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Protagoras’ *On Gods*: its context and an open tradition  
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Summary

In Part 1, I propose the following main theses on the testimonies of Protagoras’ *On Gods*:

1. Protagoras made a controversial statement on the gods in the beginning of the book *On Gods*, which was much discussed in antiquity in the contexts of religion and epistemology.
2. We have 21 testimonies and several relevant texts concerning this statement, but none of the citations is identical with another nor with the reconstructions of DK. 80 B4 and LM. PROT. D10.
3. The original book must have been lost at a very early stage, so that most references to this statement were indirect, probably from memory or by citing other works.
4. Each author treated the statement in his own interest or intention in a particular context. We cannot find an exact citation of the original statement in any testimony.
5. Since it was discussed in different forms, we should think that the transmission of this text is open, or “mouvance” (Paul Zumthor). If so, we need not (or should not) seek the correct reconstruction of the original statement, but we should examine each discussion as a part of the reception history of Protagoras.

In Part 2, I consider the *On Gods* Statement in its proper context by focussing on three aspects:

1. It was the first sentence(s) of the book. Reading a book in public was a major activity of the sophist Protagoras; through it, he sought to make the greatest possible impact on an audience. The first statement alone was repeatedly reported because it was memorable and catchy (like an aphorism), while the rest was ignored. It should be examined in this context but not as a part of systematic doctrines.
2. Protagoras challenged traditional views on the gods by appealing to the traditional distinction between divine and human. This challenge is related to his position on the man-measure thesis.
3. The statement has intertextual relations, particularly with Parmenides and Xenophanes. It supports and subverts their ideas on being and gods.
Part 1: An Open Tradition of Protagoras’ On Gods

1. Protagoras’ On Gods

We have virtually only two “fragments” of Protagoras. One is the famous “man-measure” thesis from *Truth*¹ (DK. 80 B1), and the other is the agnostic statement about the gods from *On Gods* (DK. 80 B4). Both were probably the first sentences of the books. They were repeatedly discussed in antiquity, but whereas the transmission of the man-measure fragment was relatively stable, the *On Gods* fragment was reported in different forms.² As for the man-measure fragment, it is doubtful that ancient authors actually read his book and quoted the statement from it. Rather it is more plausible that later authors cited the quotation from Plato and Aristotle without any access to the original book.³ As for the *On Gods* fragment, we have no authoritative quotation in earlier stages, but can find only scattered references from early to late periods.

The collections of fragments and testimonies, from Diels-Kranz to Laks-Most, contain some 50 to 100 texts in the chapter of Protagoras.⁴ Yet, through a fuller search, I have made a list of some 380 relevant texts: from his contemporary comic poets, Eupolis and Aristophanes, to the later Byzantine writers, in the fifteenth century. Of course, the number varies depending on what to include and how to count. Major methodological difficulties are as follows: Should we divide the biographical chapter of Diogenes Laertius, as Laks-Most? How to deal with many passages in Plato’s *Protagoras* (speeches by the character Protagoras) and in *Theaetetus* (examination and reconstruction of his argument)? Are the repeated references in the

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³ Ian C. McCready-Flora, “Protagoras and Plato in Aristotle: rereading the measure doctrine”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 49 (2015), 71-127, argues that Aristotle used Plato’s *Theaetetus*, rather than the historical Protagoras. Although his study shows a main feature of indirect transmission of Protagoras, I think that this claim goes too far.
Aristotelian commentators and various scholia worth examining? To what extent should “allusions” to be included. Despite the difficulties, I believe that it is absolutely important to have an overview of the whole reception of Protagoras, at least, up to the late medieval texts.

I have identified 21 testimonies that seem to contain some part(s) of the statement with reference to Protagoras. Modern scholars have considered some of these testimonies and differences between them, but such examination is hard to reach a reliable conclusion. What we can do is to collect all the relevant texts and construct a possible view. One of the most important purposes in examining all the testimonies is to reveal how the text of Protagoras was transmitted.

First, let us examine the modern editions. The text of DK. 80 B4 is a reconstruction from two testimonies:

[Modern Edition 1: DK. 80 B4]

περὶ μὲν θεὸν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὑποόι τινες ιδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἢ τ’ ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὃν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Diels reconstructed this from Diogenes Laertius 9.51 (T1), and one passage of Eusebius, Preparatio Evangelica 14.3.7 (T14), but changed both. DK. did not examine all the relevant testimonies. Then, Daniel Graham’s edition in 2010 follows DK, adding Hesychius (T20).

Antonio Capizzi, Protagora, published in 1955, pointed out that DK. missed one important testimony of Eusebius, PE. 14.19.10 (=Aristocles, De philosophia, T15). Capizzi’s reconstruction is as follows:

[Modern Edition 2: Capizzi, B7 (p.207; cf. p.101, n.2)]

περὶ μὲν θεὸν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὑποόι τινες ιδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντά με ἕκαστον τοῦτον εἰδέναι.

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5 E.g. Johnathan Barnes, “Protagoras the atheist?”, Mantissa: Essays in Ancient Philosophy IV, Oxford University Press, 2015, 190-203.
6 I use the following marks. T: testimony (which cites or uses some words of the original statement, with reference to Protagoras); R: relevant text.
7 Daniel W. Graham (ed.), The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy, Part II, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Protagoras, Text 29 = F3 (706). The text is reconstructed from Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica 14.3.7 (T14), DL. 9.51 (T1), and Hesychius (T20).
The newest edition of Protagoras in Laks and Most, *Early Greek Philosophy* VIII (LM.), differs both from DK. (adding “με”) and Capizzi (omitting “ἐκαστὸν τοῦτον”, adding the last phrase):


περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσὶν οὐθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὑποί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ καλύοντά με εἰδέναι, ἢ τ’ ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχύς ὄν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Thus, the main editions show a variety of reconstructions.

As we shall observe soon, each testimony gives a report different from any others. This allows us to assume, firstly, that the original book *On Gods* was lost in an early stage, while only the first sentences were transmitted to the later generations. We can assume, secondly, that each author cited the statement not directly from the original book but indirectly through previous reports. Most of the reports must have come from memory or from other sources. This is slightly different from the transmission of the “man-measure” fragment: a main difference probably arose from the fact that neither Plato nor Aristotle cited the text from *On Gods*.

We should be careful in re-examining the *On Gods* fragment by keeping these special conditions in mind. I will argue that, although Diels aimed to reconstruct the lost original as much as possible, we should treat the entire testimonies on this statement as important evidence for the receptions and influences of Protagoras: how the original statement was changed or misunderstood. To do this, we should observe all the extant testimonies and locate them in the history of the Protagoras tradition. Our main aim is not to obtain a faithful reconstruction of the original statement.

We are sure from various testimonies that Protagoras wrote and presented the work *On Gods*, which raised a controversy in Athens. First, look at Diogenes Laertius, who wrote his biography in the early third century AD:


καὶ ἄλλαγοι δὲ τοῦτον ἥρξατο τὸν τρόπον· “περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ’

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In another work he began thus: “On gods I cannot know either that they are or that they are not. For there are many things that hinder me from knowing, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.” For this introduction to his writing the Athenians expelled him; and they burnt his books in the market-place, after sending round a herald to collect them from all who had copies in their possession.

This testimony contains the longest quotation of the On Gods fragment. In addition to two statements in Diogenes Laertius (T1, R1), four testimonies in Cicero (T5), Eusebius (T14, 15) and Suda (T21) reported that the statement came from the beginning of the book. Also, due to the charge of impiety, he was probably subjected to a trial and banished; Athenians might have burned his books.

This book seems to have been read aloud in front of intellectuals in Athens. But we have scanty of evidence of the situation apart from R1, and most of the testimonies on the trial appeared late (including Diogenes Laertius).

Here Diogenes called the book “Περὶ θεῶν (On Gods)”.

10 εἰδ’...εἰδ’, FD: οἴδ’...οἴδ’, BP; the latter is usually accepted in accordance with Eusebius.
11 Cf. Eusebius, P.E. 14.3.7 (T14), 14.19.10 (T15); Joannes Chrysostomus, In epistulam I ad Corinthios, 36-37 (following T16) says “ἐν τοῖς περὶ θεῶν λόγοις”, but this is a general expression, not particular to Protagoras; cf. SE, Adv. Math. 9.55, on the Atheist Theodorus.
name, “Περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ” (T17), but this might be a general description rather than the title. It is most probable that the book was entitled “Περὶ θεῶν” (plural without an article). One may suspect that the first words of the book were used for title. But the man-measure fragment (also the first statement) was in Truth or Down-Throwers. Since book titles were often given by the authors in the age of the sophists, e.g. Gorgias’ On what is not or on nature and Encomium of Helen, it is likely that Protagoras gave the book titles. Also, considering that Plato mocked this in the dialogues,12 this must be the title given by Protagoras himself.

2. Testimonies

(1) Early testimonies

There is no testimony of the latter half of the fifth century BC, when the book was written. In the fourth century BC, Plato did not discuss On Gods, unlike Truth, but nevertheless, the Theaetetus, in critically examining the Protagorean relativism, clearly alludes to that work:

[T2: Plato, Theaetetus, 162d-e = DK. 80 A23 = Cap. A23]

θεοὺς τε εἰς τὸ μέσον ἄγοντες, οὓς ἐγὼ ἐκ τοῦ λέγειν καὶ τοῦ γράφειν περὶ αὐτῶν ὡς εἰσίν ἢ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, ἐξαιρῶ…

And you bring in the gods, the question of whose being or not-being I exclude from oral and written discussion…

Plato had Protagoras state this in the course of imaginative discussion on his man-measure thesis. The man-measure thesis is associated with, or supported by, his position on gods. He contrasted Protagoras’ human standard with the divine wisdom.13 Except this allusion, we have no contemporary testimony, either in comic plays (e.g. Aristophanes) or in Aristotle. One possibility is that the statement was not as shocking or as controversial in his time as for later generations. Another possibility is that it was suppressed. But considering that Prodicus’ thoughts on gods, though they were more fundamentally radical than Protagoras’, did not offend his contemporary people much, I’d take the former view. If so, interests in and criticisms on Protagoras’ On Gods got larger in the late antiquity.

The first extant reference to On Gods is given in Timon’ Silloi in the third century

12 Cf. Crat. 386c, 391c (DK. 80 A24), Tht. 161c (B1), 166d (A21a).
13 Cf. Tht. 162c, Leg. IV. 716c.
BC (quoted in Sextus Empiricus after T9), together with the first testimony of burning books:


… ἔθελον δὲ τέφρην συγγράμματα θεῖναι, ὃτι θεοῦς κατέγραψ᾽ οὔτε εἰδέναι οὔτε δύνασθαι ὁποιοὶ τινὲς εἰσὶ καὶ εἰ τινὲς ἀθρήσασθαι, πᾶσαν ἔχων φυλακὴν ἐπεικεῖς:

People wanted to burn his books into ashes. Because he wrote that he did not know nor could observe about gods what they are like, or whether they are. You pay proper attention to everything…

This is a free paraphrase in hexameter, but it must be reflecting the original statement in some way.

(2) Roman authors

Cicero in the first century BC discussed Protagoras four times in *De Natura Deorum*, Book 1. They are the oldest substantial reports. Near the beginning of the work, Cicero mentioned the sceptical Protagoras along with the atheist Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene:

[R2: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.1.2]

velut in hac quaeestione plerique - quod maxime veri simile est et quo omnes14 duce natura venimus - deos esse dixerunt, dubitans se Protagoras, nullos esse omnino Diagoras Melius et Theodorus Cyrenaicus putaverunt.

In this inquiry, to give an instance of the diversity, the greater number of authorities have affirmed the existence of the gods; it is the most likely conclusion, and one to which we are all led by the guidance of nature; but Protagoras said that he was doubtful, and Diagoras the Melian and Theodorus of Cyrene thought that there were no such being at all.

Here Protagoras was treated differently from the atheists. Next, the Epicurean Valleius presents

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14 omnes fere, Plasberg, Dyck: sese, ω.
the doxographical summary including Protagoras:

[T4: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.12.29 = DK. 80 A23 = Cap. A23]

nec vero Protagoras, qui sese negat omnino de deis habere quod liqueat, *sint non sint* qualesve *sint*, quicquam videtur de natura deorum suspicari.

Nor does Protagoras, who denies absolutely the possession of any definite conviction as to their being, not-being, or character, seem to have the faintest conception of the divine nature.

Then, the Academic Cotta, arguing against Epicureanism, introduces the beginning of Protagoras’ *On Gods* along with the atheists, Diagoras and Theodorus. He argues against Velleius, who insists that all men accepted the existence of the gods, by using these examples:

[T5: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.23.63 = DK. 80 A23 = Cap. A23]

nam Abderites quidem Protagoras, cuius a te modo mentio facta est, sophistes temporibus illis vel maximus, cum in principio libri sic posuisset, “*de divis neque ut sint neque ut non sint habeo dicere*”, Atheniensium iussu urbe atque agro est exterminatus librique eius in contione combusti.

As for Protagoras of Abdera whom you mentioned just now, and who was quite the most eminent sophist of that time, it was in consequence of this stating at the beginning of this work, “*On gods I am unable to say either that they are or that they are not*”, that he was banished by a decree of the Athenians from their city and territory, and his books burnt in the public assembly.

Cotta presents Protagoras’ thought as a citation, which does not contain the phrase “what they are like”. Compared with T4, the omission in T5 seems to reflect Cotta’s intention to argue that not everyone accepted the existence of the gods.15

[T6: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.42.117]

*ego ne Protagoram quidem, cui neutrum licuerit, nec esse deos nec non esse.*

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15 Commenting on this passage, Dyck suggests that the phrase “what they are like in form” is lacking because that topic is picked up later in section 65 (A. R. Dyck, *Cicero, De Natura Deorum Book I*, Cambridge, 2003, 144). In any case, it is likely that Cotta (or author Cicero) modified the statement in this particular context.
I do not think myself that that could have been the case even with Protagoras, who was neither satisfied that the gods were, nor that they were not.

Cotta omits the phrase “what they are like” again like in T5, in the context of Sceptics’ criticism of Epicureans.

When Cicero discussed Protagoras together with other problematic thinkers, he must have consulted the doxographical texts. As for the divine things, Eudemus of Rhodes, a pupil of Aristotle, is said to have written Studies on the Divine, 6 volumes (τῶν περὶ τὸ θεὸν ἱστορίας α’ - ς’). Theophrastus is reported to have written the treatise of the same title in addition to the work On Gods (περὶ θεῶν), 3 volumes. Although Fr. 150 of Eudemus (Wehrli) contains no reference to Protagoras, we assume that some testimonies were included in the doctrines on the divine collected and studied in the Peripatetic School as a part of doxographies on physics. Those doxographical sources must have been available to Cicero and other ancient authors.

In the early first century AD, the first chapter of Valerius Maximus’ Memorable Deeds and Sayings, about divine things, presented the anecdote of Protagoras, preserved in two later excerpts of which the original text was lost:

[T7: Valerius Maximus, Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium, 1. 1. ext. 7]


The Athenians expelled the philosopher Protagoras because he dared to write that he did not know, first, whether gods are, and second, if they are, what they are like.

[B, Nepotianus] Pythagoras philosophus ab Atheniensibus pulsus est libriique eius publice exusti, quod scripserat ignorandi se an di essent, ac si essent, quales essent non posse sciri.

The philosopher Pythagoras was expelled by the Athenians and his books publicly burned because he had written that he did not know whether the gods are and that if they are, he cannot know what they are like.

The second excerpt [B] mistook Pythagoras for Protagoras. Since Valerius usually used Latin

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16 Cf. Damascius, Dubitationes et Solutiones de Primis Principiis, 124, l.319 (Ruelle) = fr. 150 (Wehrli).
17 Cf. DL. 5.48.
18 ignorandi N: ignora<re se> an di Mai: ignora<ri> an di Halm.
19 But it is also possible that Valerius mistook and Paris corrected it.
authors, such as Cicero, we might suppose that the anecdote came from *De Natura Deorum* 1.12.29 (T4). However, the pair of “whether gods are” and “what they are like” (quales) does not match it, or the other testimonies of Cicero (T5, T6). On the other hand, the reports of banishment and burning books are mentioned in *De Natura Deorum* 1.23.63 (T5), not in 1.12.29 (T4). Valerius may have used some other Latin sources as well.

In the edited texts of Philodemus, an Epicurean philosopher contemporary of Cicero, we can find no direct reference to Protagoras’ *On Gods*, but the following two are relevant:

[R3: Philodemus, *De Pietate*, col. 22.1-4 (Gomperz) = P. Herc 1428, XV 1-8 (2481, col. 367, 20-23, Obbink)]

[伾 τοις ἄγνωστοιν εἰς πνες εἰσὶ θε[οι]ς λέγοντας ἢ ποιοί πνεύς εἴ[ι]σιν…

Those who insist that they are ignorant of whether gods are, or what they are like…

Diels included this papyrus fragment from Gomperz’ edition, as coming from the same source as Cicero (1.12.29 = T4). The same work contains another possible allusion to Protagoras:

[R4: Philodemus, *De Pietate*, 1.519-530 = 1077 col. 19.1-15 (Obbink)]


Epicurus criticized those who rejected the divine from beings as insane. In the 12th Book [of *On Nature*], he criticizes Prodicus, Diagoras, Critias and others as being mad and paranoiac, and compares them to bacchants.

Philodemus introduced here Epicurus’s criticism of the atheists, by reference to Prodicus, Diagoras, Critias “and others”; Obbink in his commentary suggests that they may include Protagoras, but I think it unlikely that Epicurus omitted the name of Protagoras, who was better known than the three. Rather, I suspect that Epicurus himself did not include Protagoras in this group, i.e. the thinkers who rejected gods from existing things. Although Epicurus gave a wrong

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20 The new edition of *On Piety, Part 2* is expected to come out.
description that Protagoras was a pupil of Democritus, he does not seem to have been particularly critical to him, and may have located Protagoras’ position on the gods differently.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that Diogenes of Oenoanda in the second century criticized Diagoras and Protagoras as atheists, in defending Epicurus as not denying the existence of the gods.24

[T8: Diogenes Oenoandensis, fr. 16, II.1-III.14 (Smith) = DK. 80 A23 = Cap. A23]


Protagoras of Abdera has submitted practically the same idea as Diagoras, but uses different ways of speaking, trying to avoid excessive boldness. For when he said, “I do not know if gods are”, it is the same as saying “I know that there are no gods”. If he had opposed to the first phrase [“I do not know if gods are”] “I do not know the gods”, probably it would have been appropriate to avoid the appearance of completely negative views on the gods, but would have been a euphemistic phrase.

But he says, “I do not know that gods are”, but does not say “I do not know that they are not”. He does exactly the same thing as Diagoras, who incessantly insisted that I do not know that gods are. Therefore, as I stated, Protagoras is essentially submitting the same idea as Diagoras.

Here Diogenes put together Diagoras and Protagoras, differently from Philodemus and Epicurus (On Nature 12), and therefore this should be his original argument. Diogenes understood the statement of Protagoras in the form of “if gods are”, as Timon (T2) and Philodemus (R3)

reported, but not in the form of “either that gods are or that they are not” as in Cicero. If Diogenes had had the latter form in mind, his argument could not have equated it with Diagoras. In this way, it matters much in which form each author understood the statement of Protagoras.

(3) Lists of atheists

In late antiquity, Protagoras came to be included in the list of atheists.²⁵ Philo of Alexandria in the first century BC mentioned the man-measure thesis in relation to the impiety of Protagoras, and compared him with Cain.²⁶ His expression “impious thought” (ἀσεβοδόξα δόξα) must have been a reference to Protagoras’ trial with the On Gods Statement in mind.

Flavius Josephus in the first century AD introduced Protagoras as the man who “seemed to have written on gods what Athenians did not agree” (γράψαι τι δόξας οὐχ ὁμολογούμενον τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις περὶ θεῶν), when he discussed the impiety of Anaxagoras, Diogoras of Melos and Socrates.²⁷ He drew a list of the stories of impiety trials in Athens. Similarly, Plutarch in Life of Nicias mentioned the banishment of Protagoras, and compared it with the impiety trials of Anaxagoras and Socrates.²⁸ In this way, a list of “impiety trials” was fixed in this period, and people mentioned these names in the context of impiety.²⁹

Libanius in the fourth century also juxtaposed Anaxagoras, Protagoras and Diagoras in relation to the trial of Socrates:

[T9: Libanius, Apologia Socratis, 153-154]

Πρωταγόραν ἔξεκηρύξατε καλῶς καὶ προσηκόντως ζητοῦντα περὶ θεῶν εἴτ᾽ εἰσὶν εἴτ᾽ οὐκ εἰσὶ.

You rightly and properly banished Protagoras, who inquired on gods whether they are or they are not.

These references treat Protagoras in the context of the impiety trial rather than examining his...

²⁶ Philo Judaeus, De posteritate Caini 35 (cf. 38).
²⁷ Flavius Josephus, Contra Apionem II, 266.
²⁸ Plutarchus, Nicias 23.3 (= DK. 59A18, Cap. A11a).
²⁹ Cf. Athenaeus (second to third century), Deipnosophistae, 13.611A-B: Wilamowitz-Moellendorf supposed that Protagoras here was confused with Diogoras, and suggested a lacuna. Kaibel in the Teubner edition (1890) followed this suggestion and supplied “ἐξεκηρύξθη καὶ Πρωταγόρας”.
thought or statement itself. We remember that Timon already compared the impiety trial of Protagoras with that of Socrates.

The article “what is the god?” in Ps-Plutarch’s *Epitome* referred to Diagoras of Melos, Theodorus of Cyrene and Euemerus of Thegea as those who denied the existence of gods, but did not mention Protagoras in this context.\(^{30}\) If the source of this doxography was Aetius (ca. 150 AD), as Diels examined, it might be the case that Protagoras was not included yet in the list of atheists at this stage. This treatment can be justified because Protagoras cast a doubt on the existence of god but did not deny it. As far as we understand from the reconstructed statement, his position was sceptic or agnostic but not clearly atheistic.

So the careful distinction between agnostic and atheist may have come from Theophrastus. However, it is probable that religious concerns, getting stronger in the Roman period, eliminated the distinction and regarded Protagoras as atheist. Some doxographers treated Protagoras as atheist (see also Epiphanius’ T\(_{13}\) below).\(^{31}\) Although doxographical texts were edited and added through generations in antiquity, we can suppose that Protagoras was added to the atheist list in a later stage. Just as the treatment of Protagoras changed from Epicurus and Philodemus to Diogenes of Oenoanda in Epicureanism, the doxographical tradition changed his position concerning atheism: it simplified his thought and included him in the group of atheists.

Maximus of Tyre in the second century, in relation to Plato’s view on gods, discussed thinkers of the opposite position, namely, Leucippus, Democritus, Straton, Epicurus, Diagoras and Protagoras. While Diagoras denied the existence of gods, Protagoras was said to make the statement:

κἂν ἄγνωςίν τί φης, ὡς Πρωταγόρας.

You might say being ignorant of what they are, as Protagoras.

Similarly, Claudius Aelianus in the second to third century seems to allude to Protagoras’ statement:


\(^{31}\) Ps-Galen, *De historia philosophica*, 2.29, Περὶ θεοῦ in the Kühn edition includes “Πρωταγόραν τὸν Ἡλείον” who dared to say that gods are not (ὁ γὰρ εἶναι θεοῦς εἰπεῖν τετολμήκασιν) (*Medicorum Graecorum Opera*, XIX, ed. Kühn (1830), 250). But Diels changed this name to Diogoras of Melos (Διαγόραν τὸν Μῆλιον) in section 35 of *Doxographi Graeci*, 618. If the latter is correct, Protagoras was not included in the atheists.
Then, he gave a list of atheists: Euemerus, Diogenes of Phrygia, Hippo, Diagoras, Sosias, and Epicurus, without reference to Protagoras. Also, Minucius Felix in the third century discussed Protagoras besides Theodorus of Cyrene and Diagoras of Melos.32

It is in this trend that the sceptic Sextus Empiricus in the second to third century cited Protagoras’ statement when he contrasted and examined various doctrines:

Sextus presented various arguments that deny the existence of gods, and introduced Protagoras after the atheists, namely Euemerus, Diagoras, Prodicus and Critias. He carefully indicated that only some people treated Protagoras as atheist. Timon’s testimony (T3) follows this passage.

(4) Criticisms from Christians

It became a custom to mention Protagoras in the Christian criticism of atheism of Greek pagans. Theophilus, Patriarch of Antioch in the second century, discussing the
contradictory views of philosophers on gods, examined Cleitomachus of the Academy, Critias, Protagoras and Euemerus as atheists. This list was shared by ancient authors inside and outside Christianity:

[T12: Theophilus, Ad Autolycum, 3.7 = Cap. A23]

τί δ’ οὐχί καὶ Κριτίας καὶ Πρωταγόρας ὁ Ἀβδηρίτης λέγειν: “ἐὰν γὰρ εἰσίν θεοὶ, οὐ δύναμαι περὶ αὐτῶν λέγειν, οὔτε ὅποιοί εἰσιν δηλώσαι: πολλὰ γὰρ ἔστιν τὰ κυλώντα με”.

What about Critias and Protagoras of Abdera, who says, “I cannot tell on gods whether they are, nor can I show what they are like. For there are many things that hinder me.”

Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus in the fourth century, seemed to quote the statement without mentioning the name of Protagoras in his theological treatise, Ancoratus, written in the form of a letter to Christians living in southern Anatolia. The phraseology is very similar of that of Theophilus, so that they may come from a common source:

[R6: Epiphanius, Anacoratus 104.2]33

ἄλλος δὲ, κομικὸς Εὐδαιμόν τοῦνομα,34 φησίν, “εἴπερ εἰσί θεοὶ, οὐ δύναμαι περὶ αὐτῶν λέγειν οὔδ’ ὅποιοὶ τινὲς εἰσὶ ίδέαν δηλώσαι, πολλά γὰρ εἰσὶ τὰ κυλώντα με”.

Another person, a comic named Eudaimon, says, “If indeed gods exist, I am not able to talk on them nor make clear what they are like in form. For there are many things that hinder me.”

Epiphanius must have known that it came from Protagoras, since he reported it in the doxographical work against the Heretics:

[T13: Epiphanius, Adversus Haereses, 3.2.9, 3.16 (DG.591) = Cap. A23]

Πρωταγόρας ὁ τοῦ Μενάνδρου Ἀβδηρίτης ἄρα μὴ θεοὶ εἶναι μηδὲ δλος θεῶν υπάρχειν.

Protagoras of Abdera, son of Menandrus said that there were no gods, and that generally speaking god did not exist.

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33 This passage is not usually included in Protagoras’ testimonies, but Barnes, “Protagoras the atheist?”, cites it as one of the 10 “quotations” in 202.

34 For this unknown (or fictional) poet, see Müller, “Protagoras über die Götter”, 324, n.43; Barnes, “Protagoras the atheist?”, 200, n.25 (cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf).
Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century, provided the most important pieces of information in *Preparation for the Gospel*. Book 14 contains two different testimonies:


ο μὲν γὰρ Δημοκρίτου γεγονός ἡταῖρος, ὁ Πρωταγόρας, ἄθεον ἐκτῆσατο δόξαν· λέγεται γούν τοιῆς κεχρήσθαι εἰσβολὴ ἐν τῷ Περὶ θεῶν σημαίνεται: “περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ οἶδα οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὖθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὖθ’ ὑπὸ τίνες ἴδεαν”.

Protagoras who belonged to the group of Democritus caused the reputation of atheists. Because he is told that at least such an introduction part was used in the book *On Gods*. “On gods I do not know either that they are or that they are not, nor what they are like in form.”

Eusebius juxtaposed Protagoras with Democritus, Heraclitus and Parmenides.

A little later in the same book, he cited Protagoras from *On Philosophy*, written by Aristocles, Peripatetic philosopher of the second century, and discussed *On Gods* before the man-measure thesis; this treatment is similar to Plato’s *Theaetetus*.35


tὸν δὲ Πρωταγόραν λόγος ἔχει κεκληθαι ἄθεων. γράφων γε τοι καὶ αὐτός Περὶ θεῶν εἰσβολὴ τοιῆς ἐχρήσατο· “περὶ μὲν οὐν θεῶν οὐκ οἶδα οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὖθ’ ὑπὸ τίνες ἴδεαν· πολλὰ γὰρ ἔστι τοι ἔκλυσθαν μὲ ἐκαστὸν τούτων εἰδέναι”. τοῦτον Ἀθηναίοι φηήζουν δῆμος ταύτως ἐν μέση τῇ ἀγορῇ κατέκαυσαν.

There is a theory that Protagoras was called an atheist. In writing his *On Gods*, he used the following introduction. “On gods I do not know that they are, nor what they are like in form, as there are many things that hinder me from knowing each of these.” The Athenians banished him and burned his books publicly in the Agora.

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35 M. L. Chiesara, *Aristocles of Messene, Testimonia and Fragments*, Oxford, 2001, 36. Chiesara introduces Gigon’s suggestion that of the two reports of Eusebius, the first (14.3 = T14) corresponds to Cicero *De Natura Deorum* 1.12.29 (T4) and the second (Aristocles = T15) corresponds to Sextus (T11) (p. xxxii).
The citation of Protagoras’ statement differs in some points from the previous citation of Eusebius himself (T14) and from Diogenes Laertius (T1). First, the main verb is “I do not know”, instead of “I cannot know”, and second, it does not contain the second option “that they are not” (ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν), third, four words “ἐστι μὲ ἐκαστὸν τούτων” are added in the reason. The previous citation of Eusebius (T14) does not have two lines of the reason, but in this sentence, the word “εἰσίν” is attested by Diogenes Laertius (T1) and the word “μὲ” is included in Sextus (T11) and Theophilus (T12, with Epiphanius R6). It is strange that Diels neglected this testimony in reconstructing the fragment 4.36

Next let us see Johannes Chrysostomus and Theodoretus in the fourth to fifth century:

[T16: Joannes Chrysostomus, In Epistolam I ad Corinthios, 36 (Migne)]
καὶ γὰρ Προταγόρας παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς, ἐπειδὴ ἐτόλμησεν εἰπεῖν, ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα θεοὺς…
Protagoras was a member of them, who dared to say that “I do not know gods.”

Protagoras is discussed along with “the Milesian Diagoras”, Theodorus the atheist and Socrates. We see here that it mistook “Melian (Μήλιος)” for “Milesian (Μιλήσιος)”.

[T17: Theodoretus, Graecarum Affectionum Curatio, 2.113 = Cap. B7/A23]
βδελύξεται δὲ καὶ Προταγόρου τοὺς ἀμφιβόλους περὶ τὸν θεὸν καὶ ἀπίστους λόγους·
ἐκείνου γὰρ ἐστὶ τὰ τοιάδε: “περὶ μὲν οὖν τὸν θεὸν οὐκ οἶδα, οὔτε εἰ εἰσίν, οὔθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, οὖθ’ ὁποίοι τινές τὴν ἴδεαν εἰσίν”.
Protagoras’ ambivalent and unbelievable discourse on the god was also disliked. His argument was like this. “On gods I do not know either that they are or that they are not, nor what they are like in form.”

Theodoretus discussed the atheism of Diagoras, Theodorus of Cyrene and Euemerus, and he mentioned Protagoras after the materialist view on the divine by the Stoics. Since both Theodoretus and Chrysostomus (T16) committed the same mistake (writing “Milesian”), we can

36 Before editing Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, Diels commented in relation to Cicero (T4), in DG. 535, “Euseb. P.E. XIV 3. XII 19 [= Theodor. gr. aff. c. II 113]”. The reference to Eusebius is T14, but the latter may be mistaken for XIV 19 (10). If so, Diels might have wrongly assumed that T15 had the same report with Theodoretus (T17). But they are different. Index of DK. does not contain P.E. 14.19.10. See note 8 above.
assume that they depended on the same source.

In the same work of Theodoretus, Protagoras was discussed between Diagoras and Epicurus:

[T18: Theodoretus, Graecarum Affectionum Curatio, 6.6]
Πρωταγόραν δὲ ἀμφίβολον περὶ γε τούτων ἐσχήκειν λέγουσι δόξαν: φάναι γὰρ αὐτὸν εἰρήκασιν ὁὐκ εἰδέναι, οὔτε εἶπερ εἰσὶ θεοί, οὔτε εἶ παντάπασιν οὐκ εἰσίν.

People say that Protagoras had ambivalent views on these [gods]. Because it is said that he insisted he did not know whether gods are, or that they are not at all.

Among Latin Christians, Lactantius in the early fourth century mentioned Protagoras in two works. In *Divine Institutes*, he discussed Protagoras as the thinker who cast doubt on the gods, and Diagoras, as the one who denied the existence of gods, after Democritus and Epicurus. In *On the Wrath of the God*, he mentioned Protagoras again as someone who insisted that the divine world is beyond human reason.

Also, Augustin in the fourth to fifth century in *Against the letters of Petilianus* examined “the atheist Protagoras, who denied the god” (atheus Protagoras, qui esse deum negavit), along with the Academic sceptics. In this way, Protagoras was repeatedly criticized by Christian authors as atheist.

(5) Biographical sources

Finally, let us observe four biographies of Protagoras. The longest biography of Diogenes Laertius in the early third century was already examined (T1, R1). The other three also mentioned his argument on gods.

Philostratus in the second to third century in *Lives of the Sophists* explained his bold statement on gods as influence from the Persian education. In this biography, the impiety trial and its aftermath (shipwreck) are introduced:

[T19: Flavius Philostratus, Vitae Sophistarum, 1.494 = DK. 80 A2 = Cap. A2]
τὸ δὲ ἀπορεῖν φάσκειν, εἶτε εἰσὶ θεοί, εἶτε οὐκ εἰσί, δοκεῖ μοι Πρωταγόρας ἐκ τῆς Περσικῆς

38 Augustinus, Contra litteras Petiliani, 3.21.25 (cf. 22.26).
It seems to me that Protagoras deviated from the law by claiming that it was difficult to say whether gods are or are not, because of his Persian education.

The scholia on Plato’s Republic 600C, attributed to Heschyius of Miletus in the sixth century cites the statement:

[T20: Scholia Platonica ad Rep. 600c = Hesychius Milesius, Onomatologos = DK. 80 A3 = Cap. B7/A3]

ἐκαύθη δὲ τὰ τούτου βιβλία ὑπ’ Ἀθηναίων· εἴπε γάρ· περὶ θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὔτε ὡς εἰσίν οὔτε ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν.39

His books were burned, because he said, “On gods I cannot know either that they are or that they are not.”

The article of Protagoras in Suda, edited in the tenth century, gave a similar report:

[T21: Suda, Π.2958 (Πρωταγόρας) = Cap. B7/A3a]

tοῦ δὲ Πρωταγόρου τὰ βιβλία ὑπὸ Ἀθηναίων ἐκαύθη, διότι λόγον ποτὲ εἶπεν οὕτως ἀρξάμενος· “περὶ θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔτε ὡς εἰσίν, οὔτε ὡς οὐκ εἰσί”.

Protagoras’ books were burned by Athenians. For he said this in the beginning: “On gods I cannot know either that they are or that they are not”.

Both Suda and Platonic Scholia most probably depended on the common source.40

3. Variations and reconstruction of the fragment

We have seen 21 testimonies and 6 relevant texts from Plato to Byzantine writers. Although the transmitted texts contain only two sentences at longest, it was discussed in so many contexts and in so many different forms that the variations of the reports perplex us. Now we examine each part of the On Gods Statement.

39 εἶτα…εἶτα, Par. 2622.
40 They differ only on the movable ν in “ἐστιν” in the modern editions.
[1. Beginning]
The beginning phrase of the Statement differs in articles and particles:

1a) περὶ θεῶν: Libanius (T9), Scholia Platonica (T20), Suda (T21)
   de divis: Cicero (T5)
1b) περὶ μὲν θεῶν: DL (T1), Eusebius (T14) = [DK, Cap, LM]
1c) περὶ δὲ θεῶν: Sextus (T11)
1d) περὶ μὲν οὖν θεῶν: Aristocles in Eusebius (T15)
1e) περὶ μὲν οὖν τὸν θεὸν: Theodoretus (T17)

1a lacks any conjunctive particle as the beginning of the writing. If it starts with the article “μὲν” (as 1b), we may wonder if the corresponding “δὲ” comes later, or it is the μὲν solitarium.41 Also, the particle “δὲ” (1c) or “μὲν οὖν”(1d, 1e) may come at the beginning.42

[2. Main Verbs]
Next, there are variations concerning the main verb and its mode. We can see two major options and their variations (combinations):

2a) “I do not know”
   1) οὐκ οἰδα: Eusebius (T14), Aristocles in Eusebius (T15), [Johannes Chrysostomus (T16)], Theodoretus (T17)
   2) μὴ εἰδέναι: Diogenes of Oenoanda (T8)
   3) οὐκ εἰδέναι: Theodoretus (T18)
   4) ἀγνοεῖν: Maximus of Tyre (T10)
   5) ignorare: Valerius Maximus (T7A)

2b) “I cannot know / speak”
   1) οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι: DL (T1), Scholia Platonica (T20), Suda (T21) = [DK, Cap, LM]
   2) [ἀγνωστον: Philodemus (R3)?]
   3) οὔτε δύναμαι λέγειν: Sextus (T11)
   4) οὐ δύναμαι λέγειν οὔτε δηλώσαι: Theophilus (T12), Epiphanius (R6)
   5) neque ... habeo dicere: Cicero (T5)
   6) [ἀπορεῖν: Philostratus (T19)]

2c) Combination (=2a+2b)

41 W. Kranz suggests in his comment that it continues like “περὶ δὲ ἄνθρωπων…” (DK. II. 265).
1) οὐτ᾽ εἰδέναι οὕτε δύνασθαι ἀθρήσασθαι: Timon (T3)
2) ignorari … non posse sciri: Valerius Maximus (T7B)

2d Uncertain
1) ἐκ τε τοῦ λέγειν καὶ τοῦ γράφειν ἔξαιρο: Plato (T2)
2) neutrum licuerit: Cicero (T6)

The decisive statement “I do not know” (2a) was the target of the criticism by Diogenes of Oenoanda (T8), but in the later testimonies, this reading was included only in Christians like Eusebius and Theodoretus, in relation to the criticism of atheism.

The other option is not an assertion but a denial of possibility (2b). The impossibility of knowing (2b-1) is seen in Platonic Scholia, DL, and Suda (doxographical tradition), and was probably closer to the original statement. On the other hand, although it is not immediately clear which was used, “know” or “speak”, “I cannot know” (2b-1) seems more probable because the phrases “οὐ λέγω” and “οὐκ ἐχω λέγειν” are not reported.

[3. Alternatives]

There are three patterns of the object clauses:

3a) Two alternatives: “are / are not”
1) ὡς εἰσίν ἢ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν: Plato (T2)
2) οὗθ᾽ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ᾽ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, BP [εἰθ᾽ ὡς εἰσίν εἰθ᾽ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, FD]: DL (T1)
3) neque ut sint neque ut non sint: Cicero (T5)
4) nec esse deos nec non esse: Cicero (T6)
5) εἴτε εἰσίν εἴτε οὐκ εἰσί: Libanius (T9)
6) οὔτε εἴπερ εἰσί θεοὶ οὔτε εἰ παντάπασιν οὐκ εἰσίν: Theodoretus (T18)
7) οὔτε ὡς εἰσίν οὔτε ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν [εἴπε...εἴπε, Par.2622]: Scholia Platonica (T20)
8) οὔτε ὡς εἰσίν οὔτε ὡς οὐκ εἰσί: Suda (T21)
9) εἴπε εἰσί θεοὶ εἴπε οὐκ εἰσί: Philostratus (T19)
10) ἄρα γέ εἰσίν ἢ οὐκ εἰσίν: Aelianus (R5)

3b) Two alternatives: “are / what they are like”
1) ὁποιοὶ τινὲς εἰσι καὶ εἴ τινες: Timon (T3)
2) an di essent, deinde, si sint, quales: Valerius Maximus (T7A, B)
3) οὔτε εἰ εἰσίν οὗθ᾽ ὁποιοὶ τινὲς εἰσί: Sextus (T11)
4) εἴπε εἰσίν θεοὶ … οὔτε ὁποῖοι εἰσίν: Theophilus (T12), Epiphanius (R6)
5) οὗθ᾽ ὡς εἰσίν οὗθ᾽ ὁποῖοι τινὲς ἰδέαν: Aristocles (T15)
6) [εἰ τινες εἰσὶ θεοὶ ἢ ποιoi τινὲς εἰσίν: Philodemus (R3)]
7) [εἰ θεοὶ εἰσιν: Diogenes of Oenoanda (T8), only one option]

3c) Three alternatives: “are / are not / what they are like”

1) sint non sint qualesve sint: Cicero (T4)
2) οὐθ᾽ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ᾽ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ᾽ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν: Eusebius (T14) = [DK, Cap, LM]
3) οὖτε εἰ εἰσίν οὐθ᾽ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ᾽ ὡς εἰσίν τιν ἢ ὡς εἰσίν: Theodoretus (T17)

The following passage may support that the alternative of 3a (or 3c, against 3b) is more appropriate:

[R7: Seneca, Epistulae Morales 88.43-45 = DK. 80A20]
Protagoras ait de omni re in utramque partem disputari posse ex aequo et de hac ipsa, an omnis res in utramque partem disputabilis sit...
Si Protagoras credo, nihil in rerum natura est nisi dubium;
Protagoras argued that everything could be discussed equally on either side and that this was exactly the case, that both sides would argue about all matters. … If you believe what Protagoras says, there will be no doubt about the nature of things.

Seneca does not discuss the theme on gods here, but the topics of Protagoras must include a discussion of “whether gods are, or are not”. It corresponds to the pair of “are” and “are not” in the man-measure thesis, and Diogenes Laertius juxtaposed these two statements (both are at the beginning of his books). The alternative of “gods are” and “gods are not” must be an important case of his argument.43

If we consider why the three types, 3a-c, appeared, we can explain it on the assumption that some elements in 3a and 3b dropped from the original 3c.

[4. Conjunctives]

The conjunctives that lead the object clauses are either “εἰ” and “εἴτε” (indirect

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43 Plato in the Sophist defines the sophist’s art as controverting (ἀντιλέγειν) on everything: cf. 232b-233c, and a reference to Protagoras’ On Wrestling in 232d-e.
question) or “ὡς” (substantive clause):

4a) εἴ(τε): Timon (T3), Diogenes of Oenoanda (T8), Libanius (T9), Sextus (T11), Theophilus (T12), [εἰπερ, Epiphanius (R6)], Philostratus (T19), Theodoretus (T18), [Philodemus (R3)]

4b) ὡς: Plato (T2), DL (T1), Eusebius (T14), Aristocles in Eusebius (T15), Scholia Platonica (T20), Suda (T21) = [DK, Cap, LM]

4c) Mixture of the two: Theodoretus (T17)

While the expression of 4a has a sceptical nuance and 4b an agnostic nuance, it does not correspond to the assertion / negation of possibility of the main verb. The alternative of “are / what they are like” (3b) takes “εἰ” (4a) except Aristocles, and this syntax is more natural. In Aristocles, it may be that one is dropped of the original three options. If so, Eusebius presented a more precise report in T14.

[5. Reasons]

The second sentence of giving reasons was reported only in 4 testimonies and 1 relevant text:

5a) πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι: DL (T1) = [DK]

5b) πολλὰ γὰρ ἐστιν τὰ κωλύοντά με: Theophilus (T13), Epiphanius (R6)

5c) πολλὰ γὰρ ἐστι τὰ κωλύοντα με: Sextus (T11)

5d) πολλὰ γὰρ ἐστι τὰ κωλύοντα με ἐκαστὸν τούτων εἰδέναι: Aristocles (T15) = [Cap]

5e) ἢ τε ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς δόν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου: DL (T1) alone = [DK, LM]

If we can take the longest sentence of Aristocles (5d. T15) to be the original of the first half of the reason sentence, then the others can be seen as deviations from it. While DK. adopts 5a, three testimonies of Theophilus, Sextus and Aristocles-Eusebius (5b, 5c, 5d) have the subjective object “με”, and it is most probable that it was originally included. And if “με” was there, it is also natural to include its verb “εἰδέναι” and perhaps the object “ἐκαστὸν τούτων” (5d). In this long sentence, the copulative verb “ἐστι” may be retained and not omitted.

The latter half of the reason sentence is reported only in Diogenes Laertius (Capizzi doubts it and excludes it from his reconstruction of the fragment). But since this is rhetorical and incomplete as a sentence, it may well be Protagoras’ original wording. Thus, we can

44 The verb κωλύω ordinarily has accusative and infinitive as the object. LSJ includes two examples of having persons (Acc.) only, but no example of having infinitive only. Cf. Pl. Phd. 108d: τοῖς τόποις αὐτῆς οὐδὲν με κωλύει λέγειν (Maria Michela Sassi sees in this whole passage an allusion to Protagoras’ Statement); Crat. 384b: οὐδὲν ἄν ἐκώλυον σε αὐτίκα μᾶλα εἰδέναι τὴν ἀληθείαν (in relation to Prodicus).
suppose that the reason sentence was originally 5d plus 5e.

[6. Possible reconstruction]

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι σοθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὅποιοι τινες ἴδεαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κοιλὸντά με ἐκαστὸν τοῦτων εἰδέναι, ἢ τε ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὃν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

On Gods I cannot know either that they are or that they are not, nor what they are like in form. For there are many things that hinder me from knowing: both the obscurity of things and the shortness of human life.

4. Conclusion for Part 1

The beginning of Protagoras’ work On Gods was transmitted in so many ways that it is natural for us to suppose that ancient authors (probably after Plato and Timon) did not have access to the original book or text. If that is the case, it is more important to examine different testimonies than to reconstruct the original statement, if we want to see Protagoras’ role in the history of philosophy. My close examination illuminates how Protagoras was seen and criticised in each stage of ancient philosophy and religion. While the reconstruction, if correct, is useful for hypothetical explanations of the later traditions, it is not the singular aim of our study.

One important example is seen in the different versions of the object clause. If our reconstruction is correct, two traditions can be seen as departing from the three alternatives: “οὐθ’ ὡς εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὐθ’ ὅποιοι τινες ἴδεαν”. One is to drop the second option, “that they are, and what they are like”, and the other version is to drop the third option “that they are and that they are not”. The former version was already used in Timon and caused a misunderstanding in Diogenes of Oenoanda.

We can trace how Protagoras’ controversial sceptical or agnostic statement came to be interpreted as atheistic. Whereas he was treated carefully in earlier stages, he later became one of the representative atheists.45 In this context, the Christian thinkers tended to interpret his statement as the definite assertion that “I do not know”.

Even if Protagoras presented this statement as one of his controversies (cf. R6), it

45 There might have been different traditions of “impiety trial” and “atheism”, which became mixed up later: cf. Müller, ‘Protagoras über die Göter’, 328–9; G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, Cambridge, 1981, 164.
was repeatedly discussed by those who had no direct access to the statement or the book. This situation produced an interesting set of arguments on gods in antiquity.

Although Protagoras’ statement was discussed and interpreted in many forms in antiquity, we should treat all of them as forming the tradition of Protagoras’ controversy. The transmission of Protagoras’ On Gods may be considered *mouvance*; if we dismiss any testimony that deviates from the original, almost nothing remains. Therefore, the entire tradition should be considered Protagoras’ legacy.

Part 2. Context of the On Gods Statement

1. The reading of a book as speech act

   Next, let us examine the statement itself. Although various interpretations have been proposed, we should first consider its context in the fifth century BC.

   To consider the context of Protagoras’ On Gods, the most important point should be that it was a book to be read out loud. The report in Diogenes Laertius (R1, T1) includes some details: it was read in public, either in Euripides’ house, Megaclides’ house or at the Lyceum, and it was read by Archagoras, a disciple of Protagoras’. This information was connected with his impiety trial and death, which the historian Philochorus probably reported (DL. 9.55). Although we may not be able to believe everything in the traditional story (impiety trial, burning books and tragic death), I hope we can assume one thing – that Protagoras wrote a book on gods and read it out in public.

   It is also said that On Gods was the *first* book to be read aloud in public (R1). Modern scholars are perplexed by this report, about how his first recital caused the impiety trial near the end of his life. But we can avoid a serious difficulty if we assume that the book did not immediately raise controversy but led to a prosecution much later, probably for political reasons associated with Pericles.

   The report that the book was read by his disciple is slightly perplexing: why did Protagoras not read it himself, and why was this particular information recorded? The context seems to suggest that it was to avoid direct accusation of impiety, but in this case, the attribution of the reading role to someone else may be a later addition.

   Reading is a part of teaching. Diogenes Laertius also reports that “Protagoras and
Prodicus of Ceos gave public readings for which fees were charged” (9.50). The gathering of the sophists in Callias’ house in Plato’s Protagoras shows that they did not always charge fees but sometimes gave lectures for free to advertise their profession and recruit pupils. We have another story in Plato’s Parmenides that Zeno of Elea, while visiting Athens and staying at Pythodorus’ house, read his own treatise aloud in front of his audience, and they discussed his arguments. For the intellectuals of the fifth century BC, reading a book was a major activity, whether their aim was financial or not.

Philostratus, in Lives of the Sophists, reports that Prodicus was the first to compose a story (“Choice of Heracles”); he visited different cities, where he charged a fee to recite it. His activity is compared to musical performances by Orpheus and Thamyras (482–3). Competing with him, Gorgias is said to have engaged in extempore speech. But Gorgias also composed written speeches for epideictic purposes, namely Encomium of Helen and Defense of Palamedes: these playful works intended to advertise his skill in speech to prospective pupils. The main activity of the sophists was to give lectures rather than to engage in academic inquiry and to establish systematic doctrines. Writing was not their main concern, just as Socrates did not write in this period. Instead, the sophists raised intellectual issues, often in a radical and provocative manner and, thus, challenged both society and philosophy. Protagoras’ book On Gods must be one such book: that is, a performativpe and pedagogical device rather than a theoretical achievement.

This point is crucial to evaluating the sophists’ activities. Of their own writings, only a few short pieces by Gorgias, Antisthenes and Alcidamas have survived. It is not, however, appropriate to compare them with the dialogues of Plato (Corpus Platonicum) or the lectures of Aristotle (Corpus Aristotelicum): the philosophers’ written works were aimed at the systematic inquiry into sciences and philosophy and at the construction of theories. By contrast, the sophists emphasised oral teaching and performances in front of either a large audience or a small group of pupils; they did not make it a priority to write down theoretical treatises on their ideas in any systematic way. Therefore, it is not surprising that Protagoras’ On Gods did not survive long. Likewise, Prodicus’ “Choice of Heracles” survived only in Xenophon’s report in the Memorabilia (2.1).

Can we then discuss the “theology” or “epistemology” of Protagoras? Modern scholars tend to connect the On Gods fragment with other theses and reconstruct a systematic philosophical position for Protagoras. Some connect it with the so-called new fragment of
Didymus the Blind. But if we imagine each particular occasion in which he performed a reading of the book, I think that his contemporary audience were not expecting to hear a systematic philosophical position, and they did not directly associate it with other treatises. Books and different topics may have been linked with each other in some way, but it was not Protagoras’ original intention to put forward a part or a “chapter” of his entire work. Each book and each reading was independent, performed in good time (kairos) and aimed at offering his audience excitement and a new surprise.

Since there are not any other transmitted fragments from this book, some scholars cast serious doubt on whether he composed a complete book or not. For example, one may wonder what argument can come after his clear statement: “I cannot know”. But a book that is intended to be read in public need not be long. Other scholars suggest that it was a part of a larger book containing various topics. But it was probably not a good strategy to read a long book or many arguments in public. As long as On Gods was the title of his book, it is unlikely that it was a part of some other book (although we cannot exclude the possibility that the arguments were later included in a larger, compiled book). A book should perhaps be concise enough to make the greatest impact on listeners.

Nevertheless, we can imagine some further arguments to prove or explain the first statement in Protagoras’ On Gods. For example, various contradicting views on gods among Greeks and non-Greeks could support his claim that one cannot decide about gods. In this case, the effect is similar to scepticism, just as we see in the collection of contradictory arguments on the divine in Sextus Empiricus’ Against the Mathematicians Book 9.

After early performances, the book may have been circulated in Athens. Those who wanted to read it could buy or borrow it easily, as Socrates said about Anaxagoras’ book in Plato’s Apology. Books played performative roles even in circulation. They were important materials and cultural symbols: that is why the books of Protagoras were said to have been burned in public (it is unclear if this story is historically accurate).

2. Challenge to the traditional view

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48 M. Untersteiner, I Sofisti I, 2a ed., 30–3, 55–7, regards it as the first part of the Contrasting Arguments (Ἀντιλογίαι).
49 See Plato, Apology of Socrates, 26d-e, though the book of Anaxagoras was a scientific treatise.
Giving performances does not exclude one from engaging in philosophical consideration. On the contrary, performing aims at something else. It may aim at getting money, honour and a reputation for wisdom, but its main purpose was, as far as the sophists professed, to teach virtue. Therefore, we can expect some relation to virtue in Protagoras’ statement on gods.

In Greek societies, a person’s excellence was judged in accordance with traditional virtues, such as wisdom, justice, courage and temperance. Traditional values were believed to be based on the divine order, just as it was believed that the gods were the source of justice and other virtues. A person’s attitude towards the gods was also a virtue (i.e., piety). Therefore, knowing how to think about the gods was of the highest importance. Protagoras’ statement concerning man’s knowledge of the gods was directly relevant to his education of virtue. In this sense, I suspect that the *On Gods* Statement was not a purely theoretical, epistemological or theological consideration, but that it also served as practical advice for people seeking to live in accordance with complete virtue.

Plato’s *Theaetetus* suggests that this statement was complementary to the man-measure thesis (T2) in that they both indicate the priority of human standards over the traditional divine standards. Social and cultural relativism was typical in the sophistic movement, and Protagoras was obviously one of the proponents of this new thinking. In this sense, the anthropological reading of the statement must be right in its context.

On the other hand, the contrast between gods and humans, as immortal and mortal, or absolute and relative, was a typical traditional thought. Homer, Hesiod and other poets shared the epistemological pessimism that human beings lack knowledge, while gods alone know. By appealing to the shortness of human life (or mortality) and the distance between human and divine (obsccurity), Protagoras reinforced the traditional theology. The only thing he rejected was the special access poets were believed to have to divine wisdom. Even Xenophanes, who criticised ordinary human conceptions of gods, spoke as if he alone had knowledge of the gods (B34, as we see in the next section). Protagoras went further, insisting that “I cannot know”, as he is nothing but a human being.

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50 This point is closely related to the Great Myth of Protagoras in Plato’s *Protagoras*. But I do not discuss it here.
In this way, Protagoras’ challenge to the traditional views on gods was ambivalent: it maintained the traditional position of separation between divine and human, while it avowed the ignorance of the gods. Perhaps he intended to dissociate himself from atheists like Diagoras, though the chronology between these two thinkers is uncertain. In contrast to the complete denial of the existence of the gods, Protagoras’ statement was as cautious and rational as human beings can be.

However radical the statement may have sounded in Athenian society, Protagoras’ provocation was part of his performance and teaching of human virtues. If human beings cannot know about the gods, then they should not pretend to know; they should admit that they are ignorant, just as Socrates disavowed knowledge on most important things. Socrates and Protagoras belonged to the same sophistic movement, which tried to awaken people’s minds and to encourage virtues in the human perspective. It was no accident that both of them were sued in the Athenian courts for impiety (if the story about Protagoras is true). Only the firm belief in the god separated Socrates from Protagoras.

3. Intertextuality of the statement

Finally, let us examine the statement itself and examine its intertextuality in the fifth century BC. It is essential to how his contemporary audience understood this statement. As it was performed as oral narrative, the book must have been memorable, and, in particular, the first statement aimed to create the greatest impact on the audience. Its style is rhythmical like verse and catchy like an aphorism. Therefore, the first statement alone was well remembered and transmitted throughout antiquity, while the rest was completely ignored. This is also the case for the man-measure thesis, which was stated at the beginning of the book Truth.

The On Gods Statement was not only memorable; it also contained several intertextual allusions meant to entertain. First, it has a clear echo of Parmenides’ philosophy of “is” and “is not”. The statement juxtaposes “are” and “are not” in the negative: ὁθ’ ὡς εἰσίν ὁθ’ ὡς εἰσίν. The man-measure thesis also uses the “are” and “are not” pair: τὸν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τὸν δὲ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν (DK. 80 B1). It is interesting that these two statements couple the same verb in the affirmative and the negative:52 one denies both and the other affirms both, just as, in Parmenides’ poem, the goddess presented the truth as the two

52 For the double occurrence of “be”, see C. H. Kahn, The Verb “Be” in Ancient Greek, D. Reidel, 1973, 340–1, n.12.
ways: “is” and “is not” (DK. 28 B2). Protagoras used the dichotomy of Parmenides, so as not to violate his prohibition of mixing “is” with “is not”. In the latter half of the fifth century BC, all philosophers were keen to respond to Parmenides, and Protagoras clearly exhibited his concern with the problem of being. His audience was no doubt aware of it and enjoyed listening to his arguments.

He responded to Eleatic philosophy by applying one particular subject – namely, “gods” – to the verb “be”. This application brought about a new aspect of the verb “be”. Charles Kahn suggested that the phrase “that gods are / are not” was the first technically “existential” use of the verb “be”53: “that gods are” means “that gods exist”, and “that gods are not” means “that gods do not exist”. They are used along with another example of the same verb for the copulative use (omitted in Greek) that “what they are like in form”. By introducing gods to Eleatic arguments, Protagoras changed the semantics of the key word.

Influenced by Protagoras, the existential use became a focus of controversy, as we see in the famous statement of “Socrates” in Aristophanes’ Clouds (423 BC): “οὐδέ ἔστι Ζεύς,” (Zeus is not = Zeus does not exist) (367). Also, people remembered Homer, Iliad 5.183, “σάφα δ’ οὐκ οἶδ’ εἰ θεός ἔστιν” (I do not know if he is a god). According to Kahn’s analysis, this copulative verb “ἔστιν” was given the new sense of “exist” in the time of Protagoras, who may have parodied the Homeric sentence.

The application of “gods” was ironical. If one suspends judgement as to whether gods exist, how could Parmenides tell about the truth without the goddess? Thus, Protagoras’ response was both supportive and subversive in relation to Eleatic philosophy.

Going further back, Protagoras must have had Xenophanes in mind as a major target. Xenophanes was the only thinker, as far as we know, who seriously discussed our conception of the gods. By rejecting the traditional way of speaking about the gods as human invention (DK. 21 B14, 15, 16), Xenophanes tried to demonstrate a new way to speak about the gods. There are some verbal echoes in Protagoras: Xenophanes criticised the human image of gods when he said “drew the forms of gods (θεῶν ἱδέας ἔγραφον)” in B15. The phrase “ὅσποι τινες ἱδέαν” in On Gods strongly reminds us of Xenophanes’ expression.

While Protagoras shared Xenophanes’ criticism of human conceptions, he clearly opposed what Xenophanes said in this sceptical claim:

53 Kahn, The Verb “Be” in Ancient Greek, 300–2; cf. Schiappa, Protagoras and Logos, 141–2.
καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὕτως ἄνηρ ἰδεν οὐδὲ τις ἔσται
eἰδώς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων.
eἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένοι εἰπών,
αὐτὸς ὅμως σὺ πο οἶδε· δόκος δὲ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται.

There never was nor will be a man who has certain knowledge about gods and about all the things I speak of. Even if he should chance to say the complete truth, yet he himself knows not that it is so. But all may have their fancy.

As a poet with special access to divine wisdom, Xenophanes was proud that he knew about gods. Protagoras rejected this key claim. After Xenophanes, he was probably the first thinker who considered the gods and made claims about them. Even though his attitude was sceptical or agnostic, it was an important contribution to the controversy of the degree to which human beings are related to gods. It created a basis for his teaching human virtues.

What about the intertextuality within Protagoras’ own works? It depends on the chronology. What if On Gods came before the man-measure statement? What if it was the opposite? Only those who heard the performances of Protagoras could say what the effect was.

Let us examine the final intertextuality. Life is short: this is, of course, reminiscent of the Hippocratic aphorism: ὁ βίος βράχυς. The chronology is uncertain, but if Hippocrates (born ca. 460 BC) formulated aphorisms, then Protagoras may have known them. How short? Thirty years, seventy years or eighty years? There is no stereotypical contrast between mortal and immortal. Our life is not long enough to know about gods. This perspective is the opposite of Plato’s, who lived and thought sub specie aeternitatis.

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