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THE PROMETHEUS STORY IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS**

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In this essay I will first analyze the myth Plato has Protagoras tell in his "great speech," the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus. Then I will employ what can be learned from the myth to comment on the parts Protagoras and Socrates play in the *Protagoras* as a whole.¹ The sophist introduces the Prometheus motif into the encounter and Socrates takes it up as their conversation closes. The Prometheus story illuminates the larger story which is the dialogue itself and provides a Platonic comment on issues central to the whole of the *Protagoras*.

I

Protagoras relates the Prometheus myth after the preliminary scenes in the dialogue are complete and Socrates has begun questioning him on behalf of Hippocrates. The sophist begins his long *epideixis* (exposition) with this story (320c8-322d5) as an entertaining way to introduce his explanation of how moral and political *aretē* (excellence) can be taught. That such teaching is possible is what Socrates had claimed to doubt and had challenged the sophist to show (320b8-c1).

In this story of the world's beginning, the brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus are given the task of fitting men and the other animals with suitable powers and protections once the subterranean gods have fashioned them from the elements. Epimetheus prevails on Prometheus to let him take care of the distribution; Prometheus is then to review his work. Prometheus agrees, only to have Epimetheus run short of available powers just as he reaches mankind. Epimetheus is in a quandary, for humans are left helpless and unprotected. Prometheus intervenes to steal fire and the related arts from Athena and Hephaestus and gives these to men. But once humans are in the

*The translation is taken from *Plato: Protagoras and Meno*, tr. W.K.C. Guthrie. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1956).

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light of day, they obviously need the skills of politics and war to survive. Those Prometheus could not steal from Zeus. Zeus pities men and sends Hermes to bestow the *technē* (craft) of politics on all men. Prometheus is punished for his theft because of Epimetheus' folly.

In telling this story Protagoras intends to begin his explanation of how *aretē* is taught. But using the Prometheus myth also introduces the cluster of meanings traditionally associated with the figure of Prometheus, especially from the stories told by Hesiod and Aeschylus.² In earlier versions of the myth, there was greater hostility between Zeus and Prometheus, for Prometheus was that creative intelligence (Titanic as well as ancestrally human) who wrested fire by stealth from the Olympians on behalf of mankind. Zeus punished him terribly for this defiance. Moreover, Zeus had Epimetheus marry Pandora and so mankind also suffered for Prometheus' benefaction.³

Both Prometheus and Epimetheus are Titans, fraternal counterparts bound up with the origin of men. The roles they play in Hesiod's poems correspond to their characters as named: Prometheus is forethought or he who knows in advance; Epimetheus is afterthought or he who learns afterwards. In Aeschylus there is the implicit suggestion that the character of Prometheus includes that of Epimetheus as well. For Promethean foresight is defeated and punished by Zeus; the one who knows in advance becomes inexorably the one who learns afterwards. In its Promethean-Epimethean ancestry, human folly and cleverness, blindness and insight are inseparable.

Protagoras is thus employing mythic figures whose reputations are already established. But the sophist modifies the traditional story in three important ways. Plato's Protagoras first plays down the enmity between Zeus and Prometheus; then he has Prometheus and Epimetheus change roles; third, he expands the character of Epimetheus beyond earlier characterizations.

As Protagoras relates the story, Zeus is a co-benefactor who adds to and secures what Prometheus has provided for mankind. The two share complementary wisdoms represented by the differences in the *technai* they give to men. Both are concerned to insure that men survive and prosper in their lives together. The sophist also downplays Prometheus' punishment, blaming Epimetheus (*di' Epimēthea*, 322a1) instead of referring to Zeus directly. This last

modification emphasizes the interrelated roles of both brothers in crime and punishment alike.

The close connection of Epimetheus and Prometheus is underscored because Protagoras' story has the two brothers exchange roles. Epimetheus is to provide for the distribution (a position more apt for Forethought); Prometheus is to check over the results (Afterthought's place). Switching roles does take the two out of character, but subsequent events in the story show that the brothers live up to their names rather than their new positions. As provider Epimetheus is quite in character; he is "not so very smart at all" (*ou panu ti sophos*, 321b7) and so his pro-vision or foresight leaves men quite literally out in the cold. Prometheus compensates for this oversight by stealing fire and the *dēmiourgikai technai* (arts of craftsmen). Such performances correspond to what their names predict. When Epimetheus replaces Prometheus, it turns out that Afterthought still requires Forethought (appropriately—as an afterthought) to contend with the unforeseen emergency and make up for what is lacking. Promethean foresight is required at the juncture where epimethean hindsight is faced with its consequences: lack of judgment and resourcefulness.

Yet Epimetheus requires Prometheus' assistance only because the two initially changed places. What Protagoras' retelling does is to focus on both Titans, so that Prometheus is no longer substance and Epimetheus shadow, but each is fleshed out as counterpart of the other. The exchange of positions manifests both wisdom and lack thereof in the character of *each* brother. In spite of their names and dominant capacities, both are revealed by Protagoras (and Plato) as composed of epimethean and promethean aspects. After all, what led to Epimetheus' impasse? Prometheus' lack of foresight in acceding to his request—Forethought should have known better.⁴

Epimetheus' situation is parallel: his urging the change of roles manifests an expected lack of judgment; he needs to perform before he can come to know, and the hindsight thus attained arrives too late.⁵ But aside from overlooking mankind, Epimetheus is himself no less than promethean—both able and provident—in his distribution of powers and protections to the other animals. The details in the sophist's story (especially 320d8-321a2) reveal Epimetheus' "lesser wisdom" as nothing to be disdained. Even if he cannot ultimately produce all his novel position demands, his care for the different

animal species is quite expert. In Protagoras' version of the story, Epimetheus is no mere foil for the brilliance of Prometheus, but as much a mix of forethought and afterthought as Prometheus himself.

II

By means of this story Protagoras places the question of teaching *aretē* in the context of traditional myth and religion and joins the moral training typical in Athens (plus what sophist education will add to it) to the origins of humanity. The myth can capitalize on the feelings and images associated with the sacral figures of Olympian religion so as to confer a special appropriateness on common belief and practice regarding *aretē*. The conventional daily order is thus shown to conform to the original order bestowed by the gods. Participation in Athenian life enables a return to the beginning and a share in the originating gifts of gods and heroes. Protagoras' teaching would build on current Athenian practice and further cultivate the divine gifts of *aidōs* and *dikē* (respect for others and justice).

Protagoras uses the Prometheus story as part of his response to Socrates; the sophist wants to show that *aretē* can be taught and that he is rather better than other teachers in helping students acquire it (cf. 328b1-5, c3-4). He plays down the enmity between Zeus and Prometheus in the traditional myth so that their gifts may be understood as joint benefactions—part of what it is to be human and live in society. His implicit point is that if the arts and crafts related to fire are taught and learned, it would be natural for political *aretē* to be taught and learned as well. Protagoras' own teaching thus fits neatly with the benefactions of Zeus and Prometheus, even if he identifies more with Zeus than with the Titan.

Adopting Zeus rather than Prometheus as his main patron is itself a remarkably promethean move on Protagoras' part. Sophist education was meeting some opposition as upsetting the education and politics traditional in Hellas. Since in fact the sophists trained young men to get ahead in the changing socio-political situation, their training could be viewed as rejecting traditional *paideia* (education) and traditional structures of social and political power. This tradition had always been associated with the forms, at least, of Olympian religion, so sophist education could be interpreted as revolutionary—even promethean. Protagoras' *mythos* softpedals the antique hostility

between Zeus and Prometheus and joins his own work to the traditions and conventions the broader sophist movement was already replacing. Protagoras himself had always been cautious and respectful of existing customs and mores; here he ably secures the legitimation and sanction of traditional religious myth for what he teaches. Choosing to begin his lengthy *epideixis* with this version of the myth is itself promethean in its foresight.

This interpretation suggests that the sophist's Prometheus story may itself provide Platonic comment on what Protagoras is doing in this speech. Protagoras' retelling has Prometheus and Epimetheus exchange roles and gives new prominence to Afterthought, as already noted. In the story it was Epimetheus whose initiative led to Prometheus surrendering his position as provider, and Epimetheus who manifested no little resourcefulness on his own. The sophist's changes in the myth may not be just promethean and work wholly to his advantage; those very changes suggest that he too may exhibit both promethean and epimethean features, even in this brilliant speech.

That the *mythos* may also undercut the sophist's efforts can be seen if the story is measured against Protagoras' earlier comments, in his first speech about himself in the dialogue (316c ff.). In fact, his opening words in the earlier speech first announced the motif of forethought, but attributed it to Socrates. The same speech deplored all sophist disguises and cover stories, urging that Protagoras had never hidden the fact he was a sophist. Both of these earlier remarks need serious qualification in light of the sophist's tale of Prometheus and Epimetheus.

That earlier speech began with compliments to Socrates for his tact and forethought in letting Protagoras decide whether to speak in private or not (316b5). The Greek sentence translates straightforwardly as "You are being really thoughtful on my behalf, Socrates." A more antic (though not wholly arbitrary) reading of the same words might be "You are really playing Prometheus on my behalf, Socrates." But if this remark is taken in tandem with the *mythos*, Protagoras can become Epimetheus greeting his brother. If this line announces the Prometheus motif, by telling his own version of the Prometheus story a bit later Protagoras musters forethought (and Prometheus) on behalf of his own teaching to outdo the Prometheus he recognized in Socrates.⁶ Indeed, the sophist takes the leading role

through the first part of their discussion, dominating the conversation with his great speech on moral education. And since his myth suggests that Epimetheus and Prometheus both manifest blindness and afterthought, it suitably anticipates some of the sophist's later frustrations when faced with Socrates' pushy questions.

Protagoras may have earlier disavowed pretense or disguise in admitting he is a sophist, but his own myth helps disguise the actual effect of his teaching, for it models his project after the benefactions of Zeus and Prometheus and thus implies that his teaching remains within sanctioned conventional bounds. And if the explicit promise Protagoras makes to his students is that they will become powerful in word and deed in the *polis* (city-state), he is in fact urging on them a training that should unhinge the conventional framework of political power in Athens. The sophist may place his work under the aegis of Zeus, but the success his students will achieve is epitomized by clever, resourceful, promethean speech. Employing *this* Prometheus story should lead us to expect from the man who tells it exactly such cleverness. Plato's Protagoras is a man worth careful attention.

III

In the end Socrates also alludes to the Prometheus of the sophist's story and playfully admits that he needs such a patron (361c7-d5). He explicitly adopts the Prometheus of the *mythos* and pledges to extend forethought to the whole of his life. And the myth illuminates his words and actions as it did those of Protagoras. The dialogue shows forethought and afterthought present in the young Socrates. He cannot simply reject Epimetheus and join himself to Prometheus as the discussion ends—even this is a Socratic afterthought, as is his mocking recognition of their apparent change of positions on teaching *aretē*.

Socrates is no mean Epimetheus in his own right. Only at the end of the encounter can he identify the lack of foresight in their inquiry. They were attempting to answer whether *aretē* could be taught and whether it was unitary—before having considered what *aretē* is. This oversight has brought them to the final impasse with no visible Prometheus to aid them. Since it was Socrates who proposed both questions (cf. 320b8-c1); 329c6-d1), he ought indeed to be more promethean about such matters for the future.

Socrates just had the personified argument call both principals *atopoi* (361a5)—marvelously absurd—in order to point out the inconclusiveness of their discussion and its epimethean character. As Protagoras and Socrates come to an end, each seems to be saying the opposite of what he first proposed regarding *aretē*. Socrates now contends that *aretē* is knowledge, though initially he denied it could be taught. Protagoras now attempts to separate at least courage from knowledge and thus counters implicitly his original thesis that *aretē* can be taught. For what is separate from knowledge is dubiously teachable, what is equivalent to knowledge obviously can be taught. This mocking sophistry has both men exchange theses about *aretē* and thus recalls how Epimetheus and Prometheus exchanged roles in the *mythos*.

Socrates is hardly serious, for it is not clear that there has been a real reversal of opinion by either man or that they have in fact exchanged positions regarding *aretē*. Rather, what appears to be inconsistency here manifests the lack of forethought and resourcefulness with which they pursued their conversation and the oversight which marks its outcome on the issue of *aretē*. Because they could not secure the cognitive foundations for measuring whether *aretē* is teachable and how it is unitary, their contest-and-discussion wandered piecemeal from description, verbal sophistries, and elenctic examination through poetry, criticism, and lengthy *epideixis*, all to little avail. The *logos* (argument) exaggerates when it mocks them for inconsistency, for they neither began from nor proceeded to any common point from which they could be so judged.

Socrates reacts by admitting that the issues seem jumbled, but takes this as reason to try harder. Adopting Prometheus, he commits himself to taking forethought for the future. He invites Protagoras to join him again—no one else will do—but for the meantime promises to let forethought shape his attitudes. Both principals are at an impasse, an *aporia*, and seem without promethean resources. Socrates' invocation of the mythical hero at least suggests two directions for their next encounter. First, they should be more promethean in how they order the conversation, assuming or establishing a common definition of *aretē* before taking up other questions about it. Second, forethought itself may be a crucial element within the definition of *aretē* and thus a key to whether such excellence can be taught or is unitary in nature.

The absence of any shared norm or measure in *how* they proceeded was tied to their overlooking the nature of *aretē*. Bypassing the definition of *aretē* exhibited precisely that lack of foresight which could have provided the normative framework or measure for answering the other questions Socrates raised.⁷ Without such a shared grounding, no combination of good will, wisdom drawn from experience, or rhetorical and dialectical expertise could secure the order in their discussion demanded by the questions about *aretē*. Such a *logos* possesses internal requirements of its own; talking *before* taking account of the meaning of *aretē* turns out to be an epimethean blunder for which neither interlocutor's promethean talents can compensate.

Both Socrates and Protagoras were united in their praise of knowledge (cf. 352d1-3). But Socrates could get no further in connecting knowledge and *aretē* than describing how a technique of measuring (= knowledge) would be required for the pursuit of pleasure (= excellence). His efforts along those lines (cf. 352d-359a) at best suggest that learning courage without knowledge would serve the learner as ill as ignorant pleasure-seeking does the hedonist project. Socrates never establishes that knowledge is integral to the meaning or learning of *aretē*. His final bid to take promethean thought may at least point to the necessity of intelligence and forethought for the presence of human excellence. Even Protagoras reluctantly conceded that *andreia* (courage) is at least knowledge, whatever else it may amount to.

The story of Epimetheus and Prometheus, then, sets the limits in myth for what to expect from the meeting of Protagoras and Socrates. The sophist introduces Prometheus with "knowledge-aforethought" when he greets Socrates and again when he elaborates his version of the Prometheus myth. Socrates adopts the story as an afterthought as he reviews their discussion as a whole. Each interlocutor has displayed a combination of epimethean and promethean moments as they conversed and both end rather dissatisfied. Plato's Prometheus story proposes that afterthought and hindsight are inevitable counterparts of forethought; the performances of Protagoras and Socrates illustrate the plausibility of this proposal.

IV

But reading Protagoras' *mythos* as if it were about Prometheus and Epimetheus alone does scant justice to its resolution of mankind's quandary even after Epimetheus and Prometheus have done their best. In the myth it is Zeus who makes up for the oversight of both brothers. His gifts make political life possible for humankind; he decrees that all are to be given *aidōs* and *dikē*; anyone without them is to be slain as a plague to the *polis*. As already mentioned, Protagoras uses this part of the story to join his own educational project with the Olympian's gifts. The sophist offers to extend and perfect the political "virtues" his myth attributes to Zeus' beneficence. But, in addition, this part of the *mythos* also serves to comment on the whole of the *Protagoras*.⁸

Both principals manifest aspects of Prometheus and Epimetheus as they proceed, only to end their conversation without resolving the substantive questions that have been raised about *aretē*. Since their situation upon parting parallels the plight of mankind in the *mythos* even after Prometheus' theft of fire, the gifts of Zeus in the myth suggest a way to move beyond the *aporia* with which the dialogue ends. Two features of Zeus' gifts are noteworthy in this regard. First, they exhibit a continuation of the promethean resourcefulness and progressive insight into what men require to survive and prosper—again Zeus and Prometheus are allied. Second, *aidōs* and *dikē* stand as normative measures for political existence. Their normative character provides a connecting link to the questions about *aretē* in the rest of the dialogue.

Zeus' directives for distributing a sense of justice and respect for others and for killing those lacking these qualities make clear that they are standards for participation in the *polis*. To answer Socrates' later challenge about how the "virtues" are connected Protagoras could have returned to his *mythos* and spelled out what it said were minimal conditions of political life. Neither he nor Socrates do this and in this respect they are similarly epimethean throughout. But the two differ in how they see the need and import of such an account of *aretē*. Socrates' ironic reactions and mocking questions to the sophist reflect his recognition of the disparity between what Protagoras professes to teach students and what he evidently understands only vaguely.

Protagoras is usually content to say, in effect, that the conventional “virtues” which comprise political *aretē* are required for success and power in the *polis* and that he is better than others in imparting them to students. His great speech shows expertly how convincing a picture he can present of ordinary, if enlightened, beliefs on the subject. Socrates’ captious questions and objections ultimately presuppose the sort of account he explicitly calls for only when he invokes Prometheus at the end. For the gifts of Zeus to be more than conventional norms, for it to be possible to make them useful measures, it is necessary to say what *aretē* comes to and how it relates to knowledge and wisdom. This is why Socrates holds so tenaciously to the belief that even *andreia* must be joined with knowledge if men are to be really courageous.⁹

The moral and political “virtues” are more than minimal conditions for citizens’ associating with one another; they also stand as ideals or ends for human effort and attainment, setting the parameters to the project of becoming a good citizen, a good person. Defining *aretē* is not simply a theoretical task that neither Protagoras nor Socrates adequately perform; Socrates at least seems concerned that the definition include the sort of knowing or practical wisdom without which no one can ascertain what *aretē* demands in a given situation. This is one way Promethean foresight can be spelled out as part of the aretaic project.

Socrates did show some connection between at least one human project (that of the hedonist) and the “art of measuring” (a kind of knowing) in discussing with Protagoras the difference between blind versus enlightened pleasure-seeking. Even the pleasure seeker has to weigh relative amounts of pleasure and/or pain in order to choose alternative actions. If calculation or normative measuring is demanded for expert pleasure-seeking and if knowledge is integral to true courage, some parallel “art of measuring” may be a necessary condition of excellence for any human being. The definition of *aretē* sets one measure against which practical wisdom can judge the appropriateness of what is to be done.

Protagoras’ resourceful Zeus points toward the ends or “virtues” that make up *aretē*; Socrates’ resourceful hedonist must calculate deliberately to take the way to greater pleasure. The irony here is that the way to answering central issues in the *Protagoras* is suggested by a mythical deity in the sophist’s story and by an antic Socratic

model of pleasure-seeking which the sophist finds rather in poor taste and beside the point of heroic courage and wisdom. Both Socrates and Protagoras remain unable to capitalize on these resources, for as Socrates remarks, they have not guarded "against the possibility that your Epimetheus might trip us up and cheat us in our inquiry, just as according to the story he overlooked us in the distribution" (361c7-d2). In spite of the gifts of Zeus, the *Protagoras* is epimethean as well as promethean to the end.

1. For other work on the Prometheus motif, see H. Kesters, "Prométhée dans le Protagoras de Platon," *Musée Belge*, 34 (1930-32), 23-34; M.J. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967), pp. 61-63, nn. 16, 17; S. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 64-68.

2. Further background is provided in C. Kerényi, *Prometheus, Archetypal Image of Human Existence*, trans. R. Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1963); L. Eckhardt and W. Kraus "Prometheus," *Real-Encyclopaedie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. A. Pauly and G. Wissowa (1894 ff.). For Prometheus in later European literature, see R. Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la Litterature Européenne* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1964), 2 vols.

3. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 48, 54; *Theogony* 510-11, 521, 535-65, 616.

4. Rosen, p. 67, n. 25.

5. L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 117.

6. O'Brien, p. 63.

7. R. E. Allen, *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 67-79.

8. Professor Walter Watson of SUNY at Stony Brook first suggested to me the importance of this part of Protagoras' *mythos*.

9. That this is a departure from heroic ideals in Hellas and even from ordinary language is shown in A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 220-58.