

Epideixis and the Professions of Plato's Protagoras

Occupying a conspicuous place in the *Protagoras* is the sophist's explicit professional claim and the "Great Speech" that substantiates it (ἐπάγγελμα, ἐπίδειξις). The collocation of these terms is hardly unparalleled in Plato. But the *Protagoras* is different in that it continues to exploit this interest in professional sophistic claims and their substantiation well beyond the Great Speech. We see this in Protagoras's treatment of the Simonides poem and in Socrates' own discussion of the same; we also see Socrates keeping Protagoras enmeshed, in the so-called hedonist argument, in advertising the value of his sophistic instruction.

In their initial engagement, Protagoras declares to Socrates that his student may expect to gain powers of good judgment (εὐβουλία) in the management of affairs both public and private. When Socrates equates the latter aspect to a claim to scientific instruction in citizen excellence, Protagoras responds: "that, Socrates, is exactly the profession I publicly declare" (τὸ ἐπάγγελμα ὃ ἐπαγγέλλομαι). Because Socrates' experience of the Athenian democracy is such that he doubts that citizen excellence is in any way a teachable skill, he calls upon Protagoras to give a demonstration of his position (ἐπίδειξις). The ensuing speech celebrates citizen excellence and that excellent form of government, democracy, that understands how all citizens may share in such ἀρετή. In the end, Socrates finds its persuasiveness overwhelming.

A speech that not only effectively praises its subject but also wins the admiration of the audience for the speaker is epideictic. In this regard, Protagoras's speech is in its design comparable to the Hippocratic *Art, Breaths* (περὶ Φύσεων), *Ancient Medicine* and Gorgias's *Helen*. Moreover, in that the speech serves to substantiate the speaker's ἐπάγγελμα, the claim that he as a professional makes, and publicly advertises, it is again an epideictic performance (Pratt 2012:195), and here too we may compare the works just mentioned. Thirdly, these texts

share a similar structure: preamble, announcement of subject, retrospective/prospective transitions, and epilogue (the first and the last highly rhetorical) (Jouanna 1984).

Socrates praises the power that the speaker has displayed in his *makros logos*; but he also praises the speaker for his reputed powers of *brachylogial* discourse. Protagoras displays the latter in his succinct responses during the first stages of Socrates' inquiry into the unity of the virtues. It is also evident when he himself becomes the questioner and Socrates the answerer. We may consider this an *epideixis* of the *brachylogial* mode and of *elenctic* method. It elicits from an initially flummoxed Socrates a *makros logos* of his own. It is a speech of praise (of an ode by Simonides), and it represents the speaker holding back a wealth of knowledge at his command (it is, says Socrates, merely a *peira* or "essay"); it includes a polemical preamble about the Spartan pursuit of wisdom, and everywhere depends on a single hypothesis as to the poet's motive, a hypothesis repeatedly invoked. Each of these is a quality of an *epideictic* speech. *Epideictic* as well is the first-person authority of the speech, the speaker's anticipation of the listener's objection, the speaker's disguising his own assertions as the self-evident answers to hypothetical questions, and his outlandish assertions on the fine points of Simonides' style. But one important characteristic of *epideictic* discourse is missing: the speaker's proud declaration that his speech has been a successful and compelling demonstration (*epideixis*). He concludes instead: "that ... is what Simonides *seems to me* to have meant in writing this poem." For truly to *know* what the poet meant requires the presence of the poet himself as interlocutor. Failing that, all that a speaker can do is to be "clever about poetry," as Socrates has shown himself.

The hedonist argument that follows likewise shows the traits of *epideictic* discourse. There we find Socrates promoting, with the assistance of Protagoras, the latter's program of instruction. Engaged in a *collaborative* pitch to the masses, *οἱ ἄνθρωποι*, the two advertise the

advantages of the hedonic calculus. We may regard this as the otherwise unexplained Protagorean euboulia in the private sphere. The epideictic character of the pitch is evident in its self-representation as a trial or essay, its repeated use of second-person hypothetical objections, and, most tellingly, the speaker's withholding further details of his vast expertise until after the matriculation of the students ("now *which* art, and *what* knowledge, we shall inquire later...").

Of course, the hedonist argument serves to keep Protagoras involved in the Socratic inquiry into the unity of the virtues. Nonetheless, this involvement can be no more than tentative so long as Protagoras persists in sophistic professions and epideictic demonstrations.

Bibliography

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