Crisis of Community: The Topology of Socratic Politics in the Protagoras

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Abstract: In Plato’s Protagoras Alcibiades plays the role of Hermes, the ‘ambassador god,’ who helps lead Socrates’ conversation with Protagoras through a crisis of dialogue that threatens to destroy the community of education established by the dialogue itself. By tracing the moments when Alcibiades intervenes in the conversation, we are led to an understanding of Socratic politics as always concerned with the course of the life of an individual and the proper time in which it might be turned toward the question of justice and the good.

At what appears to be the very center of the Protagoras, a dialogue that is itself situated almost exactly in the middle of the course of Socrates’ life, the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates threatens to break down. At first Socrates senses the crisis; then he exacerbates it. When Protagoras resists, for the third time, Socrates’ insistence that the conversation proceed by short responses to specific questions, he appeals explicitly to the name he has earned in all of Greece by entering “contests of speech” and refusing to acquiesce to the terms of his opponent. Socrates reports his sense that Protagoras “was himself not pleased [hiftie] with his responses to the things before us and that he might not want [eθελήσω] to engage in dialogue by voluntarily answering.” In response, Socrates determined that there was no point in his remaining at the gathering. This is the context in which Socrates says:

I’ve got something else to do and wouldn’t be able to hang around while you reeled out long speeches, I’ll be off. The fact is, there’s somewhere I really must be going—it’s a pity if I heard these things from you as well it would not be unpleasant.
Although we might surmise that Socrates indulges here in polite duplicity as a sort of social graciousness so as not to insult Protagoras, the claim that there is somewhere he must go is reaffirmed at the very end of the dialogue, when Socrates says: “[I]n any case, I said a while back that it was the proper time [ἰῶρα] for me to go.” Thus, Socrates’ claim at the moment of crisis in the middle that he has something else to do is perhaps not as disingenuous as it at first appears.

At the very beginning of the dialogue, we are given a sense of what might have been pressing upon Socrates: a meeting with a friend. The dialogue begins this way: “Whence, Socrates, do you appear?” The question “whence?” itself appears at a crossroads, as one course of life encounters another. As the first word of the dialogue, “Ποῦ ἔκει;” announces a central theme of the dialogue: the proper course of a life—or as will be heard, of two lives, that of Hippocrates and that of Socrates himself. Here at the beginning, the question is posed to Socrates and voiced by an unnamed friend. As Denyer has suggested, the phrase itself “has something of the air of ‘Where have you been all this time?’” as if the friend has been waiting for Socrates, anticipating his appearance. This further reinforces the suggestion that Socrates honestly has somewhere to go and is not simply devising an excuse to end his conversation with Protagoras. If this is the case, then Socrates himself seems to be willing to put off his meeting with friends in order to pursue this discussion with Protagoras. The importance of the discussion, and the need to continue it, animates the very telling of the story to the friends and one is left to imagine that perhaps after Socrates retells the story of his encounter with Protagoras, he and his friends took up the very issues left unaddressed at the end of the dialogue: what is it to be good and then, can it be taught?

As performed rather than narrated, the question with which the dialogue begins captures a moment of encounter as it intrudes upon the course of a life. It announces the moment when Socrates appears to his friend as at once long anticipated and yet still as somehow unexpected. The question—Ποῦ ἔκει; Whence?—frames the entire dialogue as a kind of apology, one in which Socrates attempts to justify his tardiness and legitimize his decision to spend his time with Protagoras at the house of Callias. Thus, if the beginning of the dialogue is read from the perspective of its end, Socrates is shown to have had someplace to go throughout: he has had a friend to meet.

The dialogue at once interrupts the course of Socrates’ life even as it also announces this course as a concern throughout. In the end, Socrates tells Protagoras: “[I]n your story, Prometheus was pleasing to me more than Epimetheus; for I concern myself with these things because I am consulting him and taking care over the whole of my life.” Here the dialogue, which is traditionally and not incorrectly said to concern the teaching of virtue, is said to bear upon the entire course of Socrates’ life. The question concerning human excellence and how to cultivate it in oneself and others, is also, however, here shown to bear upon the
course of the lives of those one encounters. In this case, it concerns specifically the course of the life of Hippocrates, who woke Socrates before dawn and caused him to alter his plans for the day.

The Proper Time

The crisis at the center of the dialogue should then be heard as conditioned by a peculiar temporality that frames the dialogue as a whole. When, at the very end, Protagoras puts off Socrates’ invitation to “speak from the beginning”\(^\text{11}\) in order to have a thorough look together into “what it is to be a virtuous person,”\(^\text{12}\) he says: “now, however, it is already the proper time [\(\omega\phi\alpha\ \eta\delta\eta\)] to turn to something else.”\(^\text{13}\) To this, as mentioned, Socrates responds by echoing the appeal to the proper time [\(\omega\phi\alpha\)]:

If it seems so to you, it is necessary to do this. In any case, I said a while back that it was the proper time [\(\omega\phi\alpha\)] for me to go. For I only stayed to gratify Callias, because he is so beautiful.\(^\text{14}\)

The appeal to the proper time at the end not only draws our attention to the crisis in the middle in which Socrates insists that he has obligations elsewhere, but it also returns us to the very beginning of the dialogue, where the friend surmises that Socrates has been hunting the ripe young Alcibiades. Specifically, the friend asks after the “proper time” and in so asking playfully reveals himself as familiar with the erotic ways of Socrates:

But it is clear that you’ve been hunting the blooming youth of Alcibiades [\(\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \tau\iota\nu\ \ Αλκιβιάδου \ ω\phi\alpha\nu\)]. Indeed, he appeared to me and just the other day I saw the still beautiful man, but man nevertheless, Socrates, for to speak just between us, his beard is already filling in.\(^\text{15}\)

The proper time here is bound up with the time of youth when a young man is, to quote the lines of Homer to which Socrates himself appeals, “with beard new grown, which is the most graceful time of young manhood.”\(^\text{16}\) The reference here in Homer is to Hermes, who appears to Priam as such a graceful young man, having been sent by Zeus to escort Priam to the Greek encampment to attempt to retrieve from Achilles the body of his son, Hector.

Hermes is the traveling god of the in-between, who frequents the terrestrial sphere, conversing with mortals and traversing the boundary between the divine and the human.\(^\text{17}\) He is, as Norman Brown puts it, “the ‘guide’ who presides over all comings-in and goings-out, the ‘ambassador’ who protects men in their dealings with strangers.”\(^\text{18}\) To identify Alcibiades with Hermes as Plato implicitly does here is already to emphasize the earthly journey on which Socrates has embarked. In the Protagoras, this journey is shown to be led by an image of Hermes, Alcibiades, who, as Socrates himself says, “today especially spoke up for me and came to my
Alcibiades thus serves as a kind of ambassador who protects Socrates in his dealings with the stranger, Protagoras. Indeed, Alcibiades speaks up for Socrates and comes to his aid at three decisive moments in the course of the conversation when it is in jeopardy of failing as a dialogue.

If, then, the Protagoras is framed by the temporality of the proper time, it is introduced as a journey guided by a phantom of Hermes. This suggests, indeed, an itinerary for a reading of the dialogue in which those moments when Alcibiades speaks up for Socrates are heard to defer his departure and thus to situate him, and us, in the middle of a discussion of excellence with a community of young men intent on wielding power in the city. In pursuing this itinerary, we find ourselves situated in a determinate spacio-temporal terrain the contours of which can be discerned as the proper topology of Socratic politics.

The topology of Socratic politics, which is initially marked in the dialogue by the temporality of the ὥρα, the proper time, is here articulated by a discourse erotically oriented to the question of excellence. The proper time thus appears in this dialogue as intimately bound up with the erotic dimension of human existence. The ὥρα marks finite, organic temporality, rooted in the rhythms of a natural life and oriented by the fertility endemic to erotic relation. At the end and in the beginning, the ὥρα gestures to the course of a life erotically animated by a certain way of engaging in philosophical discourse. So long as there remains a possibility for genuine philosophical dialogue, Socrates is willing to defer his departure in the hope that the time might be ripe to advance toward excellence. Thus, at the end of the dialogue, immediately after claiming that the proper time for him to go has past, Socrates justifies his having stayed by appealing to the beauty of Callias: “I only stayed as a special favor to Callias, since he is so beautiful.”

Caught in the Middle

The crisis of dialogue that appears in the very middle of the Protagoras is itself resolved, at least for the moment, by an intervention of those present. The moment Socrates gets up to leave, Callias physically restrains him. Socrates puts it this way:

[As I was getting up, Callias seized me with his right hand and took hold of my cloak with his left, like this, and said: “We will not let you go, Socrates; if you go, the dialogues [οἱ διάλογοι] will not be the same for us; I ask you to remain for our sake. As for me, not a single thing would please me to hear more than you and Protagoras engaged in dialogue [διαλέγομαι]. Please, Socrates, do this favor for all of us.”]
The details of this description are striking. They tell of a Socrates physically restrained in the name of dialogue and community. In so telling, however, the details emphasize the embodied relationship not only between Socrates and Callicles, but also between Socrates and the unnamed friend with whom he speaks as he recounts the story. The scene thus not only marks the moment of crisis at the center of the dialogue, but it also poignantly reminds us of the context in which this dialogue is framed. In taking hold physically of his unnamed friend—“like this”—Socrates at once underscores to his friend how difficult it was for him to get away and calls our attention to the dimension of compulsion endemic to each attempt to cultivate a community of dialogue.

Physically constrained, Socrates attempts to clarify his understanding of being with one another in community by insisting on a difference between dialogue and demagoguery. The former, Socrates says, is the sort of talking capable of cultivating a genuine community in which words are tested in ways that call the people engaged in dialogue themselves to account. Demagoguery, by contrast, is the sort of talking endemic to the politics practiced in the Assembly; it is animated by the spirit of competition and seeks influence by persuasion. This difference has here come to crisis, for it was precisely the way Protagoras couched the conversation in agonistic terms and, appealing to his reputation throughout Greece, refused to speak in the manner Socrates was requesting that determined Socrates to leave.

Alcibiades breaks into the conversation, speaking up for Socrates for the first of three times, the moment Callias defends Protagoras’s right to speak however he pleases. Yet in speaking up for Socrates here, Alcibiades defends an impoverished understanding of dialogue that remains fundamentally agonistic and thus incapable of cultivating the genuine “being-together with one another” Socrates seems to seek. For Alcibiades, like Hermes himself, is keen on competition and formulates his defense of Socrates in agonistic terms. Socrates, he says, is willing to concede \[παραξηγεῖν\] to Protagoras with respect to the giving of long speeches, but “I would be amazed if Socrates conceded to any human-being regarding the ability to talk things through \[διαλέγει ἔσοδοι\] and to know how to give and receive an account \[λόγον\].”

As the group attempts to convince Socrates to put off the proper time to depart, Hippias makes a speech in which he explicitly asks and advises Socrates and Protagoras “to come together into the middle, with us as arbiters bringing you together.” If the proper time marks the temporal dimension of the topology of Socratic politics, Hippias’s formulation articulates its spatial dimension, the site where the transformative possibilities of dialogue play themselves out. Socratic politics is practiced where two individuals come into immediate relation in the middle. Socrates himself suggests the manner in which he understands the dynamics of this coming together into the middle when he, not without hubris, refuses Hippias’s suggestion that a moderator be chosen, insisting “it would be
shameful to pick someone to referee the discussion” for it would presume that
the referee is as good or better than Protagoras and Socrates, which he deems
impossible. What is, however, ultimately at stake for Socrates, it seems, is that
the dialogue not be mediated by a third—for it involves the testing of those in-
volved. Thus, Socrates refuses Hippias’s suggestion that a moderator be chosen,
insisting that if there is to be a supervisor, “you all in common can preside.” This
underscores the degree to which the topology of Socratic politics also involves
being situated in the middle of a community whose members are enjoined to
reflect upon the course and direction of dialogue.

**Speaking One’s Own Voice and Listening Together**

Socrates and Protagoras are disposed differently to the community in which they
find themselves. Charles Griswold has emphasized the poignantly choreographed
scene of Protagoras walking up and down the colonnade in Callias’s mansion
with a number of people trailing behind him on either side, mesmerized by his
spellbinding voice, all “taking great care in no way to be a hindrance to the path
of Protagoras.” For Griswold, the scene indicates the authoritative presence of
Protagoras. Contrast this with Socrates’ response to Hippocrates, who came
pounding on his door just before dawn. Given the time and urgency of Hip-
pocrates’s arrival, Socrates is at first genuinely concerned with his well-being
and is relieved when he learns that Hippocrates is there not because something
bad has happened, but because Protagoras is in town. Socrates enters into direct,
personal relation with Hippocrates, taking his enthusiasm over as his own.

And yet, even as Socrates enters into a community of relation with Hippocrates,
he is already beginning to shift the focus of the young man’s erotic energies; for
the main effect of this conversation is to alert Hippocrates to the dangers of the
undertaking he proposes. Introducing a comparison with the decision making
process Hippocrates would have undergone had he been considering which doctor
to see, Socrates emphasizes what is at stake: “But here it concerns that which you
believe to be greater than your body, namely your soul, that by which you yourself
become deserving or worthless by means of all the things that you do either well
or badly.” To his credit, Hippocrates has turned to Socrates for advice concerning
this most important undertaking, and Socrates responds not by speaking to him
in abstractions, but by entering into dialogue with him, turning his attention to
the condition of his soul and the impact this condition will have on the course
of his entire life. But most decisively for the attempt to delineate the topology of
Socratic politics, Socrates *adjusts his plans for the day*, recognizing that now is the
proper time to go along with Hippocrates and to seek together precisely how the young
man will be affected if he enters into a community of association with Protagoras.
The last comment Hippocrates explicitly makes in the dialogue suggests that Socrates’ attempt to turn him toward the question of the care of the soul has not been in vain. He asks: “But by what means, Socrates, is the soul nourished?” To which Socrates responds, “By means of learning, of course.” For Socrates, the community of association into which Hippocrates wants to enter must be a genuine community of learning if it is to be capable of nourishing his soul. To recognize this is to begin to understand the true stakes of the crisis that emerges in the middle of the dialogue; for the central question of the *Protagoras* is not so much can excellence be taught, but how will an association with Protagoras affect the course of Hippocrates’s life? Socrates, of course, puts it in erotic terms: “Hippocrates here happens to long for intercourse with you; he says therefore that it would be pleasant to learn how it will turn out for him if he joins you. This is the extent of what we want to say.” Socrates too is animated throughout by this question, which he himself suggests concerns not merely the course of the life and soul of his friend Hippocrates, but also the entire course of his own life. Thus, the crisis that emerges in the middle of the dialogue is not just about the manner in which the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras will proceed, but more significantly, it concerns the precise manner in which Protagoras shows himself capable or incapable of cultivating a community of learning that can, to use Protagoras’s own words, “benefit someone of us by leading them out into excellence.” Socrates threatens to dissolve the community when he begins to sense that Protagoras is incapable of engaging in the kind of dialogue that nourishes the soul by cultivating a community of learning oriented toward the question of the good.

The possibility of a dialogue that would cultivate such a transformative community of learning seems to reopen when the interlocutors rally to convince Socrates to remain and an agreement is struck in which Socrates will submit to however many questions Protagoras would like to ask if, in turn, Protagoras will respond to Socrates’ questions by keeping his answers brief and sticking to the questions. This agreement saves the community of young men gathered at Callicles’s for the moment, but it addresses neither the underlying concern as to what ultimately animates and conditions their being together nor the larger concern of the dialogue as to what sort of community of learning Hippocrates would enter should he associate with Protagoras. Socrates, it seems, was willing to dissolve the present association if it proved incapable of speaking in a manner that set the individuals involved on a path toward being good.

Once the agreement is affirmed by all, however, the difference between the community Socrates would like to cultivate and that with which Protagoras seems to feel most comfortable is made clear when Protagoras claims that “the greatest part of being an educated man is to be clever [δεινόν] concerning poetry.” True to his agreement, Socrates responds with cleverness to Protagoras’s question con-
cerning the poetry of Simonides. Once his display is complete, however, Socrates is empowered to reject Protagoras's vision of education by Alcibiades who here speaks up for Socrates a second time, this time coming genuinely to his aid by silencing Hippias's suggestion that he too offer an account.\footnote{In silencing Hippias, Alcibiades allows Socrates to turn the course of the discussion away from poetry and back to the question of dialogue. This turn marks not only a shift in the course of the dialogue, but also a powerful critique of the vision of the educated person Protagoras seems to advocate. The problem with orienting education toward the clever interpretation of poetry is, for Socrates, that it relies too heavily on the voice of another and fails to cultivate an ability to speak in one's own voice.\footnote{In juxtaposing those “uneducated and vulgar”\footnote{people who rely on poetry for entertainment, with those “beautiful and good”\footnote{people who have been educated, Socrates invokes the question of “voice.” The former are unable to speak in their own voice in cultivating a community of association with one another, relying instead on the voices of poets. Those who have been educated, however, “because they are sufficient themselves with themselves, are able to enter into community without that sort of silly talk and childish play, but through their own voice, speaking and listening in orderly turn.”\footnote{For Socrates, the sign of an educated person is the capacity to speak in one's own voice and to listen in good order. These are the excellences capable of cultivating a genuine community of education.}} people who have been educated, Socrates invokes the question of “voice.” The former are unable to speak in their own voice in cultivating a community of association with one another, relying instead on the voices of poets. Those who have been educated, however, “because they are sufficient themselves with themselves, are able to enter into community without that sort of silly talk and childish play, but through their own voice, speaking and listening in orderly turn.”\footnote{For Socrates, the sign of an educated person is the capacity to speak in one's own voice and to listen in good order. These are the excellences capable of cultivating a genuine community of education.}} people who have been educated, Socrates invokes the question of “voice.” The former are unable to speak in their own voice in cultivating a community of association with one another, relying instead on the voices of poets. Those who have been educated, however, “because they are sufficient themselves with themselves, are able to enter into community without that sort of silly talk and childish play, but through their own voice, speaking and listening in orderly turn.”\footnote{For Socrates, the sign of an educated person is the capacity to speak in one's own voice and to listen in good order. These are the excellences capable of cultivating a genuine community of education.}}

Socrates then goes on to turn his attention explicitly to “this community here,” insisting that the same thing applies, for they should not rely on an outside voice “who can't be asked about the things they say”\footnote{but rather, they should “set aside the poets and make speeches with one another through our own [voices], attempting ourselves with ourselves to apprehend the truth.”\footnote{The shift from “they” to “we ourselves” is decisive, for it underscores precisely what is at stake for Socrates: the community of education that has emerged between them and, by extension, the community of learning Hippocrates can expect to enter should he join Protagoras. For Socrates, a community of learning is marked by a certain ποιησις, not that of the poets, but that of educated people engaged in dialogue with one another, relying on their own voices, in an attempt to apprehend the truth. This sort of making is, then, an essaying that involves speaking and listening in turn; it is deeply dialogical, self-reliant and communal. Indeed, it involves a testing not only of ideas, but also of each individual member of the community of learning.\footnote{This wrenching critique of his conception of education seems to have been disconcerting to Protagoras, for Socrates reports that he would not give a straight response as to how to proceed. Alcibiades enters here for the final time, leaning}} but rather, they should “set aside the poets and make speeches with one another through our own [voices], attempting ourselves with ourselves to apprehend the truth.”\footnote{The shift from “they” to “we ourselves” is decisive, for it underscores precisely what is at stake for Socrates: the community of education that has emerged between them and, by extension, the community of learning Hippocrates can expect to enter should he join Protagoras. For Socrates, a community of learning is marked by a certain ποιησις, not that of the poets, but that of educated people engaged in dialogue with one another, relying on their own voices, in an attempt to apprehend the truth. This sort of making is, then, an essaying that involves speaking and listening in turn; it is deeply dialogical, self-reliant and communal. Indeed, it involves a testing not only of ideas, but also of each individual member of the community of learning.\footnote{This wrenching critique of his conception of education seems to have been disconcerting to Protagoras, for Socrates reports that he would not give a straight response as to how to proceed. Alcibiades enters here for the final time, leaning}}

\textbf{Justice and a Sense of Shame}

This wrenching critique of his conception of education seems to have been disconcerting to Protagoras, for Socrates reports that he would not give a straight response as to how to proceed. Alcibiades enters here for the final time, leaning
over to Callias to ask if he thinks Protagoras is doing beautifully. Alcibiades himself insists that he is not. Socrates reports that he sensed that Protagoras was embarrassed by Alcibiades’ comments.

Alcibiades here again speaks in the spirit of Hermes, who on Protagoras’s own earlier account was said to have brought shame [δῆδο] and justice [δίκη] to human-beings. In making Protagoras feel ashamed, Alcibiades comes to the aid of Socrates as he attempts to leverage Protagoras’s existing concern for how he appears to others in an attempt to cultivate a genuine community of learning between them. The sense of shame Hermes brings to humans is carried along with justice, for justice first becomes possible when people have internalized their concern for others in such a way that they recognize it as bearing upon themselves. If Hermes brings justice together with shame, Socrates, with the help of Alcibiades, deploys shame to make Protagoras feel the truth about himself, that his concern for the opinions of others was not rooted in a genuine concern for them and his community with them, but for himself and his own “reputation among the Greeks.”

The crisis in the middle of the dialogue concerned precisely the question as to how Protagoras will speak, will he respond to Socrates or will he, as Callias advocated, “speak however he wants.” Alcibiades spoke up there as he does here, to insist upon dialogue. If Alcibiades’s own understanding of dialogue was originally bound up too much with a spirit of agonism, here, the agonistic spirit is made to do therapeutic work, for Protagoras is forced to feel ashamed by the manner in which he has comported himself in the discussion. Socrates, however, responds to this sense of shame in the face of others with a sympathetic gesture of friendship that, for a brief period, opens again the possibility that they might engage one another in a genuine way, making words together in their own voices in an attempt to articulate the truth.

The gesture of friendship involves an appeal to Homer, for Socrates says:

Protagoras, you ought not think that I am talking things through [διαλέγεσθαι] with you for any other reason than because I want to thoroughly investigate each of the things about which I myself am at a loss. I think Homer was exactly right when he said: “If two go together, one might notice first.”

In Homer, Diomedes is made to say this line as he calls for a partner to go on a dangerous nighttime raid of the Trojan encampment. Ultimately, it is Odysseus who volunteers to join Diomedes. By invoking the community of friendship between Diomedes and Odysseus, Socrates implicitly identifies Protagoras with the heroic Odysseus in a gesture of friendship designed to move him from a sense of shame to a common concern for justice rooted in the collaborative attempt to speak the truth. Thus, Socrates insists that he is the same as Diomedes, looking for someone with whom to search:
That is why I am talking things through \( \text{διαλέγομαι} \) with you more pleasantly that with anyone else, for I think that you are likely to be the best at investigating concerning the things a decent person should investigate, and especially concerning excellence.\(^{61}\)

This comment draws us at once back to two points in the dialogue. First, the appeal to pleasure draws us to the point of crisis in the middle of the dialogue when Socrates suggests that although it would “not be unpleasant” to hear Protagoras reel off long speeches, he really had some place to which he must be going.\(^{62}\) That, however, turned out not to be a fitting time to leave, for the community came together to agree how to proceed by talking things through together. Second, the suggestion that Protagoras is likely to be the best at investigating returns us to that earlier passage in which Socrates originally attempts to turn Protagoras toward dialogue by praising him for embodying certain excellences: “Protagoras here is able to speak long, beautiful speeches, as these things [we’ve heard] show, but he is also able to give short answers when questioned, and, when asking questions, he is able to wait and take care to understand the response” (329b1–4). Socrates’ praise for Protagoras there has here turned out to have been more hopeful of who Protagoras might prove himself to be than descriptive of who he has shown himself to be. Indeed, this ability to respond to the things asked and to remain and listen to the response is precisely what Socrates has been testing; for he recognizes that if Hippocrates is to enter a community of learning capable of nourishing his soul, it will need to be one that embodies the excellences of dialogue. Thus, although the gesture of friendship heard in the appeal to Diomedes and Odysseus is designed to lend Protagoras the courage to continue, it also implicitly suggests the excellences required of a community of learning that is able to pursue the question of excellence itself.

Socrates attempts to establish such a community with Protagoras, for he hopes to have found someone capable of speaking in his own voice by responding and listening together in pursuit of excellence. And although the conversation turns then to bravery and pleasure, it never grows into a genuine community of dialogue. Yet, this does not mean that the central question of the Protagoras ends in \text{aporia}; for although the discussion of the unity and nature of excellence and of the possibility that it might be taught has indeed left them at a loss, someone seems to have learned from Socrates’ failure to establish a community of dialogue in the dialogue. In the end, Hippocrates seems to have left with Socrates. Indeed, the dialogue concludes with an enigmatic sentence that at once returns us to its beginning and suggests something of its success: “Having said and heard these things, we left.”\(^{63}\) If Socrates fails to establish a community of dialogue with Protagoras, he seems to have succeeded in teaching Hippocrates something about excellence. For the final word, ‘\( \text{ἄπτημεν} \),’ articulated in the first person plural, suggests that Hippocrates left with Socrates having learned that the soul is
nourished in a community of dialogue with others committed to talking things through together, each speaking in one’s own voice and responding in ways that cultivate excellence.

Thus, the dialogue itself demonstrates the contours of the topology of Socratic politics, a space of appearing determined as much by a certain time as by a situated place. The temporal dimension of this topology has been heard in the appeal to the proper time, to the ὀρα that articulates the rhythmic unfolding endemic to the course of life. Indeed, Socratic politics is itself always rooted in the ὀρα; for it is always concerned with the course of the life of an individual and the proper time in which it might be turned toward the question of the good. This turning however, is made possible by the cultivation of a community of dialogue in which those involved respond to one another, relying on their own voices, in an attempt to articulate the truth. This is the site of Socratic politics, and the place to which Hermes has led us.

Notes

1. The Protagoras is situated almost exactly in the middle of the course of Socrates’ life. Its dramatic date, as generally accepted, is 432 BCE, when Athens was at the height of its political power, just before the start of the Peloponnesian War and the ultimate demise of the Athenian empire. Thus, it takes place thirty-three years prior to the death of Socrates in 399 BCE, when, we are told, he was 70 years old (Apology, 17d). In a certain way, the exact dramatic date of the dialogue is not so much at stake here as is the fact that Socrates was about at mid-life and still young enough to be considering the course of his life. For a good discussion of the general agreement that 432 BCE is the dramatic date of the dialogue and of how to account for the apparent anachronisms in the text that appear if this date is held firm, see John Walsh, “The Dramatic Dates of Plato’s Protagoras and the Lesson of Arete,” The Classical Quarterly 34:1 (1984). For a discussion of the problems of dating the writing of the dialogues and particularly of the problems about dividing the dialogues into early, middle and late, see Jacob Howland, “Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology,” Phoenix 45:3 (1991). For an important account of the history of Athens, see Mark Henderson Munn, The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

2. Prot. 335a4–7. The vocabulary, “contests of speech” [ἄγωνα λόγων] and “opponent” [ἄντιλέγων], suggest the agonistic register in which Protagoras understands his encounter with Socrates.

3. Prot. 335a9–b1. Denyer points out that the indicative in ἡρεσεῦ suggests that Socrates has more direct knowledge of this, whereas the optative in ἐθελήσων suggests that he is less certain about how Protagoras will act in the future. See Plato: Protagoras, ed. Nicholas Denyer, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136.

4. Prot. 335c5.
5. Prot. 362a2–3. Alessandra Fussi insists that Socrates is lying here, that he in fact has all the leisure in the world to pursue conversations whenever, wherever and with whomever he pleases. See Alessandra Fussi, “Why is the Gorgias so Bitter?,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 33:1 (2000): 50. Fussi is correct, however, to emphasize the extent to which, at the end, “Socrates’ life is still in his hands.” This point reinforces the notion that the entire course of Socrates’ life is at stake in the Protagoras.

6. Prot. 309a1. The Greek is: “Πώθεν, ὦ Σωκράτες, φαίνη;” Unlike the Republic, which begins with a definitive statement, articulated in the first person, about where Socrates was coming from and what he was doing when he is caught by the slave of Polemarchus, the Protagoras, like the Ion (Τῶν Ἰωνα χαίρειν. Πώθεν τὰ νῦν ἡμῖν ἐπιθέδημηκας ἡ οὐθεβ εἴς Ἐφέσου; [530a]) and the Menexenus ( Ἐξ ἀγορᾶς ἡ πώθεν Μενέξενος; [234a1]), begins with a question that recognizes and emphasizes the course of Socrates’ life. The question “whence?” itself appears at a crossroads, as one course of life encounters another. A number of dialogues begin with a version of the question: Πώθεν; Whence? Aside from those mentioned, there is also the Lysis, which begins with Socrates literally describing his path “straight from the Academy to the Lyceum by the road that skirts the outside of the walls” when Hippothales, seeing him, calls out: “Socrates whither and whence?” (203a–b). This question serves to situate each dialogue along the path of a life, in the moment of an encounter along the way. It reminds us that each encounter has the capacity to shift the course of a life, to move it in one direction rather than another. So too, then, in the Phaedrus, where the course of Phaedrus’s life is at stake, we hear Socrates ask: Ὁ φίλε Φαίδρε, ποί δὴ καὶ πώθεν; “My friend Phaedrus, where are you going and where have you been?” (227a1). In each dialogue, precisely such a course of life is at stake, and the new possibilities relation that are opened by the dialogue itself carry always the possibility of transformation.


8. Prot., 361d.

9. Leo Strauss has emphasized the significance of the difference between the performed and the narrated dialogues. There are, by his count, twenty-six performed dialogues and nine narrated dialogues; of the narrated, six are narrated by Socrates, three by another named figure, while they are narrated either to a named man (2), a nameless companion (2) or to an indeterminate audience (5). Strauss emphasizes that: “The performed dialogue is not encumbered by the innumerable repetitions of ‘he said’ and ‘I said.’ In the narrated dialogue on the other hand a participant in the conversation gives an account directly or indirectly to nonparticipants and hence also to us, while in the performed dialogue there is no bridge between the characters of the dialogues and the reader; in a narrated dialogue Socrates may tell us things which he could not tell with propriety to his interlocutors, for instance why he made a certain move in the conversation or what he thought of his interlocutors; he thus can reveal to us some of his secrets.” See Leo Strauss, The City and Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 58. The Protagoras is unique insofar as it begins as a performative dialogue only then to be narrated by Socrates himself. Other dialogues have a performative, dramatic beginning that moves into a narrative form, but the narration in each case is undertaken by someone close to Socrates but not Socrates himself. (In the Phaedo, the narration is by Phaedo talking to Echechrates, in the Symposium, by Apollodorus.
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speaking apparently to a ‘Glaucon,’ and the Theaetetus is performed by Euclides reading to Terpsion a written text that itself performs a discussion between Theodorus, Theaetetus, and Socrates.

10. Prot. 361d2–4. The Greek for taking care, προμηθούμενος, plays on the name, Prometheus. Socrates is already oriented toward the question of the whole of a life in talking to Hippocrates, see 313a6–7.


14. Prot. 362a1–3. There are at least three other dialogues that end with an announcement that it is the proper time, ὁρα, to go: in the Euthyphro, Euthyphro himself, unable to follow or indeed even really to hear Socrates’ questioning him concerning piety, announces: “I am in a hurry now, it is time [ὁρα] for me to go” (15e). The Protagoras, however, is more like the Apology insofar as in it, Socrates is the one who evokes the ὁρα, the proper time to go. The passage from the Apology poignantly articulates what is at stake in the appeal to the ὁρα: “But it is already time [ὁρα] to depart, for me to die, and for you to live; which of us goes to the better is unclear to any except the god” (42a). In both the Euthyphro and the Apology, the proper time, the ὁρα, is associated with a certain departure, indeed, the proper time is bound up in both cases with the question of death—Euthyphro is off to prosecute his father for murder, leaving Socrates to face his own indictment; whereas in the Apology, the time is ripe for Socrates to submit to the judgment of the “men of Athens.” For a discussion of the importance of this last formulation, see Diskin Clay and the significance of “Men of Athens” as opposed to δικασταί. See Diskin Clay, Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 51.


16. Homer and Thomas W. Allen, Homeri Ilias (Oxonii: e typographeo Clarendoniano, 1931), 24.347. The translation is Lattimore’s: Richmond Lattimore, Homer’s Iliad (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). Socrates omits the “πρῶτον” thus making Homer suggest that the most graceful time is when a man has a beard rather than when he first starts to grow one. This point is made by Nicholas Denyer, Plato: Protagoras, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66.


18. Brown also underscores the notion that Hermes regulates communication with strangers, emphasizing that this characteristic is bound up with Hermes’ status as a divine trickster. See Norman Oliver Brown, Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947), 33–4. For a good discussion of the figure of Hermes, particularly as related to the question of the public/private dichotomy, see Patricia Thompson, “Reclaiming Hermes: Guardian of the Public Sphere,” Philosophy in the Contemporary World 4:4 (1997): 42–56.

19. Prot. 309b5–6. Denyer calls our attention to a comment made by Clement of Alexandria, who writes in his Protreptic 4.53.6, that Athenian sculptors used Alcibiades as

Each of these moments will be treated in more detail below, but they occur at: 336b, 347b and 348c.

A distinction here emerges between the topology of Socratic politics and the topography of Platonic politics. The former attempts to follow the things Socrates says at the site of dialogical encounter—that is, to trace the practice of Socratic politics as an attempt to speak the speeches he speaks with a view to the good (*Gorgias*, 521d6–9). The topography of Platonic politics names the manner in which Plato articulates the site of the practice of politics in writing. Although a distinction between what Plato writes and what Socrates says is made here, it cannot be rigorously maintained because the topology of Socratic politics is bound intimately up with the topography of Platonic politics.

What begins with a gesture to the erotic pursuit of the proper time of youth, ends with an appeal to a departure long deferred by the beauty of a millionaire. Kathleen Freeman, “Portrait of a Millionaire: Callias Son of Hipponicus,” *Greece & Rome* 8:22 (October 1938): 20–35.

Its roots in the natural rhythm of natural life is what might differentiate the ωφα, in emphasis at least, from the καυρός. Ryan Drake has pointed me to two other places in the *Protagoras* where ‘ωφα’ appears in ways that support the notion that the ωφα is associated with the rhythms of nature. At 321a Protagoras speaks of the way Epimetheus equipped the animals to make them comfortable “in the face of Zeus’s seasons.” At 344d, Socrates speaks of a “hard season” that might leave the farmer helpless.

Prot. 362a; cf. 338b.

Prot. 309b7–8.

Prot. 335c7–d5.

The details also gesture to a connection between this scene and that which opens the *Republic* in which the slave-boy took hold of Socrates’ cloak—this time it is not a τρίβων but a ιματιγν—, and, in the name of Polemarchus, ordered Socrates to wait. See Rep. I, 327b4–5. The importance of the τρίβων in the present context is that it signals the economic difference between Socrates and Callias, for the τρίβων was a sign of poverty and, perhaps also integrity, so to have Socrates held by his cloak by one of the richest men of Athens is to underscore a power dynamic in which the poor held a certain authority over the rich, the good over the luxurious. For a discussion of the τρίβων as “the dress of the poor,” see Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras*, 138.

Prot. 336b2–3.

Socrates insists on the importance of testing the person as well as the idea at two points prior to the current crisis. At 331c–d, Socrates says that it is “the real you and the real me I want to test” in his dialogue with Protagoras. Then again at 333c7–9, Socrates insists that although it is “the logos itself I want to examine well, yet still it may perhaps happen that there is a thorough examination of me asking question and of the one answering them.” Here Socrates fully embraces the idea that he will be
examined in the course of the dialogue, but he leaves it subtly open—with “perhaps” and without mentioning Protagoras with the second person pronoun that would make the construction parallel with regard to the questioner and answerer—as to whether Protagoras himself will allow himself to be examined.

30. *Prot.* 336c1–3. Here Alcibiades is like the Hermes Timothy Gantz tells us appears in the *Prometheus Desmotes*: he is “a proponent of power politics, with no preference for any but the winning side, and contempt for those who believe otherwise.” See Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 111.


32. *Prot.* 337e–338a1. “to come down into the middle” translates the Greek “συμβημαι . . . εἰς τὸ μέσον.” Socrates’ response to this is to describe the effect it had on everyone there—they agreed it was a good idea—and to point out that Callias was not going to let him leave (338b2) in any case. He then proceeds to argue that there is no need for an arbiter because no one there is as good as Protagoras and he.


34. *Prot.* 338e2.


38. Further, as the conversation progresses, Socrates quickly identifies himself with Hippocrates, repeating Hippocrates’s expression of his own enthusiasm to learn from Protagoras by imagining that when “we” go to talk to Protagoras, “we” will be ready to spend “our” money for “your tuition—our own money if it’s enough to persuade him with, and if not, we’ll lavish upon him the things of our families too.” See *Prot.* 311d1–4; compare what Hippocrates says at 310e1–3.


40. The central question of the dialogue is not so much can excellence be taught as it is what is the nature of the community of learning into which this young man will enter and how will it affect his soul. This is underscored above with the formulation “enter into a community of association,” which is designed to translate the various iterations of the verbs συγγυνέσθαι, to be with, to enter into communication or association with, and συνείμι, to be with, to live with, to associate with, to follow, in those passages where Socrates articulates what animates his desire to talk to Protagoras (316b8–c4; 318a1–5). These terms, of course, are all related to συνοισία—social intercourse, society, conversation, community—and the sort of community of communication in which Socrates practices politics.

41. *Prot.* 313c8–9. Griswold points out that this is Hippocrates’s “last recorded utterance.” See Griswold, “Relying on Your Own Voice,” 296.

42. *Prot.* 318a2–4. The first line translates the Greek: “᪫ποκράτης γὰρ δόθε τυχάνει ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ ὧν τῆς συνοισίας.” Denyer draws our attention to the sexual connotations
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of both ἐπιθυμία—sexual desire, lust—and συνουσία—sexual intercourse. The translation above plays on the double meaning of “intercourse” in English, which echoes well that heard in the Greek συνουσία.

43. See Prot. 361d3–4.
44. Prot. 328a6–b1.
45. Prot. 338e6–339a3.
46. Prot. 347a–b.
47. Ironically, Socrates’ own interpretation of Simonides shows this not to be the case. His interpretation is idiosyncratic and philosophically powerful precisely because he relies so much on his own voice. McCoy rightly insists upon the philosophical and rhetorical importance of the poem against those who argue either that it is a sort of playful interlude, like Taylor, Shorey and Guthrie, and those who argue that it is an attempt to assert the inferiority of poetry, like Friedländer and Goldberg. For the specific citations for each position, see Marina McCoy, “Socrates on Simonides: The Use of Poetry in Socratic and Platonic Rhetoric,” Philosophy & Rhetoric 32:4 (1999): 365.
48. Prot. 347c3–5. The terms Socrates uses are significant. He suggests that discussions of poetry are like the parties thrown by “τῶν φαύλων καὶ ἀγοραίων,” those who are “uneducated and vulgar.” Yet the connotations of these terms are cutting. The first speaks directly to Protagoras’s claim that the clever interpretation of poetry was a sign of education (338e7–339a1), for one who is φαύλον is trifling and unsophisticated. The second term, ἀγοραίον, connotes the hucksters, traffickers, and retailers found in the agora, and further, it suggests those forensic speakers in the Assembly. For the connotations of these terms, see George Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, vol. 9 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968). Socrates levels here a very strong and unambiguous critique of the sort of activities those associated with Protagoras seem to practice.
49. See Prot. 347c3–348a8. Socrates here uses the vocabulary of “καλοὶ κἀγαθοὶ” and “πεπαιδευμένοι εἰς ἐκκλησίαν” (347d2) to draw attention at once to the nobility of those who are educated and to implicitly draw attention back to Protagoras’s claim that to be an “educated man” (ἄνδρι παιδείας), one needs to be clever at poetry (338e7).
50. Prot. 347d5–e1.
51. Prot. 348a4–6. The Greek for “make speeches” here is “τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι.”
52. This, indeed, is what is at stake when Socrates insists, at 333c–d, that it is not only the logos but they themselves who are tested in questioning the logos. See note 29, above.
54. Prot. 322c2–3.
55. Marina McCoy translates the term as “shame” and emphasizes the social and political import of the term insofar as it points to “a concern for the opinions of others.” See McCoy, “Protagoras on Human Nature,” 23n4.
56. That Plato uses the term “αιδό” here is both significant and appropriate insofar as the term is not only more archaic and fitting for the religious context in which it appears, but it also carries positive connotations of awe and respect that condition the

57. Prot. 335a7.
58. Prot. 335b5.
59. Prot. 348c5–d1.
60. Iliad, 10.224.
61. Prot. 348d6–e2.
62. Prot. 335c5.
63. The Greek is “ταῦτ’ εἰπόντες καὶ ἀκούσατες ἀπῆμεν” (Prot. 362a3). The formulation, “εἰπόντες καὶ ἀκούσατες” echoes the words Socrates used with his friend at the start, words that elicited the request for the account itself. Although Denyer is right to insist that they do not carry with them the “intellectual refinements Plato associates with διαλέγεσθαι,” nevertheless, they point to the excellences of dialogue Socrates has tried to embody with Protagoras: the capacities to speak in one’s own voice and to listen attentively to the responses of others rooted in a concern for the lives of those with whom one is engaged.