

## Conniving with Socrates: Prodicus's Role in the *Protagoras*

Plato's *Protagoras* ends with Socrates winning the sophist's reluctant acceptance of the inseparability of wisdom and courage. He achieves this in part by revealing to the common man that, on his own suppositions, a hedonic calculus is the way to a good and happy life—a life in which pleasure and good predominates over pain and bad. He also persuades Protagoras that this is what the sophist's own art achieves: it rescues our lives from pain and error.

I do not intend to explain why Protagoras accepts this account. Rather, my focus is the concurrence of another of the sophists present, Prodicus.

Consider first the opening scene. As Socrates later recounts it, he first saw Protagoras, “and after him I recognized”, as Homer says, Hippias of Elis... ‘And then I saw Tantalus too’, for Prodicus of Ceos was also in town.” The first half of this allusion marks Odysseus's sighting in the Nekyia of Heracles' eidōlon—not Heracles himself, who lives on, enjoying the banquets of the gods. Heracles, Tantalus: go no further, and we may say, with Coby, that the point of the allusion is to contrast “the extremes of pleasure and pain.” But, as Willink reminds us, Tantalus is famous not only for torment in death but luxury in life. Add to that the point stressed by Heracles' eidōlon, the hardships of his life, and we see the contrast of a tormented end to a pleasant life and the pleasant consequences of a life of hardship.

Consider next Prodicus's special expertise, the semantic analysis of synonyms. This expertise first comes into play when Prodicus, parsing a series of paired synonyms, explains the difference between enjoyment and pleasure (euphrainesthai, hēdesthai). Later, when Socrates is struggling to defend Simonides' poem against Protagoras's criticism, he turns to Prodicus and with his assistance argues that the poem itself is an exercise in “distinguishing the sense of words correctly” (onomata orthōs diairein). Were Protagoras to appreciate this, he would withdraw his

criticism. Later, however, Socrates regards Prodicus's linguistic expertise an obstacle. Speaking to all three sophists, he says: "you agree, then, that what is pleasant is good, and what is painful bad. I leave aside our friend Prodicus' distinction of names [diairesis tōn onomatōn]; for whether you call it 'pleasant' or 'delightful' or 'enjoyable'..." Far from objecting, Prodicus chuckles and agrees. The laughter, says Denyer, "may mean that Prodicus is again conniving with Socrates," as he seems to have done earlier when, as the expert in semantics, he gravely gave his approval to Socrates' highly dubious contention that the poet Simonides uses the word khalepon to mean not 'difficult' but 'bad'.

Suppose Prodicus were to insist on the semantic distinctions reflected in these words (hedu, terpon, kharton). We have, after all, already seen him explaining the difference between enjoyment and pleasure, and our sources indicate that semantic analysis of the language of pleasure was of special interest to the historical Prodicus. Given that the hedonic calculus that Socrates will recommend to the common man depends on an art of measuring pleasures and pains, be they greater or smaller, nearer or farther, Prodicus's non-quantitative, linguistic approach to understanding pleasure and pain must be suppressed. Indeed, Denyer calls Prodicus's analysis of euphraīnesthai and hēdesthai a "subversive prelude" to Socrates' eventual argument that "that pleasures are all homogeneous, and differ only in quantity." Why, then, does Prodicus not only not subvert Socrates' argument, but submit to it with a chuckle?

The composition for which Prodicus was most famous is the so-called "Choice of Heracles." As Xenophon has his Socrates paraphrase it, this fable advocates a form of hedonism which, like that advanced by Socrates in the *Protagoras*, argues for a more calculated pleasure than a sybaritic hedonist like Aristippus (Socrates' interlocutor) can hope to achieve. The fable contrasts two kinds of lives, one seeking immediate gratification and ending in a painful and

debilitated old age, the other, a life of hard endeavor leading to richly rewarding pleasures in old age. We see here that same contrast as embodied by Tantalus and Heracles. Used to introduce Hippias and Prodicus, Socrates' allusion to *Odyssey* 11 at the same time hints at Prodicus's fable.

Socrates' hedonistic argument not only facilitates Protagoras's eventual capitulation on the separability of the virtues wisdom and courage, it also enmeshes Protagoras in an art of measurement that (says Socrates) "rescues our lives" from ending with more pain than pleasure. Protagoras has bought into a moderate hedonism; and to see this was for Prodicus, the moderate hedonist of the Heracles fable, well worth biting his tongue—and swallowing his linguistics.

#### Citations

Coby, P., *Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment* (Lewisburg 1987)

Denyer, N., *Plato: Protagoras*. Cambridge 2008.

Willink, C.W., "Prodikos, 'Meteorosophists' and the 'Tantalos' Paradigm," CQ 33:25-33.