Plato's Protagoras as a Comedy of Pleasure

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There is a great deal of humor in the Protagoras. Some of it is directly inspired by Attic comedy, some of it is not. In order to appreciate the former, we have the excellent study of Andrea Capra, who identifies both the formal characteristics of Attic comedy in the Protagoras as well as the dialogue's specific echoes of the Clouds. I propose to augment Capra's analysis by focusing on the role of Prodicus. At the same time, I want to take issue with his contention that the discussion that Socrates carries on at great length with Protagoras is a purely eristic affair, with Socrates arguing by fair means and foul, in the fashion of the first agōn of the Clouds and Aristophanes in general, but without the humor. I argue on the contrary that proper consideration of the role played by Prodicus shows that the dialogue, frankly comic at the outset, retains a good humor throughout, and that it does so without prejudice to the philosophic interest of such matters as Socrates' account of hedonism.

Time does not permit review of Capra's excellent discussion of the formal comic elements of the Protagoras and the concrete borrowings from the Clouds: this will be presented in written form on the handout. Instead, I proceed to Capra's observation that theorizing hedonism in the context of Callias's notorious "pleasure palace" (palazzo di delizie) is a marvellous irony. I then return to the opening scene in Callias's house, where Socrates singles out Prodicus as his own inspired master. As becomes apparent, this man's wisdom chiefly entails skill in drawing fine but significant semantic distinctions (orthotēs onomatōn), especially in the area of pleasure. Thus, we find Prodicus warning Callias's guests not to confuse enjoyment and pleasure (euphrainesthai, hēdesthai), for as with other "synonyms," there is a world of difference between the two. Socrates himself cites Prodicus's special knowledge in the field of pleasure twice, the second time at the conclusion of his account of the common man's tacit adherence to hedonistic principles. Surprisingly, Socrates asks his master not to insist on drawing fine distinctions between pleasure, delight, and relish (hēdu, terpnon, kharton).

Earlier Socrates has observed that Prodicus is surely one of those who appreciates what Hesiod says about pain and the path of virtue (aretē). Denyer here rightly detects an allusion to the fable in which Prodicus has Ladies Virtue and Vice lecture the young Heracles on pleasure, pain, and happiness. This fable conveys an idea of contrasting lifelong trajectories relative to pleasure and pain. It is in this idea of pain, pleasure, and contrasting lifelong trajectories that we find the hedonistic significance of Socrates' earlier humorous comparison of Hippias and Prodicus to the ghosts of Heracles and Tantalus.

Prodicus's Heracles fable derives from the work entitled Hōrai. But we may infer from Xenophon's account that it also functioned as an epideictic speech, perhaps serving to advertise Prodicus's orthotēs onomatōn. Socrates' account of the common man's tacit hedonism certainly serves such an advertising function on behalf of Protagoras and the other sophists. Like the Heracles fable, it argues for a prudential hedonism. But whereas Prodicus's teaching concerns above all the *qualitative* differences in pleasures, the hedonism that Socrates encourages the common man to pursue under the tutelage of the sophists, and especially Protagoras, is systematically quantitative.

Prodicus laughs when Socrates urges him to put aside his qualititative approach to pleasure. He does so because he understands that the prudential hedonism of his own Lady Aretē is being used to lure Protagoras to a quantitative view of pleasure and pain that not only will prove his undoing on the question of courage and wisdom but also gives the lie to his famous man-the-measure teaching. Prodicus, it turns out, is not only Socrates' inspired master but also his knowing accomplice.

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