concealed their art and their motivations only out of fear of the odium they would attract if they had admitted they were sophists.

³⁵ *Protagoras* 315a7. After the mention of various sophists competing with Protagoras, Socrates goes on to enumerate several Athenians, including the sons of Pericles and all the guests (with the exception of Aristophanes) who will convene at Agathon's house in the *Symposium*. If there are obvious reasons why the *Protagoras* has often been read along with the *Gorgias*, the literary and thematic connections with the *Symposium* are very blatant, if not emphasized in the literature I am aware of. Agathon's liberality to his slaves and the forthcoming attitude toward the guests (all Athenians familiar with one another), the open gate, the night, the relaxed feisty atmosphere which has none of the air of intrigue, confrontation, and harshness of the *Protagoras*, are some of the traits making the *Symposium* a sort of foil to the *Protagoras*. In both dialogues the most fascinating myths are told by the enemies of philosophy and Socrates' adversaries, Aristophanes and Protagoras. Most importantly, eros is defined by Socrates/Diotima almost exactly the way Protagoras characterizes humans before Prometheus' intervention: poor, shoeless, and homeless (203d). Unlike Protagoras' primordial man (and like Socrates), eros is also tough and shriveled. In view of the myth, one could say that Protagoras at first sees in man the son of Penia (poverty) alone, and only later introduces Poros (resourcefulness), in the two subsequent stages of the arts and political wisdom.

³⁶ *Protagoras* 316d.

What is worth remarking here is that Protagoras does not mention Prometheus among the many predecessors of his art. At the same time, the beginning of his exchange with Socrates is interspersed with references to discretion and prudence. Protagoras does need prudence and caution; he does not present himself as a sophist out of honesty, nor does he believe that he can rely on a supposedly established and honorable tradition respected by most (Socrates had made Hippocrates blush by making him admit to something shameful, that he would present himself to the Greek world as a sophist). Protagoras is cleverer than his predecessors, for admission is a better precaution than denial. Significantly, he begins by thanking Socrates for his "discretion"; the corresponding word is a verb, *pro-mēthein*, literally "thinking in advance or forethought."³⁷ And Protagoras is like Prometheus; however, he is not moved by philanthropy, for his dispensation is strictly professional. Unlike Prometheus, he does not give his gifts freely; they are meant for wealthy and ambitious young men who are willing to pay him. Like Prometheus, Protagoras promises to make them better, giving them hope to improve their condition; he brings light to otherwise helpless, blind, and deaf men. He does that through *euboulia*, sound judgment about domestic as well as political affairs.³⁸

Socrates, who has been quite irritated by Protagoras' long speech and has tried to pin him down, asks him if he means that he can teach the "political art."³⁹ Upon hearing that that is exactly what Protagoras claims to teach, Socrates immediately raises his doubts. He could not be more blunt and less cautious. His argument has two points: Athenians are known to be wise; and they sharply distinguish between technical matters, on which they admit only the opinion of the experts who master the art, and political affairs, which are not susceptible of the same treatment. When it comes to the management of the city, anyone can give advice, even poor and low-born people.⁴⁰ Besides, if virtue could be taught, who would be better equipped with virtue than

³⁷ Protagoras 316c5.

³⁸ Protagoras 318e5.

³⁹ Protagoras 319a4.

⁴⁰ Protagoras, whom Socrates had compared to Orpheus, had just said that "the many, needless to say, perceive nothing, but merely sing the tune their leaders announce"; Protagoras 317a4-6.

the sons of Pericles, whom everybody respects as virtuous and who has exerted his best efforts at passing on his virtue to them?⁴¹

Protagoras is not wrong in valuing caution and prudence. Athenians may very well be wise, but Anaxagoras had been indicted and exiled a few years earlier on charges of impiety, precisely for going against popular religion with regard to the nature of the sun and the stars.⁴² And in fact, according to Diogenes Laertius,⁴³ Protagoras himself would soon thereafter see the persecution of his writings, which were burnt and censored in Athens. Just as Anaxagoras had, if apparently to no avail, Protagoras enjoyed the protection of Pericles, who had asked him to draft the constitution of the Panhellenic colony of Thuri; so he had less to fear than others. On the other hand, part of the indirect fascination exercised by Protagoras on young Athenians was the liberation from the constraints and guilt of ancestral beliefs, in the name of human beings' taking charge of their political situation. That he realized he had to weigh what he would say is quite obvious.

Another reason why Protagoras had to watch his tongue was the trouble he might incur if the potentially oligarchic nature of his teaching were brought to full light. He has to show that what he teaches is not openly incompatible with the customs of Athens. And here he cannot thank Socrates for his discretion, for it is Socrates who now calls Protagoras to defend himself against the charge of subverting the customs of the Athenians, who might be less dumb than Protagoras makes them out to be. What Socrates is implying is that the Athenians do not consider good judgment the prerogative of an elite; and if Protagoras is going to teach an elite, that is going to represent a potential threat to the Athenian laws. Differently stated, Protagoras has to find a way to show why virtue is neither by chance nor by nature but rather can be taught, and why consequently for the wealthy youths his services are worth large sums, without admitting that his teachings are meant to favor or manipulate the future ruling class. The resulting tension between the outcome of the myth of Prometheus, namely that we all share in virtue, and what it set out to prove, namely that virtue can be taught, will be Protagoras' murkiness and reticence about his teaching. Finally, Protagoras must not come across as too hubristic,

⁴¹ That Socrates does not really consider Pericles a good statesman follows from what he argues in the *Gorgias* (515c-17c).

⁴² Diogenes Laertius, 2:8 and 12.

⁴³ Diogenes Laertius, 9:52.

while at once claiming, before Athenians, to succeed where Pericles had failed. As we shall see, his solution involves many explicit and implicit decisions and moves, among which perhaps the most important is the intentional cloudiness and ambiguity he introduces in his continuously shifting notion of virtue. Art has one determinate subject-matter; it grows out of a natural individual predisposition, which is why there are experts at it; its rules can be formalized and taught, and thus it is easy to test claims to its possession; all of which can hardly be said of *euboulia*; yet, at the end of his speech, Protagoras will once more compare virtue to flute playing.⁴⁴

In reply to Socrates' objections, Protagoras tells his myth. For the reasons just stated, we will have to pay very close attention equally to what he says and to the tacit implications of his speech.

IV

The first thing to notice is that Protagoras does not treat his myth the way Socrates sometimes treats his: Protagoras' myth is not an allegory, nor is it eschatological or supposed to convey profound truths inaccessible to human discourse and argument, like many of the myths of origins we find in the Platonic dialogues. This obviously *is* a myth of origins, but there are no primitive, chthonian, or superhuman forces otherwise inexplicable. Nor does Protagoras appeal to a venerable tradition, for he presents his myth, in keeping with his contempt for tradition and his view of himself as cleverer than his predecessors, as his own creation. For Protagoras, the myth is simply a more pleasant way to make his point, ostensibly of more lasting and impressive impact on his audience, whom he considers as a group of young and naturally subordinate auditors.⁴⁵ The myth is meant to explain or illustrate the "reason," as Protagoras says at the end of the myth,⁴⁶ why virtue is teachable. In sum, for Protagoras there is no difference between *logos* and *muthos*, for they are both tropes of rhetorical discourse.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ See David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 216–27.

⁴⁵ *Protagoras* 320c3.

⁴⁶ *Protagoras* 323a4 and 322d6.

According to Plotinus, myths present as separate in time things which actually coexist but differ in rank-order or powers.⁴⁸ Protagoras actually does something different: he gives a diachronical version in a mythical past of the genealogy of humans, who are the result of a long formation process. But what the myth is meant to prove is not so much a rank-order or a difference in powers, but the reason why ambitious Athenians could use his teachings. Paradoxically, it will seem to prove the opposite, as we will see. If that can be doubted or if the importance of the contrast between the universal possession of political virtue and the need for Protagoras' teachings can be downplayed by the *logos* which complements the myth, what is beyond doubt is that Protagoras eventually proves that virtue is not an art, or is, at best, a very peculiar kind of art. But let us proceed with due order, if not with Promethean caution. According to Protagoras:

There once was a time when the gods existed but mortal races did not. When the time came for their appointed genesis [*chronos . . . heimarmenos*, literally "the destined time"], the gods molded them inside the earth, blending together earth and fire and various compounds thereof. When they were ready to bring them to light the gods put Prometheus and Epimetheus in charge of assigning to each its appropriate powers and abilities.⁴⁹

We are told that the gods existed before mortals did; what we are not told is why gods should want to create mortals at all. We are told that gods shaped some living matter inside the earth; what we are not told is whether the natural elements predate the gods, and above all why there should be an appointed time to serve as deadline to the gods themselves, or why the molding should take place in a dark sort of womb, which makes for a rushed and blind, if not mindless, creation, as we will see in closer detail in a moment. The picture we have so far is that of a creation over which the gods are not the ultimate power; and in fact the mention of a destined time seems to make them subordinate to Fate. If on this score Protagoras can be said to be

⁴⁷ Contrast this with, among other myths, *Timaeus* 29 on the *eikos muthos* on the gods and the origins of the cosmos. Compare Perceval Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1930), 184.

⁴⁸ *Ennead* 3.5.9. Plotinus' own interpretation of the myth of Prometheus at *Ennead* 4.3.14 is unusually fanciful; it is used as evidence of the gifts coming to the world from above and of the superiority of contemplative life.

⁴⁹ *Protagoras* 320c8–d6, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1992).

consistent with what Aeschylus has Prometheus say about Zeus' subordination to Necessity (*Anagkē*), in general his is not a very pious account of the gods.

What undoubtedly *is* mindless is the next move, occasioned by the gods themselves: why they put Epimetheus and Prometheus in charge is far from clear. And Prometheus is not very true to his name either when he lets Epimetheus assign the powers to mortals; in fact, as a savior of mankind Prometheus proves entirely inadequate, as we will see shortly. Unlike in Hesiod, where all Epimetheus does is to disobey his brother's injunction not to accept gifts from the gods—a clear sign of just how highly his brother considers Epimetheus, who will actually accept Pandora and disseminate all evils to mankind—here Epimetheus asks Prometheus to leave him in charge of the distribution of the gifts; Prometheus agrees. Of this supposed negotiation between the two brothers there is no trace in Hesiod;⁵⁰ it is a very clever and subtle transformation of the myth, one that serves Protagoras very well. Epimetheus begs his brother; he persuades him. Persuasion, then, is at the very origin of humanity; and that Prometheus is persuaded is also highly significant. It reveals the limits of his intervention and his weakness, a weakness that turns him into the complementary side of Epimetheus. But it also reveals that persuasion can vanquish even the wily and cunning, and may be more powerful than forethought (the foreknowledge of Aeschylus' Prometheus is definitely absent in Protagoras' telling).

Epimetheus is sensible and balanced at first, but eventually he betrays the ground of his name. If his brother's name stands for "careful," "fore-thought," and prudence, his stands for "care-less," "after-thought," and imprudence.

Epimetheus' distribution of powers presupposes a clear vision of the totality of nature as a realm in which resources are limited and the general state is one of war. Epimetheus' task is to find a way to strike a balance of powers such that all species will be preserved. He tries to avoid extinction and mutual slaughter by assigning strength without quickness to some, and quickness to the weak. Size, habitat, natural means of attack, multiple reproduction, and so forth, are the compensatory measures of which he makes use when he takes precautions to avoid extinction of species. Notice that he reasons *sub*

⁵⁰ Compare *Theogony* 511 and *Erga* 84–5.

specie aeternitatis: entirely neglecting individuals, all he does is for the sake of the kinds.

If, consequently, nature is a state of war of each being against all others, but at least works for the preservation of species, nature turns out to be particularly nasty and hostile toward the human species as a whole, not just to its individual members. We have the paradoxical situation in which humans, who are later said to have a kind of kinship with the gods and to worship them, are the only beings who realize the hopeless predicament they are in, and are the worst endowed of all beings. For Epimetheus now realizes that he has used up all powers "on the non-reasoning animals."⁵¹ As a result, man is left "naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed."⁵² It is now that Prometheus, at a loss to find means for humans to survive, steals fire along with the arts from Hephaestus and Athena.⁵³

Since this is a very important passage, we should dwell on it yet somewhat further. The first thing to notice is that Protagoras completely bypasses the first of the two Promethean crimes against Zeus in the traditional myth, the deceit in the ox sacrifice, which enraged Zeus and prompted Prometheus' later theft of fire. For Protagoras the theft of fire and the arts are necessitated by Epimetheus' absentmindedness;⁵⁴ they are not Prometheus' extreme remedy against Zeus, who only makes his appearance in the myth after Prometheus' theft.

Second, nature does not take care of us the way it does of other animals; worse still, nature seems openly bad to us, for humans must contrive means to defend themselves from it, be constantly on the watch, and work against nature in order not to fall prey to its threats. Humans would obviously be better off if they had developed instincts comparable to those of other animals.

Third, arts and tools are vital for human self-protection from nature. If humans have no instincts, they do seem to have something

⁵¹ "eis ta aloga"; *Protagoras* 321c1.

⁵² *Protagoras* 321c5–6.

⁵³ Athena is not supposed to stand for the ability to wage war; Athena is the goddess of crafts such as weaving, potting, ploughing, and so forth. That Athena had been helped to be born armed as a warrior out of Zeus' head by Hephaestus is immaterial here. War, as the antagonistic intention to quarrel by armed force operations (that is, not as the state of war that nature is), will only be introduced later since it presupposes the distinction between friends and foes and is therefore part of politics. See *Protagoras* 322b5.

⁵⁴ "all on account of Epimetheus"; *Protagoras* 322a1.

which predisposes them to the construction and use of tools: they have a physical nature which allows them to have a control over things. An intelligent bird or fish, if such existed, would not be in a position to exercise such control for they lack precisely the biological organ which gives us a grip on things: hands. According to Anaxagoras, the possession of hands makes humans superior to animals. When Aristotle later objects to Anaxagoras that humans have hands because they are intelligent, and not vice versa, he will emphasize that the erect posture along with the opposable thumb allow for a grip of things which is of incalculable importance and which reflects the nature of human intelligence.

The conclusion drawn by Aristotle is twofold: it is directed, positively, to prove that the hand is not like an instrument but like an instrument for instruments. Animals are restricted and confined to the unique or narrow functions they are allotted through their endowments; they cannot change their means of defense or attack, or their fur or shoes, and adapt to change. By contrast, the human hand is at once "claws, talon, horn, sword or spear."⁵⁵ Aristotle also argues, negatively, against Protagoras' view of nature as an *ante-litteram* Hobbesian state of war. In his view, nature has predisposed things in view of the best. The hand is an example thereof: it is amazingly prensive and plastic, it can grasp virtually anything whatever, that is, adapt itself to different forms. For this reason, Aristotle compares the hand to the soul and the intellect.⁵⁶ the human beings' lack of specialization is not a plight but a strength, for it opens up a broad range of possibilities—to use and know anything in principle. For Aristotle, in other words, man is the technological species only because he is the intelligent species.

For Protagoras, on the contrary, the arts are the first grounding stone of civilization. But in the passage we just read, Protagoras qualifies humans in opposition to all nonreasoning animals. He seems, in other words, either proleptically to anticipate what he still has to show—that man acquires intelligence through the arts given him by Prometheus—or to be making the point that whereas animals have instincts, humans do not but have reason instead. In the first case, Protagoras speaks like an absentminded Epimetheus carelessly anticipat-

⁵⁵ *De partibus animalium* 4.10.687a23 and following.

⁵⁶ *De anima* 3.8.431b29–432a2.

ing a decisive point; the suggestion here would be that the mind develops thanks to the arts. In Primo Levi's words, the hand has awakened the mind from its slumber, and guides it the way a dog directs its blind master.⁵⁷ In the second case, Protagoras makes unwitting use of what Hegel would call determinate negation, which however conflicts with the picture of man as having no endowment at all. Humans have a not-yet, not a nothing: they have not yet actualized what is definitely present in them as a potentiality. Humans miss all the basics but are not an absolute void, a purely lacking being. For if reason takes the place of instincts, humans have a plastic nature capable of infinitely many forms.⁵⁸

Three consequences follow from this picture. One is that the Hesiodic idea of a golden age, endlessly degenerating down to Prometheus' theft, Pandora and the iron age, in which piety and

⁵⁷ *La chiave a stella* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 163. Compare Henri Focillon's words from "Éloge de la main," in *Vie des formes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1943): "The hand organizes touch for experience and for action. It teaches man how to master extension, weight, density, number." By creating "a concrete universe independent of nature" (109), "it leaves everywhere a human imprint. . . . Educator of mankind, it multiplies men across space and time" (128).

⁵⁸ Hephaestus, having to obey Zeus and to chain Prometheus to the rock, goes against his own will; he has no ultimate command over his hands; his technical powers, in other words, are only instrumental to the sovereign god's will. For this reason, in Aeschylus' play, Hephaestus complains of the destiny he has been allotted—to which Kratos replies that all gods have one, with the exception of Zeus who is above all specialization (Zeus is here analogous to the description of humans seen above in contradistinction to animals, which have specialized instincts). Hephaestus curses his hands (l. 45). Hephaestus is known as the ambidexter (Hesiod, *Theogony* 571, 579; *Erga* 70). Dexterity is obviously a powerful instrument, but the quality of the ultimate employment of all dexterity depends on the master, which sets the end. When the gods, Prometheus, Zeus are identified in one agent and must produce a sensible creature, and the demiurge is the sole responsible creator, as in the biblical and Judeo-Christian genesis, the problem of the relation between hands and mind becomes quite acute. And if hands and mind do not cooperate, the result can be quite disastrous, as in Rilke's parable about God and his hands. Here the hands are independent of God's will; and God is portrayed as an old and clumsy man, whose hands are beyond his control. They began the modeling of mud but man, the result of their careless and truly Epimethean creation, was flung through space prematurely. When God realized it, he got mad at his hands, which blamed each other for the mess. The hands can begin, but without God nothing can be completed; and humans are the most incomplete animals. See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1904).

justice have abandoned men, is reversed. Arts become a quasi-historical product, and the emancipation from nature is a proto-Enlightenment progress which Protagoras champions. Justice is as strongly juxtaposed to violence as in Hesiod. But violence is not brought about by Eris and human recklessness and impiety; it is rather the essence of nature, which we must fight, subjugate, and exit (*exeundum e statu naturae* is also Protagoras' slogan). Justice, in turn, is not projected back in a mythical past of which we have lost sight but is actual and alive in the present political community; and this grounds the superiority of *nomos* over *phusis*, of humans over nature. But this time the gift is not thanks to Prometheus but to Zeus, as we shall see in a moment.

Second, Protagoras is strangely silent about the disanalogy between natural and human violence. The arts are for fighting nature and wild animals. It is in order to fight animals that humans try to band together. "The outcome when they did so was that they wronged each other, because they did not possess the art of politics."⁵⁹ This story suggests that the violence of nature is irremediable, whereas human violence is just the result of a negativity, the human lack of political sociability. In other words, the hostility of nature does not disappear but is at best contained once we acquire the arts; nature cannot be persuaded. Once we become political, however, the hostility of humans to each other can be controlled rationally. On this score, Protagoras would say *animal homini lupus*, not *homo*: humans are not by nature hostile to one another in the same sense as nature is hostile to humans.

Third, whether reason for the use of arts has been surreptitiously introduced or is only an anticipation of what is to follow, it still remains at the level of basic wisdom, of self-preservation, only in the sense of individual autarchy, so to speak. For it must be supplemented with something else, namely political wisdom, constituted by justice and shame. Justice is missing in nature; human society is founded on justice. But justice is almost as elusive as human nature. Is human nature the pure absence of all powers, or is it the plasticity that enables us to acquire all powers? Specifically in the myth, one could ask what counts as human nature: the indifferent living matter molded by the gods, the negative product of Epimetheus' distribution,

⁵⁹ Protagoras 322b6-8.

the recipient of Prometheus' gifts, or the political animal made possible by Zeus' intervention? For Protagoras, the necessity of culture seems to follow directly from human nature; and yet, the nature of humans is not the good, ordered, cosmic, let alone partly divine, nature of so many of Protagoras' predecessors and followers, down to Aristotle. The gap between nature and convention cannot be filled, for all of the human powers have been acquired after the distribution of Epimetheus.

Justice calls for analogous qualification. If political wisdom is bestowed on us by Zeus, at this point we should ask, in what way is justice distributed to all? Must we all possess it, or simply value its importance, on pain of extinction of human communities? In order to answer this question, let us resume the exposition of the myth.

Thanks to the arts, humans can have religion, speech, housing, clothes, shoes, blankets, and farming. But there were yet no cities. Humans lived in isolation, for when they tried to band together for self-defense from wild beasts they wronged each other because they missed the "political art."⁶⁰ Afraid that the whole race would be wiped out, Zeus sends Hermes to bring justice and shame to humans, so as to make possible order and friendship in cities. Hermes asks Zeus if he must distribute shame and justice the way the other arts had been, namely, according to the principle of division of labor (one practitioner of medicine would be sufficient to a community), or to all. Zeus replies that all should have a share in shame and justice. "Death to him who cannot partake of shame and justice, for he is a pestilence to the city," says Zeus.⁶¹ Thus the myth ends.

Here Protagoras suggests that whatever form of community is made possible by Prometheus is still a prepolitical form of association. The institution of a city does not stem from nature but departs from it. Justice is crucial to any association, as even Socrates, with his example of the gang of thieves in the *Republic*, would grant. However, the "political art" is at first simple sociability. And it differs

⁶⁰ Protagoras 322b8.

⁶¹ I disagree with Giuseppe Cambiano (*Platone e le tecniche* [Bari: Laterza, 1991], 7 and following), who takes this to imply that everybody is thus compelled to participate in politics and that Protagoras' doctrine is democratic. Participation in justice is not compulsory, but pretense to it is what we must appear as valuing, as we shall see in a moment. The question is not one of rights, but of social conventions.

fundamentally from other arts, which only help the human species in its relation to animals, to elementary autarchy.⁶² But that elementary autarchy itself is only actual in a political community. In other words, order and even self-preservation are not made possible by the arts, for the arts require concord, cooperation, and some form of division of labor in order to be effectively employed.

Again, Protagoras presupposes what the myth must prove: that Prometheus' gifts would go lost had Zeus not been "afraid of the disappearance of the human race."⁶³ Protagoras is suggesting that, thanks to Prometheus (and not to Hermes, as in the tradition), we acquire religion (along with speech and so forth), hence what he calls a share in the divine, and we become pious. Thus we reward the gods, who need humans and their worship just as much as humans need them. All of which amounts to saying that the myth invokes the gods to explain why humans worship them.⁶⁴ Another striking consideration we should underline is that Hermes seems to need to remind Zeus of how the arts were distributed, as though Zeus did not care or even know.⁶⁵ Finally, politics is autonomous from religion: piety is still prepolitical; our relation to the gods is not sufficient to ground our relation to one another.

The surface of Protagoras' myth is in a certain sense more pious than in Aeschylus: Zeus, rather than being unjust and hostile to humans, gives them the indispensable virtues that allow them to live together. But at a deeper level, Protagoras seems to have made a mockery of Olympian religion. Zeus does not need to take revenge on Prometheus' crime, for his interests are the same as his: the preservation of the human race, but now clearly for the sake of the survival of the gods. Zeus differs from Prometheus just as we saw Protagoras differs from Prometheus. Whereas Prometheus acts out of philanthropy, Zeus' motives are self-interested. There is no final reconciliation in Protagoras' myth, as apparently there was in the third play of Aeschylus' trilogy, for there is nothing to reconcile. Prometheus has now completely disappeared and left room for Zeus; without Zeus even Prometheus' gifts would be of no use. With Zeus, we have finally

⁶² *Protagoras* 322a1.

⁶³ *Protagoras* 322c1.

⁶⁴ Compare Patrick Coby, *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment* (London and Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1987), 55-6.

⁶⁵ *Protagoras* 322c3-8.

entered the proper ground of politics, which is not philanthropy but self-interest properly tempered by and within the *polis*. This is where *euboulia* will be needed and where Protagoras can be of help.

It turns out that the arts had been introduced to mark human beings' exit out of nature and to provide a first illustration of the need for and the superiority of art over nature, but politics now is the master art (if an art it is, which remains to be seen). And the myth culminates in this art, which is also called political virtue; for Protagoras, the myth of Prometheus is now the myth of Zeus. As a result, over and against later interpretations, in Protagoras' telling Prometheus never was anything like the conqueror of nature through work or fire.

If this consideration of religion and our relation to the gods were not baffling enough, Protagoras has concluded the myth with what appears to be the problem which he had set out to solve, the unteachability of virtue. Socrates had objected to Protagoras that virtue *cannot* be taught: if virtue now is a gift of Zeus to all, why does it *need* to be taught? Why do we need Protagoras? Is this myth the inept and short-sighted pleasantry of an old man who has lost his lucidity? Does Plato want to caricature or ridicule Protagoras?

V

There is at this point a transition, which Protagoras presents as smooth and natural but which is not, from the myth to the point that Protagoras desires it to have conveyed. The myth shows, so argues Protagoras, that when the arts are involved, only the opinion of the professionals will be valued. But when it comes to political virtue, which "must proceed entirely from justice and temperance,"⁶⁶ people accept advice from anyone. Protagoras admits that Socrates had said this much; but immediately Protagoras goes on to show that political virtue is available to everybody not because it is unteachable but because all humans share in it. To be precise, they share in justice and "the rest of political virtue."⁶⁷ Thereby, Protagoras has considerably shifted the meaning of the "other" virtue accompanying justice. Shame and justice were Zeus' gift in the myth; *sōphrosunē*

⁶⁶ "*sōphrosunē*"; *Protagoras* 323a1-2.

⁶⁷ *Protagoras* 323a6-7.

(moderation or self-control) is now said to constitute political virtue along with justice. While shame and *sōphrosunē* may be exchanged, one could use some argument supporting their substitution, which does not go without saying.

For example, Aristotle would not agree that shame should be considered a virtue, for it is a feeling and not a disposition, and more important it is a kind of fear of disgrace; we praise the youth who are prone to shame, but only insofar as they are learning to become virtuous.⁶⁸ The point is that one feels shame before others when one's actions are a manifestation of a not yet trained character. In the *Protagoras*, it is Hippocrates who blushes when Socrates makes him ashamed. Shame is socially induced and only on those who look to others as judges of their own virtue. Likewise, in the *Symposium*, when Phaedrus talks about the pride and shame before the beloved as Love's guidance to do virtuous deeds,⁶⁹ he does not see the problem that the beloved might be base or vicious and induce corresponding acts. His theory of eros and virtue thereby lends itself to Pausanias' immediate criticism.

That now Protagoras introduces, along with justice, the "rest of political virtue" is not the sign that he uses a loose notion because he is a sloppy thinker and occasionally flawed rhetorician.⁷⁰ In the argument following the myth, Protagoras seems intent on constantly covering up what he has just established. In particular, the connotations of political virtue vary depending on the "other" virtue with which justice is in turn coupled: shame, decency, moderation.

That Protagoras intentionally befuddles what he is saying seems apparent once we consider his next statement. When someone claims to be a good flute player but is not, all he does is to attract derision and contempt; moderation (*sōphrosunē*) is here to be translated as decency, and decency commands truthfulness. But *sōphrosunē* does not always command truthfulness: "when it comes to justice and the other political virtue, even if they know that someone is unjust, if that person publicly confesses the truth about himself, they will call this truthfulness madness. . . . They will say that everyone ought to claim to be just, whether they are or not . . . since one must have some trace

⁶⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.15.1128b10-21.

⁶⁹ *Symposium* 178d.

⁷⁰ It is no wonder that Socrates finds this murky and loose notion of virtue puzzling. His perplexity will spur the second part of the dialogue.

of justice or not be human."⁷¹ It would seem that if lying about one's lack of political virtue is advisable, one may very well lack political virtue, even if one should not admit it; and if art and virtue differ, it is first and foremost in one's cautious public attitude toward virtue, that is, at the level of appearance and speech. Contrary to this expectation, Protagoras draws a very different conclusion: while arts are mastered by experts, everybody has some share of virtue. The evidence that virtue is shared by all, and that it is not natural but taught, continues Protagoras, is the attitude which everybody, including the Athenians, have toward punishment as deterrence.⁷²

Thus, Protagoras has surreptitiously turned virtue into a matter of degree, a move which will come in very handy in his conclusion ("I happen to be more advanced than others"). Men cannot be virtuous but in society; but the degree of possession of virtue depends directly on the standards and customs of the city one lives in. In this way Protagoras has avoided the conflict with the Athenian demos and accomplished his task. For he has now shown that all he does is to improve and increase the degree of virtue which citizens already possess. But the only way in which he can have made his point is by having reduced justice to convention and to the social constraints of each city, which inflicts punishment precisely when its customs are not respected, and by having made the command over one's social appearance more important than the possession of justice.

What does justice mean in this passage? The respect of other people's opinions and concerns about the political community and of the customs' authority. In other words, one is just, and ought to claim one is, whether one is or not, because otherwise one would be undermining the foundations of society. That is why one would be a pestilence to the city. What one actually thinks and wills is obviously a different matter; anyway, admitting to going against the customs is lunacy, for that is the only thing a city cannot tolerate. We have thereby a justification of Protagoras' own procedure: when it comes to justice, we must be as elusive and appear as law-abiding as we can. We do need to be taught to be just; however, we need to be taught not for justice's sake but for appearance's sake and to avoid punishment. If justice means to conform to society's customs, justice is itself

⁷¹ *Protagoras* 323b2-c2.

⁷² *Protagoras* 324b-c.

dissociated from and subordinated to a higher form of virtue, moderation or self-control, which directs and advises its uses.

Now we can see why Protagoras shifts from shame to moderation, and why justice correspondingly changes its meaning. Shame is instrumental to social compulsion and to moral habituation; by being the inwardization of social norms, what we today would call "conscience," it is the source of external respect and law-abiding behavior, and thus it helps bring about virtue. But once the customs have been inwardized, they may become an inert and indifferent possession in us and thus sheer exteriority, so that one is free to find a way around their strictures. In this sense, shame is for learners for Protagoras, too; but moderation (*sōphrosunē*), which advises pretense to respect for laws, is the self-control of those who know better and are therefore superior to the constraints of society. In fact, on Protagoras' understanding moderation is now the inner subversion of shame. It is what advises us as to how to stay out of trouble when the laws demand abidingness and breaking them cannot go unnoticed. Protagoras assumes an implicit distinction between popular virtue, which must be shared by everybody, and the statesman's virtue, which at once presupposes it and departs from it. The shift from shame to moderation reflects this distinction. In this shift, the emphasis on public appearance has accordingly shifted from the others qua the teachers and judges who possess virtue to the others qua witnesses whom one should take care to pretend to treat as equals and not to offend. If there is a difference between the popular virtue induced by customs through fear of punishment and of which everybody is in principle a teacher and the moderation mastered by statesmen, this intentionally obscured transition from virtue as shame to virtue as moderation is the necessary premise for it.

Notice that what is entirely missing from Protagoras' words on the teaching of virtue is all reference to the student's active involvement in learning, that is, all reference to a self and to the good or end that the self values and is interested in acquiring (all maieutic, one could say). For this reason Protagoras' students are not encouraged to develop certain dispositions; they are treated as passive matter to be shaped or to be endowed with gifts. Given these presuppositions, it is little wonder that the virtue discussed by Protagoras is so paradoxical.⁷³

At this point in the dialogue Protagoras turns to the example of education in cities as a good illustration of his point. When teaching and instructing children, mothers, nurses, tutors, and the father himself take great pain to exhort the child to imitate good models or, if the child resists, to straighten him out with threats and blows as if he were a twisted, bent piece of wood.⁷⁴ This explains why the sons of the wealthy⁷⁵ quit school at the latest age. "When so much care and attention is paid to virtue, Socrates, are you still puzzled about virtue being teachable?" As to the objection regarding Pericles' sons, for Protagoras it is clear that it is a matter of natural predisposition, just like for the other arts: the example is that of flute playing.⁷⁶ If everybody can make progress because everybody is naturally endowed with some share of virtue, then the conclusion drawn by Protagoras is: "If there is someone who is the least bit more advanced in virtue than ourselves, he is to be cherished. I consider myself to be such a person, uniquely qualified to assist others in becoming noble and good."⁷⁷

With the flute playing example not only has Protagoras again revoked the distinction between arts and political art or virtue, and contradicted the earlier denial of natural disposition to virtue.⁷⁸ Also, with his last point, the story is not ended but brought back to its beginning. For Socrates' original question still stands: in what does Protagoras improve his students? At what do they become better and better?⁷⁹ In the end, Hippocrates has surely heard, and probably knows, as little as at the beginning about the exact nature of Protagoras' teaching. But the reason why Protagoras moves back and forth between art and virtue is his intention to obscure the distinction

⁷³ Social compulsion and habituation are the basis for Protagorean virtue. In the myth of Er in the *Republic*, the worst evils await the one who had chosen tyranny; in his previous life, he had lived in a well-ordered regime but had acquired virtue "by habit, without philosophy [*ethei, aneu philosophias*];" *Republic* 10.619d. This unreflected character of virtue has very little to do with Aristotle's habit, which requires awareness and choice and is a disposition to purposes, that is, the opposite of the passivity and conformism that Protagoras and Socrates imply.

⁷⁴ This is, I take it, the distant origin of Kant's definition of humanity: a warped wood.

⁷⁵ "the most able, i.e., the richest"; 326c3-5.

⁷⁶ *Protagoras* 327b8.

⁷⁷ *Protagoras* 328a8-b3.

⁷⁸ *Protagoras* 323c5-6.

⁷⁹ *Protagoras* 318a-d.

between the virtue induced by customs through fear and that of the prospective statesmen, with whom his students identify themselves.

Protagoras is not a sloppy thinker or an oblivious old man, as I was saying, because in this way he has avoided Socrates' snare. But he has done something even more important: he has hinted to the ambitious young Athenians who aspire to rule the implicit tension between the virtue inculcated by customs and the good judgment needed in order to pay lip service to it without appearing to spurn it. The only indirect evidence of what he teaches can be summarized thus: he teaches that virtue and art are not identical, and that one can aspire to rule and change conventional and social norms only by mastering them. He teaches how to appear just and conform to the customs of the city while pursuing one's ends without seeming subversive. Nothing is more needed than *euboulia* for this.

VI

Protagoras' recasting of the myth shows that he combines Prometheus and Zeus in himself. His use of the myth exemplifies his manipulation of, and promotion of independence from, a given authority or tradition. Unlike Prometheus, however, he is not willing to sacrifice himself; he uses his arts to fight Socrates, and has been able to make use of Prometheus because he is more properly an earthly Zeus, interested in maintaining his power over his audience.

Protagoras has defended himself more successfully than the inconsistency and discrepancy between the myth and the *logos* made it appear. Has he also managed to persuade Hippocrates? Whether rhetoric can exercise its power when philosophy piles up hurdles in its way is a question that can only be judged at the end of the whole dialogue and in direct connection with his subsequent exchange with Socrates.

Has Protagoras addressed Socrates' question about virtue? Here the answer must be negative. Protagoras has not only made the relation between justice and the rest of virtue elusive; more important, he has turned virtue into what Socrates would call demotic virtue, only to show that it can be manipulated by his own students. This plurivocal and ambiguous notion of virtue is what Socrates will press him on in the remainder of the dialogue.

In sum, Plato did not give us an edifying dialogue ending with the philosopher's victory over the nonphilosopher. Making Protagoras so clever and purposefully evasive is a tribute to Plato's masterful art of writing; making Socrates so pushy in his questions about virtue in the rest of the dialogue, in turn, shows why philosophy cannot rest content with rhetoric.⁸⁰

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