History of Thought and History of Humankind in Plato's *Protagoras*

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The question of the emergence of several pivotal intellectual activities during the 5th century, which have played a crucial role in the development of the history of thought, has long been a key point of scholarly debate. Since the 1990s, a lively controversy has flourished on the topic of the origins of rhetoric, challenging the traditional Aristotelian account.[1] The nature and origins of the sophistic movement are also widely debated, as highlighted in the recent Companion edited by Joshua Billings and Christopher Moore.[2] In this regard, in recent years, some voices have even come to consider sophistry as a Platonic creation.[3] As emerges from Leonid Zhmud's monograph,[4] even the history of the sciences would find its roots in the cultural ferment of the 5th century. The issue of the origins of philology, masterfully addressed by Rudolph Pfeiffer[5] in his famous 1968

[1] See especially Cole (1991) and Schiappa (1999). For a recent overview of the problem of the origins of rhetoric, cf. Heßler (2019).

[2] Billings, Moore (2023).

[3] See Ramírez Vidal (2016). For the problem of the relationships between Socrates and the sophists, cf. Notomi (2022).

[4] Zhmud (2006: 23–165).

[5] Pfeiffer (1968).

study, is also tackled from new perspectives in recent miscellaneous volumes.[6] However, it is the problem of the origins of philosophy that has most captured scholars' attention. Consider, for instance, the striking re-examination of the very category of "Presocratic philosophy," which underpins the recent edition of *Early Greek Philosophy* by André Laks and Glenn Most.[7] The careful analysis of the earliest attestations of the term *philosophia* and its associated terms *philosophos* and *philosophein*, provided in Christopher Moore's recent monograph,[8] also seems to open the door to a revision of the traditional account of the origins of this discipline.[9] In this context, the stimulating research conducted by Livio Rossetti,[10] which emphasizes the role of Plato in the development, if not the actual creation, of the notion of philosophy, comes into play. The application of this notion to the earliest stages of the history of thought would thus be the result of a retro-projection that began precisely with Plato. For this reason, according to Livio Rossetti, for authors like Parmenides or Heraclitus, one should speak of "virtual philosophy."[11] Moreover, as Livio Rossetti notes,[12] in a dialogue like the *Protagoras*, set between the 430s and 420s BC, Plato shows a use of the terms *philosophia* and *philosophein* that is not yet specialized. In homage to Livio Rossetti's stimulating work, I would like to return to the *Protagoras* itself to show how, in the dialogue, Plato stages an initial ambiguous attempt to define the respective domains of philosophy and sophistry, and especially the attempt of the two main representatives of these domains, the two protagonists of the dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras, to craft a sort of history or prehistory of the disciplines they professed.[13]

The theme of the nature of the sophist is already present in the so-called "second prologue" of the *Protagoras* where Socrates tests the young Hippocrates, eager to become a pupil of Protagoras, guest of Callias in Athens. The definition of the sophist appears to be problematic in relation to other technical activities such as medicine and sculpture. The craft of the sophist is difficult to define. However, Socrates highlights that the teachings of sophists are not aimed at exercising a technique (ἐπὶ τέχνῃ), but at general culture (ἐπὶ παιδείᾳ). The sophist is able to make people terribly clever at speaking. But on which topics? According to Socrates, the sophists are vendors of μαθήματα. But they might not know whether what they are selling is good or bad for the soul, and so they end up saying that everything in their stock is good. Aware of the risks of entrusting their souls to sophists, Socrates and Hippocrates go to Protagoras in order to understand the

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[6] Montanari, Matthaios and Rengakos (2016) and Montanari (2020).

[7] Laks, Most (2016).

[8] Moore (2020).

[9] For some useful criticisms on Moore's thesis, see Sassi (2021).

[10] See e.g. Rossetti (2016).

[11] Cf. e.g. Rossetti (2020).

[12] Rossetti (2017: 106–111).

[13] A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the online workshop organized by C. Lo Casto, P. Zeller, I. Männlein, K.-H. Stanzel, and M. Meier at the University of Tübingen, *Geschichte als politische Ressource: Vergangenheitswissen und seine literarische (Re-)Konstruktion im Athen des 4. Jhs. v. Chr (29.04.2021)*. A more developed Italian version is in Corradi (2024).

nature of his teaching (Pl. *Prt.* 310a–314c).[14] Callias' house also hosts two other sophists, Hippias and Prodicus. The description of the three sophists giving their lessons is very lively, inspired by Homer, but perhaps filtered by a comic model.[15] Protagoras gives his lecture while walking, followed by a reverent chorus of students, captivated by his words as if by the voice of Orpheus. Hippias, seated on a throne in the passageway opposite, answers the questions of his disciples on matters of physics and astronomy (περὶ φύσεώς τε καὶ τῶν μετεώρων). Finally, Prodicus, all-wise and divine (πάσσοφος (...) καὶ θεῖος), still teaches while reclining, wrapped in furs and blankets. The catalog of the various sophists' students is meticulously noted, sometimes including foreigners or lesser-known figures, but often important members of Athens' economic and cultural elite. Callias, Paralus, and Xanthippus, sons of Pericles, Philippides, and Antimoerus of Mende, eager to become sophist, are mentioned among the respectful listeners of Protagoras' lecture; Phaedrus, Eryximachus, and Andron attend Hippias' seminar, while among those sitting around Prodicus, listening to the words pronounced in the sophist's baritone voice, Pausanias, Agathon, and the two Adimantus are mentioned. Even Socrates, accompanied by the young Hippocrates, has his own following, although kept at a respectful distance: shortly after his arrival at Callias' house, the disquieting presence of Alcibiades and Critias makes itself known.[16]

Socrates approaches Protagoras and introduces him to Hippocrates, eager to become illustrious in the *polis* thanks to Protagoras' teachings. Socrates asks the sophist if he prefers to talk about these things privately or in the presence of the others. Protagoras appreciates Socrates' prudence: the profession of the sophist, a foreigner who comes to great cities and persuades young people from wealthy and influential families to associate with himself, separating them from their usual network, arouses envy, hostility and open attacks.

Protagoras then proposes a history of σοφιστικὴ τέχνη, his expertise. From a rhetorical point of view, the page is particularly elaborate, written in a catalogic style, with features that may recall a *Priamel*.[17] Its formal elaboration could suggest a close relationship with a lost work of Protagoras from which Plato draws. Protagoras, first of all, proclaims that the craft of the sophists is an ancient one (ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν σοφιστικὴν

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[14] On the "second prologue", see Palumbo (2017: 64–69). The image of the sophist as a merchant of μαθήματα nevertheless leaves open the possibility that Protagoras also offers useful teachings: cf. Corradi (2016: 348–352). For the limits within which Plato circumscribes his critique of the sophists, without precluding significant convergences, see Corey (2015: 15–37, 201–232).

[15] See Corradi (2020: 114–120) and the bibliography cited therein.

[16] As Capra (2017: 22–27) points out, in the reference to the various figures of the sophists' disciples, about whose subsequent reversals Plato's reader was in many cases well-informed, it is perhaps possible to discern a corrosive irony towards the masters. Certainly, on the other hand, the allegedly nefarious effect of Socrates' *paideia* on Critias and Alcibiades had also been the focus of Polycrates' posthumous *Kategoria* against the philosopher. Cf. Dorion (2000: 77).

[17] In Race's classic study of *Priamel* unfortunately little space is devoted to the prose (Race 1982: 111–113). Certainly, as Tulli (2008: 93) underlines, the *Priamel* is recognizable in the opening of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* (DK 80 B 11, 1 = LM 32 D24, 1). Plato has Gorgias' student Polus express praise for the art practiced by his master using the *Priamel* form (Pl. *Grg.* 448c).

τέχνην φημὶ μὲν εἶναι παλαιάν). However, he specifies how the ancients who practiced it, fearing the discredit it would involve, made a disguise in order to cover what they were doing (πρόσχημα ποιεῖσθαι καὶ προκαλύπτεσθαι). Protagoras begins a catalog of the ancient sophists organized according to the different disguises they used (Pl. *Prt.* 316a–317c = DK 80 A 5 = LM Soph. R11).[18] Some poets like Homer, Hesiod and Simonides used poetry (τοὺς μὲν ποίησιν), others, like Orpheus and Musaeus, rituals and prophecies (τοὺς δὲ αὖ τελετάς τε καὶ χρησμῳδίας), others even gymnastics (ἐνίους δέ τινας ἤσθημαι καὶ γυμναστικήν): such is the case of Iccus from Tarentum and of another sophist, Herodicus of Selymbria, still alive at the time. Instead, the Athenian (ὑμέτερος) sophist Agatocles used μουσική, and so did Pythocleides of Ceos and many others. All of them, fearing resentment, used their technical skills as disguises (ταῖς τέχναις ταύταις παραπετάσμασιν ἐχρήσαντο). Protagoras, however, does not agree with them on this point (ἐγὼ δὲ τούτοις ἅπασιν κατὰ τοῦτο εἶναι οὐ συμφέρομαι). In fact, it is not worth hiding, because the purpose of this disguise does not escape the people in power in the various cities: to try to run away, and to fail through being caught in the act increase their hostility. Protagoras, on the other hand, takes the opposite road (ἐγὼ οὖν τούτων τὴν ἐναντίαν ἅπασαν ὁδὸν ἐλήλυθα), openly admitting that he is a sophist and that he educates men (καὶ ὁμολογῶ τε σοφιστὴς εἶναι καὶ παιδεύειν ἀνθρώπους). Admitting it openly is more prudent for the sophist rather than denying it. Thanks to some precautions, he has been practicing the craft for many years without any harm.

Protagoras therefore reconstructs the prehistory of his own activity that he discovers behind the τέχναι of other illustrious predecessors. He therefore fits into an illustrious tradition of *paideia*. But beyond continuity, he signals at the same time the specificity of his choice: he renounces προσχήματα.

It is noteworthy that we can find the same names of Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus and Musaeus, also in the catalog of poets that Aeschylus provides in the *Frogs* (1030–1036) to support his thesis of the usefulness of poets as educators, and also in the catalog Hippias offers at the beginning of his *Synagoge* (DK 85 B 6 = LM 36 D22) in order to indicate the sources of his work.[19] Such catalogs were certainly a favorite of sophists and were inspired by literary tradition, epic poetry in particular.[20] Moreover, the relationship with poetry is a constant in the *paideia* of the sophists.[21]

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[18] This page has been little studied: see especially Brancacci (2002).

[19] Cf. Audano (2010). On Hippias' *Synagoge* see Andolfi (2023). Protagoras' inclusion of Simonides in the canon of the proto-sophist poets might be explained as a sort of prolepsis, anticipating the extensive exegesis of the poem of Simonides that will be presented at the heart of the dialogue (Pl. *Prt.* 338e–347b).

[20] A recent systematic study on the catalogic form comes from Kirk (2021 – see especially pp. 1–16 for useful general reflections). As often happens, the contribution of the sophists is not taken into consideration. Instead, there are multiple examples of sophists' utilizations of the catalogic form: see, e.g., Gorg. DK 80 B 11, 4 = LM 32 D24, 4; DK 80 B 11a, 30 = LM 32 D25, 30; Hippias, DK 80 A 11 = LM 36 D14; Alcid. *Od.* 22–25; fr. 10 Avezzù. Denyer's (2008: 88) survey on the topic is useful, and rightly draws attention to two passages of Plato's *Protagoras*: the list of animal δυνάμεις in the myth (Pl. *Prt.* 320d–321b) and the catalog of goods in the dialogue between Protagoras and Socrates (Pl. *Prt.* 334a–c).

[21] See e.g. Novokhatko (2020: 81–93).

As Aldo Brancacci[22] points out, the entire initial section of the *Hippias major* (Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 281a–286c) is particularly significant in relation to the passage from the *Protagoras* under analysis: in the *Hippias major* Socrates distinguishes between the ancient sages, οἱ παλαιοὶ ἐκεῖνοι, such as Bias, Pittacus, Thales, and Anaxagoras, who would have refrained from political involvement because, as Hippias himself admits, they were unable to manage both public and private affairs simultaneously, and contemporary sophists, who combine their commitment to their own city with a well-paid role as educators. Based on a model of progressive development of τέχνη, which in the case of σοφιστική would be founded on the criterion of personal enrichment, Hippias emerges as the most advanced point in a trajectory that extends from the ancient sages to Gorgias, Prodicus, and Protagoras.[23]

Coming back to the *Protagoras*, we must note that the reference to tradition is not sufficient to persuade Socrates. In the dialogue with Protagoras he resumes, at a deeper level, the doubts that he had already advanced in the dialogue with Hippocrates (Pl. *Prt.* 310a–314c). Unlike other τέχναι, such as painting and pipe-playing, the object of the σοφιστική is not defined. Protagoras then opposes his teaching once again to the τέχναι taught by the other sophists (Protagoras refers to Hippias in particular) who actually mistreats young men. His μάθημα consists of an εὐβουλία, that is good judgment in one's own affairs, how best to run one's household, and in public affairs, how to be most powerful at speaking and acting.[24] Socrates therefore deduces that Protagoras also teaches a τέχνη, the πολιτικὴ τέχνη (Pl. *Prt.* 318b–e = DK 80 A 5 = LM 31 D37).[25] He undertakes to make men good citizens. Thus, Socrates comes to clarify what Protagoras' craft really concerns, namely politics. Socrates, however, is not satisfied by Protagoras' answer and questions him again: according to Socrates, political craft cannot be transmitted. The practices of Athenian democracy show that everyone possesses political craft without having learned it from anyone, because everyone participates in political debate. Furthermore, great politicians often have sons who have none of their capacities. If it were possible to transmit this craft, they would certainly have taught it to their sons (Pl. *Prt.* 318e–320c).[26] Protagoras responds to Socrates' objections with the famous "great speech", divided into a μῦθος and a λόγος (Pl. *Prt.* 320c = LM 31 D39).[27] Once again

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[22] Brancacci (2002: 15–16). As the scholar points out, just as will happen in the further pages of the *Protagoras* (Pl. *Prt.* 342a–343c), the *paideia* of the sophists will find a counterpart in the Spartan educational model.

[23] On the evident irony of the passage, see Morgan (2009: 557–558, 566).

[24] On Protagoras' εὐβουλία see Corradi (2023).

[25] As Denyer (2008: 95) points out, Protagoras, who was critical of the teaching of the τέχναι, is thus forced by Socrates to admit that he himself teaches a τέχνη.

[26] The idea, rooted in an aristocratic perspective, that ἀρετή cannot be taught is already attested in Theognis (429–438, cf. also 31–38). See Manuwald (1999: 155–157). As Robinson (2003: 240) emphasizes, the issue of the teachability of virtue is framed similarly to Plato's *Protagoras* also in chapter 6 of the *Dissoi Logoi* (DK 90 = LM 41).

[27] In the bipartition of μῦθος and λόγος, Kurke (2011: 268–300) identifies a characteristic feature of the sophists' ἐπιδείξεις. The verb ἐπιδείκνυμι appears in reference to Protagoras' "great speech" at the beginning and end of the Platonic page, cf. *Prt.* 320d: ἐπιδείξω and 328c: ἐπιδειξάμενος. For more on the epidictic rhetoric of the sophists, see Thomas (2003).

Protagoras uses the past to justify his pedagogical commitment, even going back to the origins of man and human society (Pl. *Prt.* 320c–322d = DK 80 C 1 = LM 31 D40). The μῦθος takes up the opposition already outlined between the σοφιστική and the other τέχναι, between politics and practical crafts, to transpose it in a story about the origins of humankind and the *polis*.

The development of the μῦθος is well known. The gods task the Titans Prometheus and Epimetheus with distributing the various skills necessary for the survival of the different species. Epimetheus, having persuaded Prometheus to entrust him with the task of carrying out the distribution on his own, works in a provident way for all other living species, but exhausting all δυνάμεις, he has nothing with which to equip men. Prometheus then intervenes and steals technical knowledge and fire (ἔντεχνος σοφία σὺν πυρί) from Athena and Hephaestus and gives it to men. However, he fails to steal political expertise from Zeus. Men can thus make up for their natural deficit by manufacturing what they need. But even in this way they are unable to ensure their own survival, in fact they are unable to fight effectively against beasts because they do not yet have the political art, of which the art of war is a part. Even the attempt to reunite and found cities is in vain because without political art they succumb to mutual injustices. At this point, fearing that mankind would be destroyed, Zeus intervenes by ordering Hermes to distribute to men αἰδώς and δίκη, respect and justice, so that there would be ordering principles of the cities and bonds that bring about friendship (πόλεων κόσμοι τε καὶ δεσμοὶ φιλίας συναγωγοί). Hermes asks Zeus in what way he should distribute αἰδώς and δίκη. Unlike other techniques, where for example one who has medical technical skill is sufficient for many lay people, αἰδώς and δίκη must be attributed to all men. If only few men shared in these virtues, πόλεις could not even exist. Zeus concludes by establishing by law that anyone unable to share in these virtues should be put to death as a public pest.[28]

As is well known, Protagoras draws on poetic tradition for the construction of the μῦθος, in particular from Hesiod but intervenes in this tradition by correcting and adapting it so as to project into the prehistory of humanity some assumptions that constitute, so to speak, the theoretical presuppositions of his own activity as a sophist.[29] The myth allows us to separate the sphere of political expertise (the domain of the sophist, as we have already emphasized) from that of other techniques that are subordinate to politics. Although artisanal techniques are necessary, they are not sufficient to guarantee

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[28] On the structure of the μῦθος, see Nathan (2017: 386–389). Sommerville (2019: 133–134) identifies an analogy between the development of the myth and that of the history of the σοφιστικὴ τέχνη previously reconstructed by Protagoras (Pl. *Prt.* 316d–317c). Collins (2015: 151–156) places the two speeches within the broader context of a general protreptic strategy employed by Protagoras.

[29] For the reworking of Hesiodic motifs, see Arrighetti (2013). There has been much debate over whether Protagoras' μῦθος should be interpreted in terms of *Kulturentstehungslehre*. In this regard, Barney (2019) has recently weighed in. However, as highlighted by Manuwald (2013), if the μῦθος is considered as a history of the development of human culture, it would appear inconsistent. Protagoras' intent seems rather to emphasize the importance of the domain in which he operates. According to Bonazzi (2022), we are dealing with a narrative that, through a skillful variation of the tradition on the origins of human societies, is etiological in nature and clearly focused on the current condition of humanity.

the survival of men, which is only possible within the *polis*, and for this reason πολιτικὴ τέχνη is needed. The superiority of the πολιτικὴ τέχνη is also in itself underlined by the fact that it belongs to Zeus, while the practical techniques are the possession of inferior divinities. Political expertise also has a more universal character since it is not distributed to individual specialists but, from a democratic perspective, to all citizens.[30] If Protagoras seems to respond to the doubt expressed by Socrates by explaining why everyone in the democratic *polis* has the right to participate in political debate, the problem of the transmissibility of political skill still remains open. Protagoras' words would somehow seem to present us, beyond the frame of the myth, αἰδώς and δίκη, the fundament of the πολιτικὴ τέχνη, as a sort of natural gift present in all human beings. But developing his argument, the sophist clarifies how, in reality, political virtue is the object of teaching: unlike those who are devoid of natural gifts, those who are devoid of this virtue and possess the vices contrary to it, injustice or impiety, are punished, and their punishment should act as a deterrent. In addition, the *polis* as a whole participates in a vast collective educational enterprise that guides young people from an early age: beginning with the family, followed by teachers of grammar, music, and gymnastics, and ultimately relying on the laws of the *polis*. The sophist therefore works on young people already trained in political virtue but allows further progress, an improvement for which he deserves to be rewarded (Pl. *Prt.* 322d–328d).[31] In terms that seem to anticipate Aristotle's results in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Arist. *NE* 1103a14–26), for Protagoras, even if man has a natural potential for political virtue, virtue itself does not come naturally but it must be implemented through a specific educational path.[32] Moreover, in a lost work entitled *Megas logos* Protagoras argued that teaching needs nature and practice and that one must begin to learn from an early age (DK 80 B 3 = LM 31 D11).

Critics have long wondered how much the discourse that Plato lends to Protagoras depends on the works of the sophist. We do not have the space here to retrace the enormous critical debate.[33] Of course, the fact that Protagoras, an agnostic thinker, attributes such an important role to the gods in the development of human progress should not cause a problem: this role is clearly due to the mythical form of the discourse. Among other things, on closer inspection, even in the myth, the development of religion is confined to a pre-political phase of human progress, not decisive in the formation of the *polis*.[34] The same subordination of all the τέχναι to a higher τέχνη, the πολιτική can be related to the criticism that, according to the testimony of Plato himself in the *Sophist*,

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[30] On the democratic character of the model proposed here by Protagoras see now Kierstead (2021). According to Tordesillas (2021: 89–90), it is however not necessary to bind the μῦθος to a particular political regime.

[31] On the educational path outlined here by Protagoras, see Corradi (2016: 342–348).

[32] See Beresford (2013: 151–152).

[33] For the *status quaestionis*, see Corradi (2016: 337–342), Bonazzi (2022: 426–429), and de Sterke (2022: 294–305).

[34] See Corradi (2017: 463–468).

Protagoras developed against the τέχναι in the name of the ἀντιλογικὴ τέχνη (Pl. *Sph.* 232b11–233a7 = DK 80 B 8).[35]

As we have seen, in the Protagoras, the sophist, to clarify the nature of his τέχνη and justify its existence, uses the past. Not without a significant, sometimes forced, re-elaboration of tradition, Protagoras reconstructs a prehistory of his own discipline, identifying a series of figures from the past who would have practiced sophistry behind the mask of other τέχναι. Moreover, Protagoras reworks poetic material, especially Hesiod on the origins of humankind, in order to reconstruct the advent of the πολιτική, the sphere in which the sophist operates, in the history of man.

It is likely that, to some extent, the Platonic presentation reflected ways of using the past that were typical of the sophists. In this sense, we can consider a striking analogy with what we read in the treatise on *Ancient Medicine*, a text commonly dated to the last quarter of the fifth century, chronologically not far from Protagoras. In the text the author claims the autonomy of medical art, rooted in dietetics, against recent trends that tended to subordinate it to abstract principles of philosophical derivation.[36] In defense of his technique, the author of this Hippocratic text uses a strategy similar to Protagoras in Plato's dialogue. As Silvio Marino recently pointed out,[37] as Protagoras claims the antiquity of the σοφιστικὴ τέχνη by tracing back to it a series of figures from the past, the Hippocratic author (III 4) argues that the ancients sought a diet suited to their nature and came to discover the regimen we still use today, distinct from that of animals. Later (VII), underlining the continuity between dietetics and medicine, he affirms that the one who discovered this form of nutrition should also be named ἰητρός: in fact both of them use an identical method and come to identical results. As Protagoras in the dialogue, therefore, the Hippocratic author roots the origin of his τέχνη in the past, seeing it somehow behind the appearance of dietetics.[38] Moreover, like Protagoras, the author of the Hippocratic treatise reconstructs the past of human beings, in a completely demythologized context, by grasping the fundamental stages of human development in the discovery of proper nutrition and then medicine. Jacques Jouanna rightly highlighted some affinities between the two texts: "According to Protagoras, men found their very existence threatened before the discovery of the arts and political virtue, just as they did, according to the Hippocratic physician, before the discovery of cooking and medicine. Moreover, the dual acquisition of the arts and political virtue, which according to the Sophist occurred over time, bears comparison with the dual discovery of cooking and medicine

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[35] See now Fait (2021) and Gavray (2021). More generally for Protagoras' point of view on the τέχναι, see Cambiano (1991²: 3–13, 56–60).

[36] For all issues concerning the dating, author and polemical aims of this text, see Schiefsky (2005: 55–71).

[37] Marino (2019: 145–180).

[38] Already in the chapter III of the treatise, it is argued that the οὔνομα of ἰητρική should be attributed to the discovery of the correct form of nutrition, since it was discovered for the ὑγιείη, the τροφή and the σωτηρίη of humanity. The hypothesis that, just like the τέχναι, αἰδώς, and δίκη in the myth of Protagoras, medicine is also a divine gift is rejected by the Hippocratic author (XIV). See Jouanna (1992 [1994]: 238).

as described in the Hippocratic treatise."[39] It is important to highlight, however, that unlike in *Ancient Medicine*, Protagoras underscores the novelty of his choice to openly profess the σοφιστικὴ τέχνη.

The comparison with the Hippocratic text can lead us to think that Protagoras, in presenting and defending his own discipline, by reworking the past, followed modalities that were typical of the contemporary debate on the τέχναι.[40] However, we will see how Socrates himself, continuing the dialogue, will conform to Protagoras' practice in presenting and defending his own disciplinary field, that is philosophy.

After the conclusion of the 'great speech,' which seemingly gains substantial support from Socrates, the debate shifts to the theme of the unity of the virtues mentioned by Protagoras. The debate is very bitter. The opposition between the two does not only concern the content but also the method of research. Socrates' brachylogy is opposed to Protagoras' macrology. Socrates sometimes resorts to methods that we would not hesitate to define sophistical, presenting some fallacious arguments.[41] The dialogue reaches a crisis resolved only thanks to the intervention of the illustrious characters present at Callias' house (Pl. *Prt.* 335a–338e). Then, the dialogue starts on new foundations: Protagoras takes the floor and questions Socrates. The discussion moves to the exegesis of poetic texts. The sophist discovers in a poem by Simonides (Simon. 542 Page = 260 Poltera) an apparent contradiction that Socrates had missed. Socrates is called to prove that not Simonides but Protagoras is wrong (Pl. *Prt.* 338e–339e = DK 80 A 25 = LM 31 D31, D42). At first, he unsuccessfully asks Prodicus and his synonymic art for help (Pl. *Prt.* 339e–342a). It is worth noting how Socrates places Prodicus' activity within the context of another intellectual tradition, different from the one outlined by Protagoras at the beginning of the dialogue – a divine wisdom (σοφία θεία) concerning the correctness of names (ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων), which dates back to Simonides, if not earlier. Socrates, as a student of Prodicus, belongs to this tradition to some extent, but Protagoras does not.[42] We are thus confronted with a preliminary sketch of an alternative history of thought. This will be further developed in the subsequent pages of the dialogue.

After the first two fruitless attempts to resolve the *aporia* pointed out by Protagoras, Socrates proposes an overall interpretation of the poem, which starts from the reconstruction of a hypothetical historical context in which Simonides' poem was composed

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[39] Jouanna (1992 [1994]: 240). According to Schiefsky (2005: 159–160), "while the details of Protagoras' story do not provide a close parallel to VM's account, the purpose of the two accounts is basically the same." For a more general convergence of the Protagorean conception of the πολιτική and the conception of medicine in *Ancient Medicine*, see Hussey (2021).

[40] On the early attempts at histories of individual τέχναι in the second half of the 5th century, see Zhmud (2006: 48–50), who mentions both the example of the *Περὶ τῶν ἀρχαίων ποιητῶν καὶ μουσικῶν* by Glaucus of Rhegium (Glauc. 1–8 Gostoli) and the scholarly research of Hippias. More generally, for the reconstruction of the debate on τέχναι in the 5th century, see Heinimann (1961) and Cambiano (1991[2]: 3–84).

[41] On Socrates' fallacies, see Capra (2001: 123–145, 179–204) and, on some Protagorean aspects of the Socrates of the *Protagoras*, Corradi (2017a).

[42] See Manuwald (1999: 321).

(Pl. *Prt.* 342a–347a).[43] Our aim is not to dwell on the broad debate concerning the seriousness of Socrates' exegesis. While for many years the idea of the playful, parodic nature of Socratic interpretation prevailed among critics, the last 30 years have seen important studies – most notably the work of Fabio Massimo Giuliano[44] – which reconsider its substantial seriousness. In this article, it will suffice to highlight how, in this passage, Socrates engages with exegetical practices typical of the sophists to demonstrate that he is entirely comfortable with them and perhaps even more adept at achieving convincing results than the sophists themselves. This, of course, does not mean denying the presence of ironic or parodic elements in the passage or overlooking that, at the end of the discourse, Socrates clarifies that the exegesis of poetic texts is not the proper way to engage in philosophy (Pl. *Prt.* 347b–348a).

At the very beginning of the third exegetical attempt, that is the analysis of the poem as a whole, Socrates deliberately seems to take up the history of the σοφιστική that Protagoras had developed at the beginning of the dialogue. Socrates states that philosophy is very ancient (παλαιοτάτη) and has been practiced above all in Crete and Sparta and most of the wise men, the σοφισταί, are to be found there. But they deny having this kind of knowledge and pretend (σχηματίζονται) to be unlearned, in order to hide their primacy over the Greeks, just like the sophists mentioned by Protagoras. They show their primacy by fighting bravely, in the fear that if they were known for wisdom, everyone would start to practice it (Pl. *Prt.* 342a–b).

The passage therefore explicitly refers to the text in which Protagoras reconstructs the history of the σοφιστική that we have analyzed. The textual parallels are also significant: if σοφιστική is for Protagoras παλαιά, philosophy is for Socrates παλαιοτάτη. If the crypto-sophists of Protagoras hide behind προσχήματα, the philosophers of Socrates pretend, σχηματίζονται, to be unlearned.[45]

Socrates later specifies the nature of the φιλοσοφία of the Lacedaemonians,[46] which has nothing to do with the Spartan way of life imitated by the philo-Lacedaemonians of the various cities. Spartans keep this knowledge secret: the Lacedaemonians meet with their σοφισταί in secret,[47] they practice the systematic expulsion of foreigners, they do not allow their young people to go to other cities so that they do not unlearn what they have learned. But the Spartans often demonstrate their wisdom – a wisdom that is possessed also by women – with a noteworthy saying, short and concise (ῥῆμα

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[43] As Most (1994: 131–134) points out, the operation of contextualization carried out by Socrates presents traits of great modernity.

[44] Giuliano (1991). For a useful review of the main trends of criticism on this Platonic page, see Brittain (2017: 32).

[45] See Capra (2001: 118).

[46] The term φιλοσοφία had also been used earlier by Socrates in relation to Callias (Pl. *Prt.* 335d) without any particular technical significance: ὦ παῖ Ἱππονίκου, ἀεὶ μὲν ἔγωγέ σου τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἄγαμαι. Cf. Rossetti (2017: 106–111).

[47] According to De Brasi (2013: 79–81), by using the term σοφισταί to refer to the wise men active in Sparta and Crete, Plato perhaps wants to show that even the φιλοσοφία Λακωνική would be but another form of sophistry.

ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον), that they can shoot like a skilled archer (ὥσπερ δεινὸς ἀκοντιστής), and the person with whom they are talking seems to be like a child in their hands. Socrates specifies that there are contemporary and past men who have understood that being philo-Lacedaemonian (λακωνίζειν) means much more φιλοσοφεῖν than φιλογυμναστεῖν, aware that it is proper to a fully educated man to utter such sayings.[48] Socrates then proposes a catalog of admirers of Spartan culture: Thales of Miletus, Pittacus of Mytilene, Bias of Priene, Solon of Athens, Cleobulus the Lindian, Mison the Chenian, and the Spartan Chilo.[49] They are the so-called Seven Sages, according to Socrates, emulators, lovers and disciples of the Spartan *paideia*. Socrates offers as proof of this the fact that each of them uttered short memorable sentences (ῥήματα βραχέα ἀξιομνημόνευτα ἑκάστῳ εἰρημένα). Socrates then cites the case of the sentences engraved on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, "Know thyself" (Γνῶθι σαυτόν) and "Nothing too much" (Μηδὲν ἄγαν) as an illustrious fruit of their collaboration. Socrates finally summarizes what he argued by affirming that this was the modality of the philosophy of the ancients, a laconic brachylogy: οὗτος ὁ τρόπος ἦν τῶν παλαιῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, βραχυλογία τις Λακωνική (Pl. *Prt.* 342b–343c). As known, this introduction allows Socrates to interpret Simonides' poem as an expression of the poet's will to refute one of the sentences of the Seven Sages, more precisely the saying "Hard is it to be good" (χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι) pronounced by Pittacus (Pl. *Prt.* 343c–347a).[50]

Socrates thus responds to Protagoras' history of σοφιστική with his own history of philosophy. The imaginative reconstruction of Lacedemonian knowledge seems in some way to be constructed in polarity with respect to what Protagoras affirmed: the curious choice of Sparta is perhaps to be put in relation with the desire to oppose the democratic context where the sophist works with a contrasting political model.[51] Moreover, his choice certainly allows above all to use in an anti-Protagorean key a characteristic trait of Spartan culture, such as laconism, interpreted as a pre-figuration of Socratic brachylogy, a brachylogy that in the course of the dialogue is repeatedly opposed to the macrology of Protagoras.[52] As Protagoras, Socrates proposes a canon of intellectuals of the past, lovers of Lacedaemonian philosophy, specifically the Seven Sages. Even the cooperation between the Seven could to some extent oppose the competitive spirit with which

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[48] For the ironic and sophistic character of the reconstruction of Dorian culture proposed here by Socrates, see Denyer (2008: 155). On the other hand, Giuliano (1991: 137–138 [= 2004: 33–35]) emphasizes the serious component of the Platonic operation.

[49] The text of the *Protagoras* represents the earliest attestation of the canon of the Seven Sages. See Engels (2010: 16–40).

[50] Moore (2016: 284–285) highlights how the context reconstructed by Socrates presents significant parallels with the debate taking place in the house of Callias. Cf. Morgan (2009: 554–558). Hunter (2020: 203) points out in this regard that the number of interlocutors participating in the debate is seven, just like the sages invoked by the philosopher.

[51] See Capra (2001: 118). In *Hippias major* (Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 283b–286c) Plato points out how the Spartans showed a certain distrust of the *paideia* of the sophists.

[52] After all, as Giuliano (1991: 138, n. 125 = 2005: 34, n. 125) points out, Socrates had twice before urged Protagoras (Pl. *Prt.* 335b, 336a) to make use of that βραχυλογία of which the sophist is an acknowledged specialist (Pl. *Prt.* 329b = DK 80 A 7 = LM 31 D14).

Protagoras interprets his own activity.[53] Finally, the reference to Delphi at the end of the description of the φιλοσοφία Λακωνική could be seen in contrast with the marginal role that Protagoras attributes to religious worship in myth.[54]

Certainly, within this presentation of Spartan philosophy there are elements that link this activity to the conception of Platonic-Socratic philosophy. And on closer inspection, also in the subsequent interpretation of the poem to Scopas, Socrates will project traits of his own reflection and research method onto figures from the past: he attributes to Simonides the practice of ἔλεγχος (Pl. *Prt.* 343c–345c)[55] and to the poet himself and to all σοφοὶ ἄνδρες the Socratic principle that no one does evil voluntarily (Pl. *Prt.* 345d–e).[56] However, in the presentation of Spartan philosophy, there are also elements that move in the opposite direction, as recently highlighted by Diego De Brasi.[57] De Brasi particularly emphasizes the polemical aspects against the philolaconism that was fashionable in Athens at the end of the fifth century, especially as embodied by Critias, who is present in the dialogue. My interest here is to highlight how Socrates defends his own dialectical method, brachylogy, through a reinterpretation of intellectual history that mirrors the way Protagoras presents his own τέχνη. In fact, the points of convergence between Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue are much more numerous than is commonly recognized.[58]

In Socrates' response to Protagoras, however, the reference to the origins of humanity is missing. One might think that a direct response to the myth of Prometheus, as narrated by the sophist, required a context that the *Protagoras* did not allow. Nevertheless, the reference to Prometheus that Socrates develops at the end of the dialogue should not be overlooked. Before once again debating whether ἀρετή can be taught, Socrates expresses the desire to address the problem of the nature of ἀρετή with Protagoras, in order to avoid being deceived by Epimetheus during their inquiry, just as Epimetheus carelessly deceived men in his distribution of δυνάμεις. In fact, among the characters in the myth, Socrates claims to prefer Prometheus to Epimetheus: he identifies with Prometheus and envisions his own life with Promethean foresight.[59] This is how he approaches all these questions (Pl. *Prt.* 361c–d). In the etymological play that relates the name Prometheus, the 'Fore-thinker,' to the verb προμηθέομαι, 'to foresee,'[60] it is perhaps possible to imag-

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[53] On the other hand, also the φιλοσοφία Λακωνική has, as the image of the skilled archer itself suggests (342e), competitive aspects. See Moore (2016: 288).

[54] Morgan (2009: 565–567) stresses the importance of the reference to Delphi.

[55] See Berger (2021: 71–72).

[56] See Sassi (2019: 64–70).

[57] De Brasi (2013: 73–81).

[58] See Corradi (2017).

[59] As Morgan (2022: 102–106) highlights, through a sophisticated mythological role-playing, Socrates comes to identify himself to some extent with Prometheus, while Protagoras, in the myth, had clearly assimilated himself to Zeus for his ability to offer πολιτική to men. Indirectly, Protagoras is now downgraded by Socrates to the role of Epimetheus. See Manuwald (1999: 448).

[60] For the role that the etymology of the two Titans' names plays in the myth narrated by Protagoras and during the dialogue, see Corradi (2021: 131).

ine the outline of a different reconstruction of humanity's prehistory as a framework for the development of the philosophy that Socrates would be ready to offer. We can envision a Prometheus who gives men the precious τέχνη of caring for the soul, which is the true salvation in life for mankind. Indeed, beyond any speculative hypotheses, the theme of the origins of humanity and the myth of Prometheus would find further development in the pages of Plato's later works. In the grand myth of the *Statesman*, Prometheus's gift of fire to humans (Pl. *Plt.* 274c–d) is mentioned, albeit marginally, as one of the various δῶρα bestowed upon humans by the gods when they were in the direst of straits (ἐν μεγάλαις ἀπορίαις), at the beginning of Zeus's cycle. But perhaps more significantly, in a dialogue where the figure of Socrates once again assumes a leading role, such as in the *Philebus*, Prometheus is invoked in connection with the method of inquiry favored by Socrates, the καλλίων ὁδός of dialectic (Pl. *Phlb.* 16c). For Socrates, it is a gift from the gods to mankind (θεῶν μὲν εἰς ἀνθρώπους δόσις), tossed down from some divine source (ποθὲν ἐκ θεῶν ἐρρίφη) by the hands of a Prometheus, together with a gleaming fire (διά τινος Προμηθέως ἅμα φανοτάτῳ τινὶ πυρί). This passage has sparked lively critical debate, particularly regarding the possible identification of Prometheus with Pythagoras. Naturally, we do not have the space here to address the complex exegetical issues that commentators have explored. However, it seems highly significant, in light of the reflection we have proposed, that even in a dialogue as late as the *Philebus*, Plato resorts to the story of the origins of humanity as an appropriate framework to present the specificities of his own method of inquiry.[61] This is a clear sign of the enduring influence – despite Plato's reworking and the transition from σοφιστικὴ τέχνη to philosophy – of modes of reflection that matured through the experience of the sophists.

[61] For analogies and differences between the passage in the *Philebus* and the myth in the *Protagoras*, see de Sterke (2022: 587–604). It is worth noting that in the *Philebus*, as well as in the *Statesman*, we are not dealing with a theft but with a gift. For the complex exegetical problems of the passage in *Philebus*, with particular reference to the type of dialectical method described by Socrates, see Delcomminette (2006: 91–159). If the Prometheus in *Philebus* could indeed be identified with Pythagoras, we would witness here a significant connection between the narrative about the origins of humanity and the history of thought.

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History of Thought and History of Humankind in Plato's *Protagoras*

In Plato's *Protagoras*, prompted by Socrates, Protagoras grapples with the complex problem of the nature of the *sophistike techne* that he professes. To clarify the nature of his teaching, he reconstructs a history of his discipline, identifying a series of figures who preceded him, concealing their own activities under the guise of other *technai*. Furthermore, through the famous myth of Prometheus, he places the sphere in which he operates, the *politike*, at the center of the development of human communities. In response to Protagoras, Socrates, through a curious reinterpretation of the past, identifies Spartan *brachylogy* and the activities of the Seven Sages as precursors to his own philosophy. As is also evident from the comparison with the *Ancient Medicine*, in the *Protagoras*, Plato, not without a hint of irony, seems to stage the fifth century intellectuals' attempt to define their activity through a skillful reworking of human history.

KEYWORDS

Plato, philosophy, sophistry, history, Protagoras, Socrates