

# Interpretation

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Robert C. Bartlett's *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates* is a singular achievement. It combines meticulous textual analysis, deep scholarship, and unflagging attention to the most serious questions with writing that is both lively and lucid. Bartlett expertly guides the reader through the twists and turns of Plato's *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus* in order to clarify the debate between sophistry and Socratic political philosophy. He argues persuasively that this debate remains alive and vital; contemporary relativism, the view that reason lacks any solid foundation, is the legacy of the sophistry that was born in ancient Greece, and the truth of its claims would render philosophy an exercise in futility (3, 164, 173). Nothing less than the very possibility of education in the full sense of the word, the possibility of learning something true about moral and political questions, or even about anything at all, is at stake.

Bartlett tackles the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus* because Protagoras, the greatest sophist of antiquity, is a central figure in both dialogues. Socrates examines his moral/political doctrine in the former, and his theoretical doctrine in the latter. This short review cannot do justice to Bartlett's many excellent observations and compelling interpretations, including his instructive discussions of other dialogues and authors (e.g., 88–89, 124–26), trenchant observations about contemporary questions (e.g., 185), and vivid accounts of Socrates's own masterful rhetoric, subtlety, and humor (e.g., 30, 42, 71, 86–87, 97). It will aim instead to outline the book's seminal contribution: bringing

into sharp relief the character of sophistry and thereby of Socratic political philosophy. In examining these dialogues, Bartlett uncovers the opinions at the heart of sophistry and thereby lays the foundation for understanding the distinctiveness and even the superiority of Socratic political philosophy.

Bartlett argues that Socrates's examination of Protagoras in the *Protagoras* has two distinct objectives (72, 89, 213–14). Socrates questions Protagoras initially for the sake of his young companion Hippocrates, who wishes to see and perhaps study with Protagoras, but also for his own purposes. Through an analysis of Protagoras's famous long speech and Socrates's subsequent cross-examination of Protagoras, Bartlett first shows how Socrates exposes Protagoras's defective prudence. Socrates does so by bringing out what Protagoras claims to teach his students, namely, that while belief in the gods and the political virtue they demand is good for political communities, those beliefs are neither true nor is there any need to practice the civic virtues if one can cleverly disguise one's failure to do so (38–39, 97–98). Noting some evident similarities between Protagoras and Socrates (115–16, 126), Bartlett reveals the deeper difference: Protagoras's casual disdain for political virtue (208–9). But that disdain has practical consequences for Protagoras. As Bartlett deftly shows, Protagoras's open dismissal of civic virtue leaves him vulnerable to Socrates's manipulation of Protagoras's argument so that it openly contends that piety is unjust (46) and that committing injustice is moderate (49). Bartlett thus shows how easily Socrates undermines Protagoras's claim to possess (and thereby to be able to teach) the art of speaking cleverly with a view to one's own safety (210–11) and that Protagoras's vulnerability arises from his failure to treat questions of ordinary piety and justice with any seriousness (103).

Socrates next turns from investigating Protagoras's teaching to examining the man himself. Here Bartlett brings out the defective understanding that underlies Protagoras's contempt for political virtue, linking it to what is revealed to be Protagoras's confusion about courage (74). Protagoras's initial account of courage appears to be compatible with his view, stated earlier, that the only sensible guiding principle is what is good or advantageous for oneself (81, 97). But after an interlude in which Socrates teases out Protagoras's hedonism (82, 88), Protagoras is no longer willing to concede the implication of his initial argument about courage: in facing terrible things, the courageous do only what is most pleasant. Protagoras, then, is not only imprudent; he does not know his own mind (99, 103–4). His evident admiration for courage conflicts with his view that the good is the pleasant. He cannot treat courage

as merely the pursuit of the pleasant and thus refuses to reduce courage to the end that he has openly argued is the only sensible end for human beings (97–98, 104). As much as Protagoras thinks one’s own good, or one’s own pleasure, is the only sensible standard, when the implication of this claim becomes clear to him, “he recoils from it” (105). Bartlett argues that Protagoras remains attached to something like noble courage and the hopes that accompany its exercise at least in part because of the character of the world as Protagoras describes it in his initial long speech (38–39). After all, the knowledge described in that speech is limited in what it can provide human beings, leaving open the hope that noble courage is somehow rewarded, perhaps even by divine beings (65, 105). Protagoras’s contempt for civic virtue, one of whose manifestations is the display of noble courage, has prevented him, Bartlett shows, from seeing the hold it continues to have over him and thereby the power of its claim to explain the soul (cf. 222).

The Protagoras of the *Theaetetus*, conjured up by Socrates, is a somewhat different Protagoras (119, 231n10). We encounter here, says Bartlett, “a much more impressive thinker” with a radical theoretical doctrine that Socrates insists on laying out. Socrates, in conversation with Theaetetus, a young, promising mathematician, introduces the late Protagoras’s famous claim that “man is the measure” to flesh out Theaetetus’s own tentative definition of knowledge as “nothing other than” perception. While the ostensible subject of the dialogue is “What is knowledge?” Bartlett shows that the deeper issue at stake is whether knowledge is possible (122). Bartlett’s discussion carefully distinguishes among the various accounts of knowledge that Socrates brings forth—that knowledge is perception, that man is the measure, and that all is in motion or flux—and he shows the ways in which they are positions that do not necessarily imply or depend on one another (135–36, 143). Bartlett pays special attention to the difficulties attending the thesis that all is in motion and what it means to hypothesize that there is no stable or knowable being but that whatever “is” is in constant motion and thus is never actually an “is” (153–54, 173). Among its many difficulties, the thesis about motion is necessarily hypothetical (143, 151) and at odds with our experience of the world (205–6). Yet, as Bartlett shows, the motion thesis is essential to understanding the radicalized version of Protagoras’s claim that man is the measure: it is precisely because he accepts that all is in motion that Protagoras can maintain that *each* man is the measure. Hence the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* embraces a full-blown relativism, meaning that all things, including and especially morality, piety, and even the good, have no stability or truth beyond one’s private and momentary experience of them (176–77). Bartlett’s

careful analysis of the implications of this thesis leads him to raise this pressing question: why would Protagoras hold a doctrine that, at least in Socrates's account of it, leads him to the position where one can ultimately say nothing about knowledge at all (202–3)? For the full elaboration of Protagoras's theoretical doctrine suggests that knowledge, understood as the human capacity to grasp anything truly, is impossible.

Bartlett argues that Protagoras's position is rooted in an awareness of the mysteriousness at the heart of any attempt to explain how or why the world appears to us as it does (154, 170–71, 220), and the challenge that this poses to assessing or addressing the claims of those, including prophets, who claim to speak with gods (162–63, 202–3). By embracing the argument that everything is subjective, Protagoras relieves himself of the burden of demonstrating the falsity of the claim that there exists a “knowledge” that is beyond the experiences of others (162–64). If there is no way to access the experiences of another, much less to assess their truth, Protagoras's doctrine at least allows that if they cannot be refuted, they also cannot be confirmed (203). The extremity of Protagoras's doctrine, especially what Bartlett argues is his willingness to treat the good as relative (171, 197–98, 202), thus appears to be a response to a *theoretical* problem. The difficulty is that in trying to respond to an argument the truth of which Protagoras is unable to refute, Protagoras gives up on knowledge altogether, a position, Bartlett notes, whose “truth” undermines Socrates's very way of life and thus explains why Socrates treats it with the utmost seriousness (173, 224).

What, then, is the connection between Protagoras's radicalism that Socrates lays out in the *Theaetetus* and his moral/political confusion that Socrates exposes in the *Protagoras*? Bartlett shows how in the latter dialogue Socrates outshines and out-argues Protagoras, largely because his interlocutor fails to take virtues such as piety and justice seriously, thereby failing to recognize and understand the full panoply of human concerns, including love and mortality (214–15). The most compelling evidence of this failure is Protagoras's confusion over courage and especially his own apparent attraction to its noble and beautiful examples. But the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus*, whose doctrine is rooted in an awareness of the impossibility of refuting all possible claims, would not seem to be as disturbed as he turns out to be in the *Protagoras* when Socrates exposes the confusion in his arguments (96, 99). Bartlett acknowledges this tension between the dialogues and argues that in the *Theaetetus*, Plato improves upon the historical Protagoras, at least in part to explain Socrates's *own* concerns (222; cf. 191). By bringing out the

*theoretical* roots of Protagoras's doctrine in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates points to his profound concern with the challenge that this doctrine poses to his way of life and to his *own* grounds for addressing that challenge. For, as Bartlett shows, Socrates adumbrates a tantalizing alternative: he somehow discovered a stable enough human perspective to maintain consistently that there is a knowledge available that directs human beings to the truly good things (195–97, 217–18, 223). Indeed, throughout the discussion of the *Theaetetus*, Bartlett alerts his readers to textual indications of an account of knowledge that is rooted in perception, making man qua man a measure, without needing to resort to the argument that all is flux (161, 221–22). Bartlett guides his reader towards this possibility by exploring the results of Socrates's peculiar practice of dialectics, which requires, among other things, taking seriously ordinary opinions about the virtues rather than assuming their conventionalism, being keenly alive to the profound human concern for love and beauty, and possessing in his own soul a remarkable degree of toughness or steadiness that allows him to pursue these questions wherever they lead (89, 105, 215–17). This guidance, at least for this reviewer, is the most instructive part of a deeply rewarding book.