

## What About Hermes? A Reconsideration of the Myth of Prometheus in Plato's *Protagoras*

Plato has a well-deserved reputation for being a superior prose stylist who can compose elegant dialogues and convincingly imitate the *ethos* of a particular interlocutor. In fact, his skill in imitation is so convincing that it sometimes leads to confusion regarding the origin or status of certain accounts: does Plato faithfully represent his characters' thoughts or criticize them for the sake of correction? This is indeed the case in the *Protagoras*, which includes the delightfully entertaining yet historically puzzling Myth of Prometheus (320d1-322d5). The story, which has invited the attention of various scholars in different generations, employs traditional mythology to explain human evolution while simultaneously showcasing the principal doctrines of Protagorean philosophy. But the question remains: does Plato accurately represent Protagoras' thought, or does he hijack his *ethos* in order to crash it into the wall of Platonic objectivity? In my examination, I submit that Plato exploits the allegorical potential of Hermes in the myth and in order to criticize Protagoras' philosophical method and sophistry in general.

The elusive nature of this story, combined with the fact that its exact source is unknown and that it is placed into the mouth of a controversial individual by a biased author, makes formal analysis somewhat challenging. Nevertheless, scholars of the past century who have engaged in debate over its correct interpretation seem to fall into three categories. The first of these includes those who maintain that the myth accurately portrays Protagoras' doctrines without any added criticism: Schiappa (2003), Balaban (1999), McNeal (1986) and Untersteiner (1954); the second group includes scholars who see the myth as an artistic rendition by Plato, a representation of Protagoras' thought influenced by sources outside the sophist's own teachings but not necessarily motivated by Platonic criticism: Most (2012), Arieti & Barrus (2010), Rutherford (1995), Kastely (1996) and Gagarin (1969); the last group includes those who consider the myth

to be authentic in substance but critical in its implications: Lampert (2010), Bartlett (2004), Pohlenz (1923) and Gompertz (1912) among others.

My own contribution to this complex discussion is closely related to the view that the Myth of Prometheus faithfully represents Protagoras' philosophical views but is highly critical in its implications. This interpretation rests on two convictions: First, that the role of Hermes (322c1-d6), an element of the story that has been treated superficially by the vast majority of scholars, is central to the myth and independent of—even opposed to—Zeus' role as lawgiver. In fact, the attributes Plato himself associates with Hermes at *Cratylus* 407e4-408b2 strongly suggest that the god represents the sophistic movement of the fifth-century BCE "Greek enlightenment," and in particular Protagorean relativism as opposed to Platonic objectivity. Second, that Plato is partly (if not entirely) responsible for the creation of a myth that accurately represents Protagorean thought but cleverly manipulates the allegorical potential of traditional mythology for the sake of criticism. As Eduard Norden (1956) has observed, a literary stylist like Plato was certainly capable of presenting the sorts of arguments historical figures *would have* endorsed (τὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ δύναντον, quoting from Aristotle), but this by no means prevented him from doing so in a critical and philosophically creative manner.

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