Recovering the wisdom of Protagoras from a reinterpretation of the *Prometheia* trilogy

*Prometheus* (c.1933) by Paul Manship (1885-1966)

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Composed for inclusion in a Festschrift in honour of Dr. Laurence Lampert, a Canadian philosopher and leading scholar in the field of Nietzsche studies, and a professor emeritus of Philosophy at IUPUI.
Adult Content Warning

- Nudity
- Sex
- Violence
- And other inappropriate themes...

Prometheus Chained by Vulcan (1623) by Dirck van Baburen (1595-1624)
Nietzsche on
Protagoras & the Sophists

“The Greek culture of the Sophists had developed out of all the Greek instincts; it belongs to the culture of the Periclean age as necessarily as Plato does not: it has its predecessors in Heraclitus, in Democritus, in the scientific types of the old philosophy; it finds expression in, e.g., the high culture of Thucydides. And – it has ultimately shown itself to be right: every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the Sophists – Our contemporary way of thinking is to a great extent Heraclitean, Democritean, and Protagorean: it suffices to say it is Protagorean, because Protagoras represented a synthesis of Heraclitus and Democritus.”
Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 2.428
Reappraisals of the authorship & dating of the *Prometheia* trilogy

• Traditionally thought to have been composed by Aeschylus (c.525-c.456 BCE).
• More recent scholarship has demonstrated the play to have been written by a later, lesser author sometime in the 430s.
• This new dating raises many questions as to what contemporary events the trilogy may be referring.

Bust of Aeschylus from the Capitoline Museums, Rome
Research Question & Hypothesis

• **Research Question** – What is the meaning and significance of the *Prometheia* trilogy, given its new historical context in the early 430s?

• **Hypothesis #1** – The trilogy is an allegorical representation of the philosophy of Protagoras

• **Hypothesis #2** – The ‘philanthropic’ Prometheus is an allegoric representation of the sophist.

*Prometheus (1868)* by Gustave Moreau
Methodology

• Identify divergences between the Prometheia trilogy and traditional versions of the Promethean myth.
• Compare these divergences to what is known of Protagorean thought.
• Also compare to views of authors:
  – known to have influenced Protagoras (e.g. Heraclitus, Simonides).
  – whom he is known to have influenced (e.g. Sophocles, Critias).
The Hesiodic Promethean Myth

- Sacrifice at Mekone
- Zeus deprives men of fire
- Prometheus steals fire and gives it to humans
- Hephaestus & Athena create Woman / Pandora
- Hermes gives Pandora to Epimetheus
- Pandora opens jar and releases the evils that afflict men
- Zeus gives men additional evil of mortality
- Zeus binds Prometheus
- Long winged eagle eats Prometheus’ liver
- Herakles kills the bird
- Zeus ceases from anger

Christian Griepenkerl (1839-1912): *Theft of Fire*, *Animation of human clay figure by Athena*, *Prometheus Bound, Prometheus Freed by Heracles*
Archaic & early Classical Additions

• Deucalion and the Flood Myth
• The Ass and the Snake
• Thetis and the Mortality of Zeus
• The Creation of Man

*Deucalion and Pyrrha* (c.1635) by Giovanni Maria Bottalla (1613-1644)
Events of the *Prometheia* trilogy

**Prometheus Fire-Carrier**
- Theft of Fire

**Prometheus Bound**
- Binding of Prometheus

**Prometheus Unbound**
- Herakles kills eagle & releases Prometheus
- Prometheus warns Zeus from Thetis
- Prometheus is glorified

*Prometheus* (1762) by Nicolas-Sébastien Adam (1705-1778)
Who was Protagoras?

• Born in Abdêra, an Ionian pólis in Thrace.
• Countryman of:
  – Leucippus (early 5th cent. BCE)
  – Democritus (c.460-c.370 BCE)
• First came to Athens no earlier than 460, and no later than 454 (Morrison, 1941)
• First & greatest of the ‘sophists’
• Humanist & harbinger of the “Greek Enlightenment”
• Close advisor of Pericles

C.490 – C.420 BCE
What is known of Protagorean philosophy?

• Titles of sixteen books
• Five authenticated Fragments
• Plato’s depiction in ‘Protagoras’

‘Democritus and Protagoras’
By Salvator Rosa (1615-1673)
Books written by Protagoras

Known from Diogenes Laertius &/or other sources:
1. Truth, or Refutatory Arguments
2. On the Gods
3. On Being
4. Great Logos
5. Contradictory Arguments

Doubtful titles listed by Diogenes Laertius (9.8):
1. The Art of Eristics
2. Of Wrestling
3. On Mathematics
4. Of the State
5. Of Ambition
6. Of Virtues
7. Of the Ancient Order of Things
8. On the Dwellers in Hades
9. Of the Misdeeds of Mankind
10. A Book of Precepts
11. Of Forensic Speech for a Fee, two books of opposing arguments

Fragment from Herodotus Histories VIII
"POxy v0017 n2099 a 01 hires" by Unknown - Papyrology Rooms, Sackler Library, Oxford
The “two *logoi*” Fragment

Diogenes Laërtius (3rd cent. CE) writes that:

“Protagoras was the first to maintain that there are two sides to every question, opposed to each other [δύο λόγους εἰναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις]" (9.51, trans. Hicks)
The “stronger and weaker *logoi*”

Fragment

Aristotle (384-322 BC) writes that: “Protagoras promised to teach how "to make the weaker argument stronger." *Rhetoric* 1402a, (trans. Schiappa)
Law of Non-contradiction Fragment

“It is impossible to contradict [antilegein].”
(trans. Schiappa)
“Concerning the gods I am unable to know, whether they exist or whether they do not exist or what they are like in form. For there are many hindrances to knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.”

(fr. 4 [Diels] trans. Schiappa, pp. 141-2)
“Man is the Measure” fragment

From *Truth, or Refutatory Arguments*:

“Of everything and anything the measure [truly is] human(ity): of that which is, that it is the case; of that which is not, that it is not the case.”

(fr. 1 [Diels] trans. Schiappa)

*Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490) by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)
Protagorean Ideas in the *Prometheia* Trilogy

1. The Need for Guarded Speech
2. Prometheus as the Sophist
3. *Philanthrôpía* of Prometheus
4. Orientation toward Hope
5. The Gift of Fire
6. Zeus as Subject to Necessity
7. The Secret of Zeus’ Downfall, and the Reconciliation of Power & Wisdom

*Prometheus Bound (c.1611-12)* by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) & Frans Snyders (1579-1657)
1. The Need for Guarded Speech

In the only extant fragment from *Prometheus Fire-Carrier*, someone says:
“Both silent, when there is need, and speaking in season”
(Aeschylus fr. 118, Trans. Smyth)

In Plato, by comparison, Protagoras says that:

• in ancient times, men who practiced the sophistic art veiled their teachings, for fear of offending the powerful (316d);

• but that he does “not conform with any of them in this respect”, for they failed to pass undetected anyway (316a-317b).

• Instead, Protagoras openly admits to being a sophist, though he adds that he has been careful to take “other precautions” (317b).
2. Prometheus as the Sophist

- Protagoras the first person to openly "admit to being a sophist [sophistês] and to educate human beings" (Plato, *Protagoras* 317b).
- In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is twice described as a sophist:
  - by Kratos (62) and
  - by Hermes (944)

*School of Athens* (1509-1511) by Raphael (1483-1520)
3a. The *Philanthrôpía* of Prometheus

- *Philanthrôpía* first occurs as a word in *Prometheus Bound* to describe Prometheus, the sophist.
- Hephaestus and Kratos both condemn Prometheus for his “philanthropic way (*philanthrôpou trópou*)” (lines 11, 28).

*Prometheus Bound* (c.1640) by Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678)
### 3e. Philanthrôpía – subsequent usage

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3b. Philanthrôpía and Protagoras

In Plato’s *Protagoras* (327d), Protagoras makes reference to the chorus of “misanthropes (misánthrôpoi)” in Pherecrates’ comedy, ‘Agrioi, staged at the previous year’s Lenaia festival.
3c. Philanthrôpía and Protagoras

In Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger prefaces his critique of the teachings of the sophists by describing “a god who rules over those with intellect” who is “philanthropic [philánthrôpos]” for having sent daemons to rule over humans for their benefit (4.173d).
3d. *Philanthrôpía* and Protagoras

There is an intrinsic alignment between the concept of *philanthrôpía* and the Protagorean ontological claim that “Man is the measure of all things.”

Vitruvian Man (1487)
Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519)
4. Orientation toward Hope

- In Hesiod, Pandora opens a jar and releases the evils into the world that afflict men, retaining only hope (ἐλπίς).
- In *Prometheus Bound*, “blind hopes” (251) is the 2nd gift of Prometheus, which saves humankind from oblivion.
- Two of the very few positive assessments of hope in classical Greek literature are found in Heraclitus and Sophocles, who respectively influenced and was influenced by Protagoras.
5. Transformation of the Gift of Fire

• In Hesiod, Prometheus steals fire and gives it to man.
• In the central episode of *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus places “mind and reason” in man (443) & discovers and teaches “All human arts” (506).
• Closest parallel found in the Promethean Myth Protagoras tells in Plato (320c-324d).

Prometheus placing mind in Man
Frontispiece to Rousseau’s *First Discourse* (1750)
6. Zeus as Subject to Necessity

- In archaic Greek myth, Zeus is described as the master of the Fates.
- In *Prometheus Bound*, Zeus is described as subject to the Fates and the Furies, whose hand on the helm controls Necessity (515-518).
- A reflection of Protagoras’ anthropological view of the gods as human creations (fr. 4).

Bronze Sculpture, thought to be either Poseidon or Zeus (Poseidon is more probable), c.460 BC, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
7a. The Secret of Zeus’ Downfall

• In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus saves Zeus by warning him away from forcing a union with Thetis.

• The threat posed by Thetis to Zeus first mentioned by Pindar and Melanippides.

• A further reflection of Protagoras’ view that even Zeus is subject to necessity.

• Also reflects the primary subject matter he claimed to teach: good counsel (*euboulia*) so as to make his students most powerful (*dynatôtatos*) regarding the things of the city (Plato, *Prot*. 318e-319a).

*Thetis at the feet of Zeus* (1811) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867)
7b. The Reconciliation of Power & Wisdom

- In Hesiod, Zeus and Prometheus remain unreconciled.
- At the conclusion of *Prometheus Unbound*, Zeus and Prometheus are reconciled to one another.
- Likely an allegory for the alliance of Pericles and Protagoras.

Apulian calyx-crater depicting Promêtheús Luómenos, dating to the third quarter of the 4th century BCE.
7c. The Apotheosis of Prometheus

- *Prometheus Unbound* likely concluded with the initiation of an annual torch-race (*Lampáda*) in his honour, the *Prometheia*.
- Prometheus was thus initiated into the Pantheon of the gods worshipped by the Athenians.
- The apotheosis of Prometheus thus reflects his elevated genealogy, relative to the one in Hesiodic, as the son of Gaia and Sky.

Torch used in the race. (Coin in Mionnet, pl. 49, fig. 6.)

Source: Smith (1890) s.v. *Lampadedromia*
**Conclusion**

- *Prometheus Bound* is the largest extant fragment of Protagorean wisdom, albeit in mythic form.
- The first extant & most definitive use of *philanthrôpía* as word refers to the sophist, the discoverer and teacher of the human arts [*téchnê*].

*Prometheus Creating Man* (1589) by Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617)
Significance of Findings for Classical Studies

Greatly augments what is positively known of the philosophy of Protagoras:

• Authenticates Plato’s portrayal of him in *Protagoras*; his ‘Great Speech’ in particular.

• Authenticates *On The Original State Of Man*, and indicates its likely content.

• Provides important clues as to the content of *On The Gods*. 
Significance of Findings for Philanthropic Studies

• Philanthropic studies primarily focuses on the analysis of private giving to public purposes.

• A Protagorean understanding of philanthropy, by contrast, would focus on an analysis of the discovery and dissemination of knowledge to the end of further civilising human existence.