An analytic reading of the myth (and of the logos)

1. The Protagoras is one of Plato’s most celebrated dialogues. It tells of an encounter between Socrates and Protagoras, with many topics discussed, not always in an orderly way; and if some of these topics clearly refer to Plato’s own interests (for instance, unity of virtue), others can be probably traced back to the sophist. This holds especially true for the first part of the dialogue, when Protagoras presents himself to Socrates as a teacher of ‘political art’ in private and public affairs (31d-319a), and Socrates contends that such an art cannot be taught by raising two doubts: 1) in public life, in the Assembly, when the Athenians debate on ‘technical’ matters, they accept the advices of the experts, and of nobody else; on the contrary, when they have to deliberate on politics, everyone is entitled to express his or her own opinions, on the assumption that everyone is expert (wise, σοφούς, 319b) – therefore there is no need of teachers (319a-e); 2) in private life, the best citizens care to educate their children in everything but not in that virtue, on the assumption, evidently, that is a natural gift and not something that can be taught (319c-320c)\(^1\). Protagoras replies with a long speech (the ‘Great Speech’, as it usually called, 320c-328d), telling first a myth (320c-322d)\(^2\) and continuing with a logos (322d-328d)\(^3\). The myth, a readjustment of the Prometheus’ story, will serve to answer to the first doubt\(^4\); the speech will repeat and confirm what was already established by the myth (322d-324d) and also answer the second doubt (324d-328d).

This ‘Great Speech’, and the myth most notably, is one of the most important sources at our disposal on the sophist Protagoras. It is not a surprise that many efforts were devoted to establish its value as

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\(^{1}\) These two doubts are not identical: the first implies that all are experts, the second does not.

\(^{2}\) On the use of mythos see 320c 4, 6; 324d5.

\(^{3}\) On the use of logos, see 324d6.

\(^{4}\) In short, the myth retraces the key stages in the history of humankind, starting from the well-known events surrounding Prometheus, the beneficent daemon. When the time had come to generate mortal animals (including humans), the gods entrusted Prometheus with assigning each species qualities that would allow it to survive and prosper. Prometheus (literally, ‘he who understands first, who foresee’) left the task up to his brother Epimetheus (‘he who understands afterwards’), but the latter forgot humans. To make up for his brother’s mistake, Prometheus stole fire and technical expertise from the gods, allowing humans to approach the world of the gods, learn how to speak, and master the technologies required to solve practical life problems – the provision of food, clothing, and housing. However, despite this progress, humanity risked becoming extinct, as it lacked political wisdom: only this wisdom would allow humans to organize themselves into social groups and live together, so as to protect themselves from wild animals and natural dangers. Humans were trying to save themselves by coming together in cities, but ‘when they gathered together, they committed injustice against one another…so that they scattered once again and were destroyed’. Finally, fearing that the human race would meet extinction, Zeus despatched Hermes to distribute Justice (dike) and Shame (aidos), not in the same way as with the other forms of arts (whereby, for instance, one physician is enough for many patients), but to everyone indiscriminately.
an historical testimony, and several hypothesis were advanced. In the *logos*, which follows the myth, it is made mention of Pherocrates’ *Savages*, which took place in 420 bC (327d3-4), whereas Pericles’ sons, who died in 429 bC, are introduced as alive (328c6-d2): now, ‘this contradiction cannot be reconciled with possible utterances of the historical Protagoras’ but appears to be compatible with Plato, ‘as he seems not too concerned with absolute historical truth’\(^5\). The historical value of the myth (which is presented as strictly interchangeable with the *logos*, 320c) is more controversial. Only the great German scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, for what I know, took into consideration the hypothesis that it was a direct quotation from Protagoras, on the assumption that the *Protagoras* was one of earliest dialogues with Plato simply collecting views from other thinkers and recording Socrates’ arguments with the sophists\(^6\). To be sure, it would be too much to assume that Plato simply incorporated a long extract from an opponent’s work into his own text; the sophisticated quality of the text suffices to show that this is an untenable reading\(^7\). Indeed, ‘Plato was surely too great an egoist for uncreative borrowing’\(^8\). Likewise, also the opposite option, that this is an entirely Platonic invention, has not found many supporters, apart a very interesting paper of Gerd Van Riel, who has recently claimed that the text is ‘Plato’s own work’ and ‘expresses a number of anthropological points which represent Plato’s own doctrines’ (2012, 145)\(^9\); more precisely the myth serves not so much to introduce Protagoras’ views as to establish an anthropological point on which both participants in the discussion agree. To be sure, Van Riel does not exclude that this myth could somehow, literally or reshaped by Plato, come from Protagoras (2012, 162), but seems to imply that in consequence of this Platonic reshaping (‘Plato assumes this myth and its contents as his own’) it has lost much of its virtual Protagorean dependence (Protagoras’ views are rather discussed in the long speech which follows). This is going too far, in my opinion. First of all, because the assumption of a radical opposition between Plato/Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue is far from being uncontroversial. In fact, it may be argued that the two are closer than it is usually assumed (but this is not an issue that I can discuss here). Interestingly, this was also the opinion of some ancient writers: according to the Peripatetic Aristoxenus, ‘the *Republic*…was almost entirely written in Protagoras’ *Antilogies*’ (80B5 D.-K. = 31R1a L.-M.). Secondly, also the opposition between myth and *logos* is debatable. Protagoras presents the two as virtually identical and interchangeable. This is something which has to be accounted for. Stimulating as it is, Van Riel’s reading is not entirely convincing\(^10\). After all, as Mario Veggetti among many others has remarked, there must remain ‘un vincolo di

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5 Manuwald 2013, 163-164.
6 Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1920, I 80-81, 127, 151; II 431. Interesting paralles are Lysias’ speech in the *Phaedrus*, and Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symp*.
7 Good discussion in Sihvola 1989, 91-93.
8 Barney, 2.
9 See also Prior 2002 (see below, note ***).
10 Besides, it can be remarked that the theological views of the myth are clearly flawed (for instance Zeus interested in sacrifices like in Aristophanes). It is not credible that Plato wanted to claim them as his own (Morgan 2001, 136 n. 4). As it will become clear later, one major problem with Van Riel’s interpretation depends on his literal and chronological reading of the myth, which is not the only possible one.
familiarità. Protagoras was a famous thinker, who passed away on a relatively recent date; Plato could hardly have disregarded his views to such an extent, when he was constructing the character of the dialogue. By the way, an accurate report is also the condition for the critique to be really successful. It is most likely that Plato’s Protagoras advocates views that would have been regarded as possible views of the historical source.

2. But what does this reasonable claim mean in concrete? Two problems at least need to be taken into account for a correct understanding of the testimony. First of all, we need to establish whether the choice of the myth was Protagorean or Platonic – did Protagoras used the Prometheus myth or is Plato reshaping some of his views in these mythological clothes? Secondly, what is the context for this text, its intellectual background? On the first point scholars disagree; on the second there is a wide agreement that this testimony constitutes Protagoras’ contribute to one of the most hotly debated topics in fifth century Athens – the investigation in the origins of human civilization (often referred to with the German term Kulturrentstehungslehre). Indeed, the myth has often been interpreted as conveying Protagoras’ views on the emergence of society. We know from Diogenes Laertius’ Life of Protagoras that he wrote a text entitled περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως (IX 55 = 80a1 D.-K.). A footnote in many papers often suggest that this is in all probability the source from which Plato drew. To be sure, the hypothesis of the περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως is impossible to prove. That Protagoras’ testimony was somehow addressing the topic of human civilization is instead a reasonable claim.

As for the first problem – whether the myth was Protagorean or not – the difficulty for those who endorse the ‘Protagorean’ option is that the myth, read literally as a contribution to the debate on the origin of human civilization, does not go without difficulties. From the very beginning, when Epimetheus is in charge of the distribution, the distinction between humans and animals is in place, but it will be only with Prometheus that humankind will receive the gift of rationality, which is what distinguishes us from the other animals. In other words, there seems to be a pre-existing human kind, which is virtually defined by the possession of qualities that will be introduced only later. Strangely enough, since human beings are created already provided with technical skills, there can be no mention of stages in the development of human society; as a matter of fact the myth does not mention any stage of primitive life without technical skills, which is also surprising. Besides, if it is true, as we will later apprehend, that technical skills are not given to all, the consequence is that language and belief in the gods do not belong to all human beings – a patently absurd statement. Neither is it clear how could these first human beings develop each his or her own individual art, given that the

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12 See eg Untersteiner 1996, 28 n. 24; Kahn 1981, 98; Brancacci 2002, 172; Barney, 3; on the title, see O’Sullivan 1996, 119-120.  
13 By the way, there is a big problem with titles in Protagoras and more in general early Greek writers, see for instance Corradi 2012, 190-191.  
14 A recent attempt is Thein 2003, 60-2.  
15 Nussbaum 1986, pp. 100-101; Sihvola 1989, 100.
development of specialized knowledge (see Hermes’ example of the doctor, at 322c) would seem to presuppose the sort of communal life which was impossible without justice and politics when they lack justice and cannot therefore live together. The passage from the second to the third phase results then mysterious: if it is true that no society or community is possible without some justice and shame, in the second period human beings were living completely isolated/scattered (why did they need language, by the way, if they were living alone?)16. Shall we really conclude that there were humans without any sense of justice and shame? And how could they have developed, then, these two virtues? The only possible solution seems to point towards Zeus – this is his gift, and this has to be taken literally17. Controversial in itself, this option is also hard to reconcile with Protagoras’ (in)famous agnosticism (80b4 D.-K.), of which Plato himself was well aware (cf. Tht. 162d)18. Such a reading contrasts, in other words, with one of the few testimonies on his thought at our disposal. Besides, in the logos there is no mention of gods or divine interventions. All in all, read as a serious contribute to the debate on the development of human civilizations, the myth results quite problematic and not very interesting.

It is not by accident, then, that many scholars have advanced the alternative hypothesis, suggesting that it was rather Plato who reshaped Protagoras’ historical account in mythological clothes. This option has often been endorsed implicitly; recently, it has been openly defended by Rachel Barney in her recent excellent paper: ‘in the Myth he is playfully imposing his own form on source material from a different genre. Nor it is difficult to imagine what that genre might have been. In the fifth century, some theories of human progress began to replace the traditional idea of a degeneration from a primeval Golden age (Hesiod’s Golden race, Empedocles’ age of Love etc.). They can be traced in such different authors as Democritus, Aeschylus, Sophocles as well as Euripides, the Hippocratic corpus and Critias (later see also the poet Moschion). According to many scholars also Protagoras should be counted in this group19. This is of course possible: everything is possible with Plato. But such an hypothesis solves the problems we were discussing at a very high price, insofar as it transforms this text into a banal summary of some popular and widespread views on human progress and civilizations. As Rachel Barney has correctly remarked, in Plato’s dialogue Protagoras’ portrayal is nuanced and philosophically rich (Barney, 1). But this is not the case for his speech, if we read it as a piece on the emergence of human civilization. Once upon a time, humans were living like beasts, and the technical skills they had were not sufficient to give them security and prosperity; then they joined in cities and lived happily ever after. More or less, this is the story told by the myth, when we read it as an historical account of human civilization: ‘the parallels between the Protagoras myth and

16 See also Manuwald 2013, 172.
17 Kerferd 1953, 42-45.
18 Guthrie 1957, 92.
19 Barney, 3 with mention of περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως. See also Neschke-Hentske 1995, 58; Beresdorf 2013, 143.
our texts [ie, text on the origins of the civilization] do not extend beyond the commonplace\textsuperscript{20}. Moreover, such an account does not explain the overall structure of Protagoras’ speech in its entirety. Protagoras wrote an historical essay, so to say; Plato transformed this historical narrative into a mythological narrative; but the myth, read in this way, is not easy to reconcile with the logos. What is the relation between mythos and logos? In the logos there is no interest for any sort of chronological reconstruction – this is something we need to explain too. Given that this reading of the myth does not seem to have much in common with the logos, shall we then conclude that this latter is not important or is just Platonic? Once again, this contrast with Protagoras’ claim that his mythos and his logos are interchangeable (320c2-7).

3. Since none of these readings is entirely satisfying, other options are worth pursuing. Leaving aside for the moment the problem of the authorship, it is interesting to remark that, in spite of their divergences, all these interpretations shares the view that Protagoras was somehow contributing to the debate on the emergence of human society, as if he was interested in reconstructing the different phases in the history of human progress and civilization. As we have seen, this is precisely where the problem lies, because the myth does not fit very well this kind of historical reconstructions. An alternative option is thus to take the myth for what it is, that is a myth. To be sure, we can certainly underline many important parallels with the dossier of texts on the origins of human society; there is no need to deny a common ground between Protagoras’ myth and these texts. This myth clearly draws on them. That said, however, there is no need either to read into the myth an historical narrative, nor it is perhaps necessary to assume that there was such a Protagorean historical narrative which Plato would have reshaped into his myth. An alternative option, and perhaps an easier one, is to read the myth as a story, and not as history – as a story, that is, which is not meant to be an historical reconstruction but which rather plays with the texts on human civilization in order to convey some important (Protagorean) ideas. In other words, it is not matter of denying – it would be impossible – that the story is clearly articulated in three phases, but of remarking that the myth need not be interpreted in a chronological sense, as if it was retracing the various stages in human civilization; rather it is meant to identify and circumscribe some essential features of humankind itself. In this sense Protagoras’ myth can be interpreted as a variation on the theme, or as a parody, of the Kulturentsathing tradition, whose aim is not so much to reconstruct how we became what we are, how our civilization developed, as to account how our society is organized. Very much like Aesop’s fables (an interesting parallel), the myth need not be interpreted historically but as an explanatory, aetiological, story, accounting for an ‘essential’\textsuperscript{21} element of human nature\textsuperscript{22}. Unlike

\textsuperscript{20} Cole 1981, 51 n. 9; ‘Protagoras’ account does not go beyond a vaguely conceived theory of challenge and response; of the more careful and detailed naturalistic reconstruction of history[… there is no trace’ (1981, 51).

\textsuperscript{21} Sihvola 1989, 98.

\textsuperscript{22} An intriguing Platonic parallel is Aristophanes’ speech in the Symposium; also in this speech the chronological development is the tool which serves to bring to light what is essential in human nature.
most of the above mentioned texts, ‘Protagoras’ story is not a naturalistic account of the rise of human society’, nor an account of how the world came to be but rather how it is. The focus is on the human present condition, and the myth is, to use Cynthia Farrar’s words, not genetic but analytic: it analyzes ‘social man in its various element’ in order to understand what is really important. It is a powerful ‘argument – a kind of thought experiment, in fact designed to help us identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for human flourishing’ (so too Barney, 4).

When read in this way, the myth gains in clarity and originality. As we were saying, what is important is not so much to reconstruct the different phases of human civilization as to circumscribe some essential/fundamental features of human beings. Now, if the goal is to explain who we are, the myth does not need to be divided in three or five steps (as it is possible, of course), but rather in two parts, between the pre-political state of nature and the political word of the city, the first envisaging an impossible world, a counterfactual example which shows *e contrario*, what is really distinctive of the human world – what really allows men to live the way they live: not technical skills (or the belief in the gods), but the political attitude, which consists in the possess of *aidos* and *dike* – *Aidos* corresponding to ‘the component that enables each to govern himself in his conduct toward other human beings’ and *dike* to the norms which regulate the social intercourse among human beings.

The state of nature in which humans find themselves living after their creation reflects an impossible situation, and may be understood as a counter-factual example to demonstrate *e contrario* that human beings are political animals. Human beings are political animals: and political society is not so much the final accomplishment of mankind’s long journey but it is the condition of possibility for human life, which is always associated life. As the myth has it, this is what prevents human extinction like the various features given to the different animals prevented their extinction.

‘The political art seems to be not only an instrument which is discovered for improving the conditions of life, but an essential element of human existence … a characteristic without which a human being cannot properly be recognized as a human being’ (those who do not possess political skills should not be counted as human beings at all).

In favour of this reading it is worth observing that with it the virtual tension with the *logos* disappears. Indeed, the *logos* completes the myth by first repeating in plain words the same view of the myth and by then offering a solution to Socrates’ second objection. The myth argued that we are all ‘political animals’, insofar as we all participate of *dike* and *aidos*; the same idea is also repeated in the *logos*:

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23 Farrar 1988, 92; Vegetti 2004, 147; prospektiva strutturale analitica); cfr. also Sihvola 1989, 98, the synchronic level of meaning is more important than the diachronic one.

24 See Van Riel 2012, p. 149.

25 Sedvic 2009, 9 (with interesting remarks on the relation between *aidos* and *dike*, 10-11).

26 Beresford 2013, 155.

323a (bis): ‘for they think that this particular virtue, political or civic virtue, is shared by all, or there wouldn’t be any cities. […] Consider this as further evidence for the universal belief that all humans have a share of justice and the rest of civic virtue.28

323b-c: ‘one must have a trace of justice or not be human’.

324d-325a: ‘does there or does there not exist one thing which all citizens must have for there to be a city? Here and nowhere else lies the solution to your problem. For if such a thing exists, and this one thing is not the art of the carpenter, the blacksmith, or the potter, but justice, an temperance, and piety – which I may collectively term the virtue of a man …’

Political virtue is the necessary condition for the very existence of the city and it is the defining virtue of human beings. There is no human being who is not living with other human beings in a political community; there is no political community without some (degree of) justice; there is not, by consequence, a human being without some (degree of) justice. Once this has been explained, the logos will show that this common possession of political virtue does not exclude difference in merit (see the example of the flute-players polis, 327c-e). As a matter of fact, basic equality does not exclude that some members of the group are potentially better than others, and therefore more capable to provide the community with the solutions it needs: ‘universal competence is both complemented and made possible by the excellence of the few’29. Likewise, there are some teachers who are better in imparting the city the lessons it needs. Which is what Protagoras is offering (see below): he is one of the talented few, capable of making people noble and excellent (328b)30.

Protagoras against the technai

1. If this reading is correct, the comparison with the testimonies at our disposal on human civilization shows what is distinctive, and remarkable, of Protagoras’ Great Speech, most notably the myth. Many ancient authors of that period have written about the origins of human society31. In fact, it goes too often unnoticed that this dossier is made of an heterogeneous mix of different texts, Presocratic ‘histories of almost everything’ together with tragedies or poems, which do not necessarily belong to the same tradition32. For the sake of the discussion we can however agree that in the fifth century there was great interest on the rise of human civilization and a growing awareness on the

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28 All translations of the Prt. are from Lombardo – Bell in Cooper 1997.
29 Farrar 1988, 86.
30 Segvic 2009, 17-27 remarked that Protagoras’ teaching can be taken in two senses: he is teaching his students either how to become good citizens or how to satisfy their political ambitions. Plato clearly implies the latter. But Protagoras was probably refusing the alternative: he is teaching how to have personal success by helping the city.
32 As it is instead argued by Kahn 1981. A good account of all the traditions converging in this dossier is Cole 1967, 4-5 (historians, catalogues of inventions, presocratics and perhaps sophists, poets).
importance of *technai* for the development of the society. Protagoras is often added to this list. As we have already seen, scholars insist on the parallels between this myth and these other texts. The differences, however, are even more interesting than the affinities. When we look at these texts, what is interesting to observe is that, with the notable exception of the *Sisyphus* fragment (which is later and clearly reminiscent of sophistical ideas), they all share a similar account of the history of human civilization, underlining the importance of technical skills as the key condition for human progress. From Aeschylus and the other tragic poets to the *corpus hippocraticum* and Diodorus/Democritus, the history of human progress is a Promethean story, it depends on *technai*. *Techne* is praised for enabling human beings to overcome natural needs and the perils of an hostile environment and thus to live a prosperous life. *Techne*, in other words, is what marks the distinction between civilization and savagery, and between human beings and animals. An eloquent text, which incisively summarizes these reconstructions, is for instance *On ancient medicine* 3, where the original human condition is emphatically described by terms such as ‘necessity’ (*anagke*) or need (*chreia*; see also Diodorus/Democritus, here below) [interestingly also the author of this treatise, like Protagoras in Plato’s dialogue is defending and presenting himself and his activity, see Schierfsky 2005, 159]:

‘Necessity itself (*αὐτὴ ἡ ἀνάγκη*) caused medicine to be sought for and discovered by human beings and discovered by human beings, for it was not beneficial for the sick to take the same foods as the healthy […]. It was on account of this need (*διὰ δὴ ταύτην τὴν χρείαν*), I believe, that these people sought for nourishment suited to their constitution and discovered that which we make use of today (*VM* 3, transl. Shiefsky’).

Here like in the other texts of the dossier, this necessity is always external, so to say, coming as it comes from nature. And human progress consists in the process of liberation from natural necessities – with the human beings finding their way to protect themselves from natural adversities and obstacles:

‘They say that the first men to be born in the beginning, leading a disordered and bestial life, dispersed and went out to the pastures and nourished themselves with the healthiest herbs and the fruits that grew spontaneously on the trees. When they were attacked by wild animals they came to one another’s help, being taught by utility, and, gathering together out of the fear, they gradually

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33 For the sake of clarity we can distinguish between first order *technai* and second order *technai*, arts that have clearly specifiable products from those that have not, see Kent Sprague 1976, xiv. More in general on the importance of *technai* see for instance Cole 1972, 1: ‘Nowhere, in fact, is the effect of Ionian rationalization on the Greek mind more striking than in the success of its contention that the technological achievements of civilization are of a relatively recent origin, and that man’s life was once more far simpler and poorer materially than it is now’; or Schierfsky 2005, 157: ‘The notion that human beings originally lived a brutal and savage life and then gradually attained a civilized existence through the development of technology was widespread in fifth-century’.

34 And Moschion, who is later.
came to recognize one another’s features. [...] Now the first men lived wretchedly, since none of the things useful for life had been discovered: they were bare of clothing, ignorant of dwelling and fire, completely unaware of domestic food … [...] But being taught gradually by experience, they took refuge in caves during the winter and stored away those fruits that could be conserved. Once fire and other useful things came to be known, the crafts were gradually discovered, and everything else that can assist life in common. For in general, it was need itself that taught human all things [...] (Democritus 68B5 D.-K. = 27d202 L.-M.; transl. Laks – Most).

It is in this context that technai, from agriculture to medicine and arithmetic (see Aeschylus, Prom. 442-468), are so important, insofar as they help us in this battle against nature. To be sure, a similar account is also present in Protagoras’ myth. Also in his story mention is made of the most important technical skills (housebuilding, weaving, shoemaking, carpentry, agriculture, plus religion and speech, which are also present in the other texts). But the differences are by far more remarkable. For here, unlike the other testimonies, technai do not play a decisive role – they do not suffice to warrant human survival and prosperity. Protagoras is the only one (or: the first one, if we want to consider the Sisyphus fragment and Moschion) to insist on the fact that technai, alone, are not able to warrant human progress, nor human survival, for the problem is not external, so to say, but internal (which is another way of addressing the issue of man the measure, by the way): ‘they committed justice against one another’. This is a remarkable difference, which changes the terms of the problem. Technical skills can help with natural necessities, but are not useful with human relations, which is by far a more complicated problem. Indeed, human relations are a much more complicated and potentially dangerous issue than our natural weakness. Conflict, which was the great absent in the other texts, becomes the real problem in Protagoras, who is also in the position to offer a solution to it. And in this capacity to see where the real problem lies and to offer a solution, is Protagoras’ superiority. What is important is politics – and political art/virtue is what Protagoras is teaching; much more than the traditional technai the condicio sine qua non for human survival and progress are the political skills – and this, as we already remarked, not in the sense of an historical progress only. The point is that there is no human community without some form of politics. Protagoras’ myth, by underlining this point, presents a very subtle attack against technai.

35 List of technai: Aeschylus, Prom. Astronomy, mathematics, writing, pastorizia e allevamento, seafaring, medicine, prophecy and divination, metals
Sophocles, Ant. Pastorizia and agricolture, speech, law, architecture, medicine
Euripides, Suppl. agriculture, seafaring
Diodorus/Democritus: language, techniques in general.
Archelaus: arts.
36 Sihvola 1989, 100-101. Another interesting difference is Protagoras’ idea that technical developments occur within a short span of time (tachy; 322a6); the other texts all insists on the importance of the temporal element, see Manuwald 2013, 173; Schierfsky 2005, 158.
37 The antinomian tradition (Guthrie 1971) would then be a reaction to Protagoras: Sisyphus, Thrasymachus, Antiphon, Callicles etc. To be discussed and expanded!
2. In favour of this reading some other sections of the Plato’s dialogue can be adduced. Most importantly, also some other testimonies, and not only from Plato, do appear to confirm the hypothesis. An hostile attitude with regard to the techne\textsuperscript{38} on the part of Protagoras is attested also elsewhere in the dialogue, and most notably at the beginning, when Protagoras presents his teaching in explicit opposition to that of the other sophists. The opposition is between Protagoras’ ‘political’ teaching and the ‘specialistic’ curriculum of the others:

[Protagoras:] For the other people harm young men. Diving them back, despite resistance, towards the arts (τὸὺς τέχνας) that they have fled, they cast them upon those arts (εἰς τέχνας), teaching arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music (and he cast a glance at Hippias’) (80a5 D.-K. = 31D37 L.-M.)\textsuperscript{39}.

[An intriguing hypothesis concerns Prodicus, who is one of Protagoras’ competitors in the dialogue, and who seems to have insisted on the importance of agriculture in the development of human society (and of its religious tradition). Since his speech on Heracles was reportedly contained in a text entitled Horai, that is ‘Seasons’, Nestle 1936 and Soverini 1998 advanced the brilliant hypothesis that Prodicus celebrated Heracles as a symbol of the world of farmers and agriculture as well, and that the Horai provided a praise of agriculture, along with a theory on the origin of religion connected to agriculture, and an exhortation to virtue (something necessary for agricultural life), embodied by the figure of Heracles at the crossroads. It is an intriguing and highly speculative hypothesis. If correct, it would make of Prodicus an ideal target for Protagoras; in the dialogue, however, Protagoras ‘cast a glance at Hippias’.

Even more remarkable is that we find evidence of such polemics also outside Plato’s Protagoras. In the specific case of geometry (and perhaps astronomy, also mentioned in the above text, and geodesics), Protagoras’ polemical stance is confirmed by two other testimonies, from Simplicius and Philodemus:

‘Not even this is true, that mensuration deals with perceptible and perishable magnitudes; for then it would have perished, when they perished. And astronomy also cannot be dealing with perceptible magnitudes nor with this heaven above us. For neither are perceptible lines such lines as the geometer speaks of (for no perceptible thing is straight or curved in this way; for a hoop touches a straight edge not at a point, but as Protagoras said it did, in his refutation of the geometers [that is along a line])

\textsuperscript{38} As already shown in note *** also the other sources indistinctly refer to such different arts such as agriculture and housebuilding or mathematics and astronomy.

\textsuperscript{39} See also 311b-312a where Protagoras’ teaching is opposed first to that of doctors and sculptors, and then is associated to that of teachers.
Likewise, Philodemus:

 […] that the <things> are not knowable, <the> words are not acceptable; <as> Protagoras indeed [scil. said] about ma<thematics> (80B7a D.-K. = 31d34 L.-M.)

The same attitude, more in general, is further attested elsewhere also in Plato, in the *Sophist*:

[The stranger from Elea]: With regard to all the arts and for each of them, they way in which one must contradict each of the artisans himself is set out (καταβεβλήται) as it were in the public domain, written down for whoever wants to learn it.

[Theaetetus]: You seem to be talking about Protagoras writings on wrestling and the other arts (περί τε πάλης καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν). (80B8 D.-K. = 31d2 L.-M.)

In all likelihood, the reference in this text is not so much to wrestling but to these polemics. In an agonistic society to contradict each individual expert in a given subject was a vital aspect of the public debate, and an easy strategy for those who were seeking to present themselves as the best teachers and their teachings as superior to those of the others experts and teachers. Of course, this polemical context is more relevant with regard to *techmai* such as geometry or medicine than shoemaking, as some interesting texts from the *Hippocratic corpus*, for instance the prologue of the treatise *On art*, confirms by alluding to some ‘professional slanderers’, who had made an art of vilifying the arts in order to display their own knowledge, without ‘improving nothing’ (*de arte* I):

‘There are some who make an at of demeaning the arts, so they think, not achieving the result I just mentioned, but rather making a display of their special ‘skills’. […] The eagerness to debase the discoveries of others by an art of mean discourse, not suggesting any improvements but instead sandering those who have knowledge in front of those who have not – this no longer seems to be an object or an occupation of the intellect, but rather an indication of a mediocre nature or lack in art (*On art* I, transl. Mann).’

It is tempting to count also Protagoras among these writers. All these testimonies confirms Protagoras’ polemic stance with regard to *techmai* as we have found it in the myth.

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40 Interestingly, geometry is also discussed in the first part of th *Tht*.
41 That this fragment contains a reference to Protagoras is contested by Romeo 1992.
43 Along the same lines, see Mann 2012, 40-41.
3. Protagoras’ attack against technai can also help shed some light on the elusive nature of Protagoras’ teaching. In the dialogue there is an oscillation between terms and also his teaching is sometimes described as a techne\textsuperscript{44}. But, even though his teaching is sometimes qualified as techne, it clearly differs from that of the other sophists and teachers:

tὸ δὲ μάθημα ἐστὶν εὐβουλία περὶ τε τῶν οἰκείων ὅπως ἄν ἀριστα τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν διοικοῖ, καὶ περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως, ὅπως τὰ τῆς πόλεως διηνιστῶτας ἄν εἰη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν.

‘The object of my instruction is good deliberation about household matters, to know how to manage one’s own household in the best way possible, and about those of the city, so as to be most capable of acting and speaking in the city’s interest’ (Plat. Prot. 318e-319a = 80A5 D.-K. = 31D37 L.-M.; this text directly follow from the text quoted above)\textsuperscript{45}.

Euboulia is a widespread word and is used in many senses\textsuperscript{46}. The parallel with the technai at least helps to understand some major features of Protagoras’ teaching. In the above quoted text from the Protagoras (80a5 D.-K. = 31D37 L.-M.) the problem with technai seems to be that they focus on specific issues which are marginal for the life of the city. Protagoras’ Euboulia, by contrast, has to be capable of dealing with the problems of the societal life. This is a first point, even though such claim (which justifies Hippocrates’ enthusiasm, see the prologue) is generic and does not tell much in itself (as Socrates remarks, by the way). The other testimonies are more interesting and help better understand the limits of traditional technai and, by contrast, the merits of Protagoras’ euboulia. In fact, it seems that it is not only matter of a contrast between specialistic vs universal applications. If we take into consideration Protagoras’ attack against geometry, the basic problem with technai seems to be that they rely on universalistic, abstract, assumptions, which do not correspond to concrete reality. This appears to be confirmed also by a reported polemic with Zeno:

Zeno of Elea asked the sophist Protagoras: ‘Tell me, Protagoras, does a single grain or even the ten thousandth part of a grain make any sound when it falls?’ Protagoras said it did not. ‘Then,’ Zeno asked, ‘does a bushel of millet make any sound when it falls or not?’ Protagoras answered that it did, whereupon Zeno replied: ‘But surely there is some ratio between a bushel of millet and a single grain or even the ten thousandth part of a grain?’ Protagoras answered that there was. ‘But then surely,’ Zeno said, ‘the ratios of the corresponding sounds to each other will be the same: for as the bodies

\textsuperscript{44} Besides, cf. also 80B10 D.-K. = 31d12 L.-M.; Protagoras reportedly wrote a Techne cristikon, 80A1 D.-K. = 31d1 L.-M.

\textsuperscript{45} The final clause echoes Tucydides’s famous judgement on Pericles (1.139), see Segvic 2009, 17-19. Dynatotatos can of course be translated also with ‘most powerful’, but it is doubtful that this is the best translation for Plato’s text – political power is not the central issue (nor it is in Thucydides’ text, as rightly remarked by Woodruff 2013, 180 n. 2).

\textsuperscript{46} See the exhaustive analysis of Woodruff 2013; see also Denyer.
which make the sound are to one another, so will the sounds be to one another. And if this is so, and if the bushel of millet makes a sound, then the single grain of millet and the ten thousandth part of a grain will make a sound.’ This was the way Zeno used to frame the question (29a29 D.-K. = Zeno d12 L.-M.).

Leaving aside the problem of the historical authenticity of this encounter, this testimony has sometimes been interpreted as proof of the fact that Protagoras denied infinite divisibility; but this seems to be an incorrect conclusion, since Protagoras – at least in theory – does not deny the possibility of a division into increasingly small parts. What Protagoras denies is rather that the sound produced by these portions of millet is audible. Also in this case, it appears that the sophist examined things from the point of view of sensible experience, against the abstractions of the scientists: just as sight does not perceive the touching of a sphere and a tangent at a given point (ie polemics against geometry), so hearing can only perceive sounds up to a certain point. And this helps to explain what is the problem of geometry, by the way: if it does not deal with physical object it amounts to an insignificant verbal game; if it does deal with physical objects, it is subject to empirical evaluation, which offers different results from those provided by a priori analyses – and this explains why it is not useful⁴⁷. This is a bold claim; it is not matter of denying any social utility to geometry merely (as in the previous text, where Protagoras opposes his teaching to that of the other sophists) but of arguing that this expertise is not valid neither in its own field of application. Admittedly, if this is the polemic, it does not seem to raise interesting arguments against geometry. It remains, however, that the above quoted polemical remarks of the anonymous author of the Hippocratean On art show, as we have remarked, that this polemical argument was in circulation: the affinity with Protagoras is remarkable.

What is clear, in any case, is that the opposite has to be the case for Protagoras’ political euboulia. Euboulia, by contrast, will turn out to be very concrete and related to concrete situations. Euboulia turns out to consist, in other words, in the capacity of making good judgment in any given, concrete, situation⁴⁸; and given situations are evidently many and different from each others. Protagoras’ argument ultimately rests on a particularist account of reality, which resists any possible universalization. This last point is further confirmed by another testimony, once again from the Protagoras:

‘I know of many things that are disadvantageous to humans, food and drinks and drugs and many other things, and some that are advantageous, some that are neither to humans but one to other to horses; some that are advantageous to none of these but are so to trees; some that are good for the roots of a tree, but bad for its shoots, such as manure, which is good spread on the roots of any plants but absolutely ruinous if applied to the new stems and branches. Or take the olive oil, which is

⁴⁷ See for instance Barnes 1979, 546.
⁴⁸ Also in geometry or medicine? see also Gorgias 82b29 D.-K. = 32P22 L.-M. and Grg. 456a-c with Bonazzi 2019, 138-140.
extremely bad for all plants and is the worst enemy of the hair of all animal except humans, for whose hairs is beneficial, as it is for the rest of their bodies. But the good is such a multifaceted and variable thing that, in the case of oil, it is good for the external parts of the human body but very bad for the internal parts, which is why doctors universally forbid their sick patients to use oil in their diets except for the last bit, just enough to dispel a prepared meal’s unappetizing aroma (333c-334c).’

The objectivity of the good is not denied, but it varies in individual cases. Often dismissed as irrelevant, this text credits Protagoras with some kind of ontological pluralism, which is the ground for his euboulia.49 If this is the reality of the political (that is, human) world, euboulia cannot be but the capacity to individuate, in any given situation, what is good or convenient. And since we lack a universal, absolute, criterion to establish it, because reality is too rich and complex, euboulia will turn out to be ‘the ability to negotiate defeasible argument well in practical affairs, and so to arrive at the most reasonable expectation relative to the knowledge available’50.

[Interestingly, this interpretation also serves to show that Protagoras’ portrayal in the Protagoras does not radically differ from his portrayal in the Theatetus, contrary to what it has been claimed (Gomperz, vol. 1, 458; Levi 1940, 286). A pluralist reading (see also the secret doctrine) seems to be possible also in Protagoras’ apology in the Tht.: there is a natural predisposition to justice (Beresdorf 2013, see below) which leads human beings to establish laws. But these laws need not be the same everywhere nor need they be always the same. If this reading is correct, the two dialogues are less incompatible that usually claimed by many scholars.51

Of course, this implies the need of a proper discussion of Protagoras’ relativism, which leads us to Rachel Barney’s paper]

Once again on the authorship of the myth

Even though a final and definitive word is impossible to reach, the parallels with other Protagorean testimonies seem to support the hypothesis that ‘Protagoras could have presented his theories in a mythical form’ (Sihvola 1989, 97), and that the narrative of the myth can be read as a sort of sophistic epideixis, as an entirely consistent advertising speech of a sophist in support of this teaching.52 As it has been now repeatedly shown by many scholars, use and criticism of myth played

49 One remarkable exception is Guthrie 1971, 164-175. Surprisingly, this text is not mentioned by Apfel 2011 in her defense of Protagoras as a pluralist thinker.
50 Woodruff 2013, 189. This also serves to qualify what is said at the beginning of the dialogue, when Protagoras’ teaching is described as the capacity of ‘making people clever at speaking’ (ἐπιστάτην τοῦ ποιήσαι δεινὸν λέγειν; 312d3-7). Euboulia obviously depends on the capacity of speaking well, but this cannot be reduced to the art of winning debates merely; see Woodruff 2013, 192.
51 This also answer to Prior 2002, who argues that Tht. relativism is incompatible with Prt. and this proves that the latter is not a reliable witness to the historical Protagoras, see above. A recent attempt is Rowett.
52 Manuwald 2013, 167 and 175; very useful and important on this point is Morgan. See 320c3: epideixo, 328d3: epideixamenos.
an important role in the sophists’ activity; from Gorgias’ Helen and Palamedes to Prodicus’ Heracles or Hippias’ Trojan speech examples abound and confirm that many sophists’ epideixis were playing with mythical themes. Also Protagoras can be counted in this group, developing a very original polemic against his adversaries. By the way, as we will soon see, in the text there are also interesting references to poets, who also made extensive use of the mythical tradition.

Needless to say, I am well aware that neither this option solves all the problems. The alternative option of Plato inventing the myth cannot be excluded. What is important to observe, in any case, is that the ‘mythological’ interpretation has at least the merit of making the text interesting for what it says and not for what it could have or must have said, and helps us to better understand Protagoras’ originality in the intellectual scene of his time. As it turns out, there is more at stake, for the scope of his polemics is wider.

Protagoras and Hesiod
Marginal in the tradition on the origins of civilization, the awareness of the importance of politics and justice was obviously very much widespread in the Greek world since the very beginning, from Homer and Hesiod. Interestingly enough, the myth has a clear reference to Hesiod’s Work and Days, when Zeus orders that everyone participate in dike and aidos; this will be his law, nomos, Zeus says (Prt. 322d). This order clearly alludes to some very famous verses of Hesiod’s Works and Days:

Perses, lay these things in your heart
And give heed to Justice, and put violence entirely out of your mind.
This is the law that Cronus’ son has established for human beings (τὸνδε γὰρ ἀνθρώποις νόμον διέταξε Κρονίων):
That fish and beasts and winged birds
eat one another, since Justice is not among them;
but to human beings he has given Justice, which is the best by far (WD 274-280; transl. Most).

This quotation is not a display of erudition, but aims to indicate the real subtext of the myth, with Protagoras adopting a subtle strategy of appropriation of the poet. Hesiod’s basic idea is that nomos (law, justice, politics) is what distinguishes humans from animals, insofar as it allows them to transcend the world of brute force and violence by creating an order based on shared values. As a matter of fact, this is also Protagoras’ thesis: what is typical of human beings is

53 Another interesting parallel is with Aesop’s fables, see Farrar 1989, 88.
54 See also Gavray, 162. Other arguments: 1) Aristotelic parts of animals 687a23-26 speaks of oi legontes (Beresdorf 146); 2) the prominent paratactic style of Protagoras’ myth does not agree with the style of Platonic myths in other dialogues (see Manuwald 2013, 166 and 2003, 40-44); 3) structurally the speech is not discussed in the dialogue; it is like an intrusion. Protagoras also wrote a text peri politeias. Perhaps is this the source? See Manuwald 1996, p. 128.
55 Kahn 1981, 103-108 discusses the parallel with Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound (more controversial, and there is the further problem that we do not know the trilogy).
possession of justice, which is to say their political and social capacity. Protagoras’ myth clearly alludes to Hesiod’s story; the quasi quotation is intended precisely to emphasize such a convergence. But also in this case the divergences are not less interesting than the affinities. Borrowings are never neutral, and the appropriation is also a transformation. First of all, with regard to justice: in Hesiod Justice is divine, she is a deity, the daughter of Zeus, who intervened when he saw that men fail to respect her (WD 257, 265; T 901-903). All mythological imagery aside, this means the belief in the absolute existence of justice, regardless of human beings; human justice is not independent of this order of divine values, but must rather conforms to it. The situation radically changes with Protagoras, whose innovation consists in his emphasis on the human rather than divine. There is no place for divinity; justice is something human; it depend on laws, which can vary – it is not what brings us close to the gods but what fulfills our natural potential.

Such a kind of humanism gives by consequence an optimistic turn to Hesiod’s traditional pessimism, and this is the second difference. Interestingly, also Hesiod writes of δίκη and αίδως. He associates the two terms in the myth of the races, when he talks of the iron age. What characterizes the Age of Iron is precisely the flight of justice and shame, and the consequent triumph of violence. Indeed, it is the world in which we live now, according to Hesiod, but it recalls the one without political techne in Protagoras’ myth:

Δίκη δ’ ἐν χερσὶ καὶ αἰδῶς οὐκ ἔσται.
Justice will be in their hands, and reverence will not exist (191-192)\(^{56}\).

By claiming that in our world there is always some degree of justice and reverence Protagoras inverts Hesiod’s account, by offering a much more positive view of human beings. As long as there are human beings, there are communities and therefore some moral and political values: an inclination towards fairness is a natural endowment\(^{57}\), which is then concretized by the enactment of laws and moral rules. Hesiod’s iron age is rather implicitly associated to Pherecrates’ Savages. Whereas Hesiod describes human history in terms of decadence (since it is difficult to imitate the gods), Protagoras presents it in much more favourable terms\(^{58}\).

And this idea in turn strengthens the reasonable belief that acting in view of justice is in everyone’s interest; this is another idea of the logos, which constitutes the major theme in Hesiod’s WD (cf. 270-55).

\(^{56}\) An interesting parallel, and another example of Hesiod’s influence in fifth century Athenian literature is the use of these very same ideas in Thucydides’ account of Corecyrean stasis. But in that case the affinities are much more remarkable than the divergences: what happened in Corecyra is meant to confirm the truth of Hesiod’s verses, see Edmunds 1975, Bonazzi 2015.

\(^{57}\) On this point see Beresford 2013, 148-158. It is true that Protagoras says that ethical arete is not a product of physis but arises from instruction, training and efforto (323c). ‘But this view is fully compatible with a belief in innate ethical tendencies, because his idea is apparently that the finished virtues are a product of instruction and training acting upon natural predispositions’ (Beresford 2013, 151).

\(^{58}\) With these observations I also hope to make clear why I disagree with Van Riel, p. 149, when he describes Protagoras’ myth as story of bitter misery.
273: ‘Right now I myself would not want to be a just man among human beings, neither I nor a son of mine, since it is evil for a man to be just if the more unjust one will receive greater justice. But I do not anticipate [ἐσχατον] that the counselor Zeus will let things end up this way’.

Remarkably, the quasi quotation of Hesiod in the myth was not the first reference to the poet in the dialogue. In fact he had already been explicitly mentioned by Protagoras himself at the beginning of his encounter with Socrates:

I say that the sophistic art is ancient, but that those ancient men who practiced it, because they feared the annoyance it caused, employed a screen and disguised it, some using poetry, like Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides, and others initiatory rites and oracles, the followers of Orpheus and Musaeus; and certain ones, I have heard, under gymnastic too, like Iccus of Tarentum and another one, still alive, as much a sophist as anyone: Herodicus of Selymbria, originally a Megarian colony. And music was the screen employed by your fellow citizen Agathocles, a great sophist, Pythoclides of Ceos, and many other (Prt. 316-d-317c = only partly included as 80a5 D.-K. and Soph. R11 L.-M.)

Once again it is not easy to say whether these Hesiodic references were already present in Protagoras or rather depends on Plato. In favour of the first hypothesis we can observe that other testimonies shows that Protagoras adopted a similar strategy of appropriation also towards Homer59. Euboula and orthoepeia (see Simonides’ interpretation – which is Plato’s parody of Protagoras’ teaching). And this could be used, with some degree of speculation, in favour of the first option also in the case of Hesiod. In any case, the goal of these references is clear. The above quoted statement is not merely designed to place Protagoras under the authority of a well-rooted tradition, but rather contributes to a more complex strategy of appropriation and transformation. By claiming a direct link to these wise men, and the poets in particular, Protagoras can present himself as an heir to Greek paideia, as one of the great masters, or, rather, as the great master, the only one who is capable of imparting a teaching that drew upon the tradition but that can also meet the needs of the new times. The poet’s task was to preserve and transmit the system of values on which the life of his community was founded. To engage with poetry was to engage with the tradition; and this engagement was a fundamental part of the sophists’ teaching. In such a way, Protagoras could reinforce his claim to be the new teacher, the educator capable of imparting teachings suited to the needs of the new world of the polis. Plato’s goal, in the Protagoras, was to show that this was not correct – if in the myth the sophist was implicitly identifying himself to Zeus at the end he will turn out as Epimetheus60. But for the time

59 See for instance Rademaker 2013; I quickly discuss this problem in in the paper for the Sophists workshop; the same probably holds also in the case of Simonides. On Protagoras and the poetic tradition see Corradi 2007.
60 Morgan 2001, 147-153 (I do not agree, though, that Protagoras was implicitly presenting himself as Prometheus. In the myth he sides with Zeus and politics in opposition to the other sophists and teachers, who are implicitly equated to Protagoras, then).
being, until this has not be proven, one can well understand Hippocrates’ enthusiasm, when he heard that the great thinker was arrived in Athens.

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