an introduction to PROTAGORAS

- Considered the first Sophist – taught poetry and public speaking for pay
- Charged 100 minae per pupil, which was 10,000 times the daily wage (SAY WHAT?)
- Asked to draft laws for the Athenian colony of Thurii.
- Author of *On Truth & On the Gods* ⇒ for the latter he was charged with impiety and banished from Athens. Apparently he died at sea at 70 years old.
- Introduced Relativism, Theological Skepticism, and Humanism.
- Relativism, which says that truth is always relative to some particular frame of reference, led to claims that Sophists were trying to make ‘the weaker argument appear the stronger.’

fragment 1: Man is the Measure

- “Man is the measure of all things” – a fragment of Protagoras’ writing, therefore it is without context to fully assess its meaning
- Understood by some as an endorsement of democratic ideals, as it makes no reference to socioeconomic status (a huge deal back in the day)
- Plato’s analysis
  - Individual level ⇒ There is an obvious contradiction: everyone interprets things differently, therefore what man experiences is too inconsistent to be a stable measurement of anything. Example: “One may feel cold if the wind is blowing, whereas one may feel warm under the same conditions.”
  - General level ⇒ Protagoras is suggesting that perception is knowledge, but perception can be drastically different from person to person. Perceiving something a certain way does not make it so.
- This fragment is often contrasted with Parmenides’ beliefs.
- Parmenides was an advocate of Eleatic Monism, which maintains that change is an illusion and reality is composed of and reducible to one substance. In *On Nature*, he writes that the real is only what can be conceived, not what can be seen.
- “Man is the measure of all things” can be seen as a counter-argument to Parmenides: people have the ability to judge for themselves what is and what is not
- Asserts the possibility that our experiences with the world can differ according to our sensibilities and sensitivities

fragment 2: On the Gods

- “About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.”
By the 5th century, many educated people were questioning the traditional depictions of the Gods.

As intellectuals in the ancient world discovered more about nature, many came to view the gods as fanciful attempts to explain natural phenomena, which may explain why Protagoras shifted to agnosticism.

Also a statement on the limits of human understanding that came to characterize pagan monotheism.

fragment 3: Dissoi Logoi

“First it can be said that every object has two sides being certainly contrary to each other.”

We do not know if Protagoras originated this perspective or whether he simply made it popular.

Derived from logos and pragmata, the exact meanings of which have been debated for centuries.

Logos – speeches and arguments

Pragmata – subject or question

fragment 4: Making the Worse Appear the Better

The idea that Sophists taught how to make the worse appear the better is widespread in existing literature.

No one knows for sure whether Protagoras actually mean “making the worse appear the better argument”, as many have interpreted it to be “making the weaker appear the stronger argument”.

Protagoras (by Plato)

Socrates is telling a companion about his conversation with his friend, Hippocrates, who wishes to go and learn from Protagoras.

“...knowledge is the food of the soul; and we must take care, my friend, that the Sophist does not deceive us when he praises what he sells.”

He says knowledge is a dangerous thing to purchase, as “you must receive them (the wares of knowledge) into the soul and go your way, either greatly harmed or greatly benefited.”

They go to the house of Callias, who was infamous for squandering his inherited wealth and for his scandalous sexual affairs with young boys and married women.
There they find Protagoras walking and teaching multiple people. Among the group are Critias, Charmides, Eryximacus, Andron, Alcibades, and others, all of whom “were notorious for their immorality.”

- Plato has presented these Sophists in a very specific light, as if to associate the teaching of persuasive arguments and speech with these terrible, immoral acts. He even includes talk of “youthful lovers” in the dialogue.

Socrates begins by asking what exactly “Sophists” do and what Protagoras claims to be teaching. Protagoras agrees that he teaches “the art of politics” and that he promises to make men better citizens.

Socrates asks Protagoras to explain how virtue can be taught. Protagoras launches into an extremely long speech, in which he makes various points and complicated, eloquent declarations.

- Plato makes Protagoras seem to be extremely wise and amazingly well-spoken. Socrates says “So charming left his voice, that I the while / Thought him still speaking; still stood fixed to hear.”

Yet Socrates asks Protagoras to clear up one thing: is virtue one whole, of which justice, temperance, and holiness are parts; or are they only the names of one and the same thing.

- Protagoras says they are parts of virtue which are one, related to each other as the parts of a face are related to the whole face.

Socrates continues to question Protagoras until he argues him into a corner, and Protagoras becomes very reluctant to assent to Socrates’ statements. He begins to act “ruffled” and seems to set himself in an “attitude of war.”

Socrates asks Protagoras about expedient things and their relation to things that are good. Protagoras answers with a long story (making somewhat abstract references) and Socrates says “I have a wretched memory” and begs for Protagoras to give shorter answers.

- This is clearly a sly move, as Socrates is actually relaying this detailed dialogue to someone the entire time.

Socrates asserts that justice, temperance, and courage are all parts of knowledge, while Protagoras claims that they are not.

After much arguing and discussion, Socrates reaches his conclusion:

- this argument has always been to “ascertain the nature and relations of virtue…you (Protagoras) affirming and I denying that virtue can be taught.”
- Socrates acknowledges that he, who has said virtue cannot be taught, has contradicted himself by attempting to prove that all things are knowledge,
including justice and temperance, and courage. If all of these things are knowledge, then it would make sense that virtue can be taught:

- If virtue were other than knowledge, as Protagoras attempted to prove, then clearly virtue cannot be taught; but if virtue is entirely knowledge…then virtue is capable of being taught.

- Having forced Protagoras into contradicting himself, Socrates departs, most likely advising Hippocrates to avoid the teachings of Protagoras.

Reflection

- Plato has presented Socrates, his teacher, as brilliant and superior to Protagoras in the realms of logic and reason, as Socrates is ultimately the argument’s victor. He also, more subtly, makes the back and forth, devious arguments of the Sophists appear to be immoral.