Myth and philosophy on stage in Platonic dialogues

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3.2 *Demonstration of a Beneficial myth/hypothesis* – Protagoras

3.2.1 *Theme introduction, setting and narrative mode*

From the very first discussion in the *Protagoras* the reader is introduced to a major theme that runs consistently through the whole dialogue: the value of mutually beneficial partnership where each party contributes an essential, yet different, component.[1] The dialogue is introduced when Socrates, in the role of first person narrator, which lasts till the end of the dialogue, mentions the events of the morning to an unidentified friend.[2] Socrates agrees to explain the details of the discussion and in doing so acts in favor of both himself and the listener. The morning's dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras, which makes up the main part of the dialogue, is recalled and, generally speaking, exhibits similar features which constitute the structure of the introductory discussion – mutual advantage for both interlocutors and the unique participation and character of each interlocutor. The conversation described is between a philosopher and a sophist, an Athenian citizen and a foreigner, a young man and an old man, an invited guest who has come to teach and an uninvited guest who has come to learn. These themes, along with other fine details included in many parts of the text, will prove to be extremely important in my analysis of the dialogue and for understanding the place of myth in a mutual scaffolding framework.

[1] The Prometheus and Epimetheus myth is pivotal for understanding the theme of partnership which pervades the dialogue and its significance for interpreting the message of the text. I will discuss this issue further in the section on plot structure.

[2] R.C. Bartlett respects the place of minor literary details by drawing attention to the fact that Plato uses the term *hetairos* rather than *philos* (Plato [2004] pg. viii). The ambiguity of the word *hetairos* introduces a complexity into the relationship that cannot be recognized in the word 'friend'. In this chapter I will explain how one of the major themes in the plot is the advantages and disadvantages of partnership. For this theme to function a more formal and conditional relation between two parties is required as opposed to the intimacy associated with friendship.

The fact that Socrates is the explicit narrator is a significant point to consider in conducting an analysis of the dialogue. In my critique of the *Meno* I pointed out how the content of the dialogue can be viewed in a particular way because of the fact that there is no explicit narrator and no introduction or setting to the dialogue. The same applies to the *Protagoras* but in this case there is great deal of material to interpret even before the crux of the dialogue begins.[3] I will argue that the introduction to the dialogue by the narrator and the beginning of Socrates' narration of events contains elements that complement scenes and ideas expressed in the most important parts of the text.[4] Socrates does not need the author to use literary techniques to confirm what kind of role he is going to play in the dialogue; Socrates is in control of the storyline and we must concentrate on what he says about himself, how he says it and how he depicts the conversation.[5] It would be naïve to assume that Plato does not play a role in creating the dialogue and therefore representing Socrates the way he sees him to some extent, but the fact that he has included this introductory scene in the dialogue indicates a distance between author and narrator which justifies my interpretation that we are more likely witnessing Socrates without a completely Platonic costume.[6] I think that it is plausible to argue that the fact that we see a somewhat challenged and sometimes unconvincing Socrates can be attributed to the fact that he is not completely a literary character used by Plato for his

[3] Ebert (2003) pp. 9-11. Ebert refers to three different kinds of poetry outlined in the *Republic* to assist his classification of the formal style exhibited by the *Protagoras*.

[4] For instance, in an introduction to the *Protagoras*, M. Frede points out that the fact that the slave closes the door on Socrates and Hippocrates is significant (Plato [1992] p. xiv). The scene indicates, for Frede, that generally people cannot distinguish between a philosopher and a sophist and connects this confusion to Socrates' trial and execution (in contrast Protagoras led a successful life as a teacher and political ideologue). Through the dramatic setting of the dialogue, I believe, Plato is conflating or overlaps categories, personalities and stereotypes characteristic of other dialogues. I will argue that a fusion of these different aspects is one of the most fascinating features of the text and that it is a concomitant element of the plot structure.

[5] There are eight dialogues where the main dialogue is reported by an explicit narrator (Ebert [2003] pp. 11-20). These are the *Phaedo* (Phaedo), *Parmenides* (Cephalus), *Symposium* (Apollodorus and Aristodemus), *Charmides* (Socrates), *Lysis* (Socrates), *Euthydemus* (Socrates), *Protagoras* (Socrates) and *The Republic* (Socrates). In addition, there are two spurious dialogues that are narrated: *Erastai* (Socrates) and *Eryxias* (Socrates). In all cases it is clear that the personality of the narrator, as he is presented in the particular dialogue, has a profound impact on many of the philosophical and literary features of the text.

[6] This interpretation opens up the possibility that the character and function of Protagoras may be more in tune with Plato's way of thinking than Socrates. I will argue that Plato contrasts Protagoras' approach to the topic with Socrates' and amplifies Protagoras' successful procedure and outcome by illustrating Socrates' unconstructive and pedantic methods.

own purpose. Plato may be portraying a more realistic Socrates in a far less than ideal situation which classifies the text as a case of 'historical fiction'. I do not want to speculate on this possibility too much and at this stage it is enough to mention the issue of narrative mode and the contrast between author and narrator, but I will return to this issue in detail when I address character selection.

Before meeting with Protagoras, Socrates perplexes Hippocrates with his well-known style of elenchus in order to find a definition: this time for the definition of a sophist. The discussion ends in *aporia* and one has the impression at this stage that Socrates is occupying the dominant position in the story. One may assume that if he were to use the same technique with a sophist the outcome would be not unlike that reached with Hippocrates. Based on this we anticipate a Socratic victory, but we are surprised.

3.2.2 *The myth/hypothesis*

Protagoras offers to present a myth in order to explain why the art of politics and good citizenship – which both interlocutors take to be indispensably associated with virtue – can be taught. However, Protagoras' case must be understood in context. Prior to Protagoras' tale Socrates gives an argument for the opposite, i.e. they cannot be taught (319).[7] Socrates bases his argument on his own observations of Athenian practice rather than define virtue and how it relates to civil life – he assumes that inquiring into the way different humans practice politics will give him the answer to the question of whether virtue can be taught. Only a few simple examples are referred to. Socrates noticed that the Athenians do not consult experts when they deal with political and civil issues, which they certainly do when it comes to other technical matters such as building. Along with

[7] Van Riel points out that Socrates presents Protagoras with a dilemma: if he agrees with Socrates he jeopardizes his occupation as a teacher and if he disagrees with him he criticizes the democratic constitution which enables him to work as a teacher ([2008] p. 3). Protagoras' myth renders Socrates' problem irrelevant by placing the details and data within a new hypothesis.

the fact that no teacher is ever referred to as the source of a particular point of view, Socrates concludes that the subjects of politics and good citizenship cannot be taught.[8] He assumes that technical skill and political skill are of the same kind which is why he can infer that since Athenians deal with each one differently there is a contrast in the education used, or not used, for each.[9]

He then goes on to cite the example of Pericles to describe how great political leaders and virtuous citizens could not teach their children how to be good citizens. Socrates' argument is inductive in that he is selecting certain examples from Athenian society and based on these few examples constructs an account of what things can be taught and what cannot. The argument is not very convincing and one of the major factors missing from the account is a hypothesis that clarifies the connection between the art of politics and good citizenship and virtue. Actually, Socrates begins by discussing how political practice and citizenship cannot be taught and his conclusion, suddenly, mentions only virtue (320b). There is no explanation provided for how the former, a "special kind of wisdom", is one and the same thing as virtue. However, Socrates ends his argument by praising Protagoras' wisdom and experience and accepts, without irony it seems, that he will demonstrate that virtue can be taught.

> …myth is often ready to become the field of final causes. It steps in where no explanation in terms of efficient or formal causality seems to be available. In terms of both time and space, it furnishes the means to describe a wholeness. It tells how the immortal soul should behave because of the judgment. It describes the structure the cosmos was given because of the similarity to its model. In the Protagoras, the teleology operates within the political context.[10]

[8] It seems that Socrates' argument has a specific agenda that he is not revealing here. The argument has affinities with his critique of democracy in the *Republic* and it may be argued that Plato wants to show, through Socrates, that one's views on other issues can affect the way one chooses to deal with a topic like virtue that requires special attention of its own.
[9] Van Riel attributes the failure of the conversation between the two interlocutors to the fact that they are using two different conceptions of *arête* (Van Riel [2008] pp. 2-3).
[10] Thein (2003) p. 61.

In response to Socrates, Protagoras tells a myth.[11] Whereas Socrates begins with empirical data and moves on to a proposition Protagoras begins by explaining a myth/hypothesis involving the origins of human nature. The hypothesis consists of an explanation of how political practice and the values of citizenship are indispensably connected to virtue.[12] It is only after the myth/hypothesis that Protagoras renders arguments for why virtue can be taught which include empirical evidence that debunks Socrates' argument.[13] The way Plato has structured Protagoras' myth, his selection of particular aspects from different versions of the myth, and his emphasis of certain features all prepare a foundation for the following arguments and prescribe a special reading of the dialogue as a whole. I will explain these elements of the myth and their relationship with other parts of the dialogue but it is helpful to first understand the way in which Plato structured the myth to clarify the connection between the art of politics/good citizenship and virtue.

The myth tells of the creation of the human race and animals out a mixture of two elements, earth and fire. The gods assigned the job of equipping humans and animals with their distinctive powers to the titan twins Prometheus and Epimetheus. After Epimetheus failed to assign humans with any powers Prometheus steals the gift of skill in the arts and fire from the gods and gives them to humans for their survival. As a result, humans could create religion, language and the things required for basic subsistence. But because they did not possess political skill and civil expertise they were in danger of extinction at the hands of beasts and themselves. Hermes was sent by Zeus to equip humans with virtue which the myth equates with political skill or "qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice, so as to bring order into our cities and create a bond of

[11] Tarrant describes the social dynamics associated with seniority, interpretation and story telling and how these factors influence the presentation and status of myths in Plato's dialogues (Tarrant [2008] p. 4).
[12] Zilioli (2007) pp. 96-98. Zilioli connects the theory proposed in the myth to the fragments of Protagoras.
[13] In his introduction to the *Protagoras* C.C.W. Taylor argues that Socrates' style of argumentation, which subjects an opponent's hypothesis to critical questioning with the aim of exposing its contradictions, was first pioneered by the Sophists. The difference, he explains, between Plato's use of the method and the sophists is that Plato's aim is not victory by one party but healthy cooperation between two parties to arrive at truth (Plato [1996] p. xi).

friendship and union" (322c).[14] These gifts are distributed to all as part of their nature but Protagoras includes the fact that they must be acquired by each individual or risk becoming unjust and, ultimately, facing capital punishment. Therefore, Protagoras makes a distinction between political wisdom, which necessarily involves justice and moderation, and skill in other arts (a distinction that Socrates does not make). It is because all men have this potential that everyone acknowledges the opinion of their fellow citizens. The myth explains why political skill and good citizenship are conduits for acquiring virtue and the consequences associated with not having them or not developing them. It follows, that since each individual must acquire virtue by enhancing their natural predisposition for political activity, and that it is unanimously desirable that all individuals in the state acquire virtue, that it is teachable and in fact must be taught for the survival of the human race.[15] Pratogoras then goes on to present Socrates with empirical examples for why virtue, which he has successfully shown to be expressed through political activity and a productive life as a citizen, can and must be taught. In similar fashion to the situation in the *Meno*, one of the reasons why Protagoras' position is more plausible is because he has taken the consequences of his hypothesis into account whereas Socrates has not even thought up a proper hypothesis to begin his argument.

> The concept of technique that was historically predominant in the fifth century BC helps us understand that for those Greeks living at that time, such as Protagoras, the employment of a technique just meant following some codified procedures; no assumption was ever made about the objectivity of the result obtained through the application of those codified procedures…The account of the birth and development of human society that Protagoras gives in the Myth combines the divine origin of the technai with their role for improving human life.[16]

[14] "The myth has supplied a framework within which excellence might be considered; the myth is used for such purposes by those with a fatherly point to make." (Tarrant [2008] p. 6)
[15] For a negative interpretation of Protagoras' myth that states that it ignores individual value see Bartlett's comments in Plato (2004) pp. 73-74.
[16] Zilioli (2007) pp. 101-102.

To recapitulate, Protagoras' myth does something that Socrates' earlier argument fails to do: it explains the important connection between political activity and good citizenship, and virtue. Socrates begins by stating that the art of politics and good citizenship can not be taught because of certain examples that indicate that men often try to teach it but fail. He has not explicated 1) what politics is 2) what a good citizen is 3) what virtue is and 4) what relationship 3 has to 1 and 2. On the other hand, Protagoras covers all grounds and I will argue how a mutual scaffolding approach illuminates the dynamic nature of his subsequent arguments and the structure it uses, which refers back to the main ideas expressed in the myth, to infer its conclusions.

3.2.3 *The philosophical arguments*

The myth/hypothesis accounts for our innate ability to sustain ourselves and communicate. It also expresses our natural potential to organize ourselves politically and live as productive citizens in a city. It affirms that the general state of being that humans are intended to live in is one of 'friendship and union' (322c).[17] The myth describes how all humans came to have the predisposition for virtue and how everyone needs to make use of their predisposition as citizens who participate in politics if they want to guarantee justice. After the myth Protagoras presents Socrates with a number of arguments in the form of examples which confirm the hypothesis – the position that political skill, good citizenship and virtue are bound together and its associated details along with the proposition that virtue can be taught. First, he distinguishes virtue from other skills by explaining that the reason the Athenians listen to everyone on matters of politics while consulting experts when dealing with all other crafts is because, based on the theory presented by the myth/hypothesis, all humans have the ability to contribute to political life – if they did not learn to use their potential they would not be citizens of the state,

[17] I will argue later that this is one of the most important features of the dialogue as a whole which pertains to its plot, the character roles and in light of which the arguments need to be interpreted. In this instance Plato uses the word *philias* for friendship.

excluded from participation in such matters and punished. Socrates had assumed virtue could not be taught because experts were not consulted in running the state. The fact that Athenians ask everyone's opinion regarding politics means, for him, that everyone recognizes that an individual educated in political skill and citizenship is unachievable. For Socrates, the example of Pericles' sons and Clinias, failed attempts to teach virtue, are interpreted according to the conclusion of the argument that all citizens (non-experts or amateurs) are consulted in political matters. In contrast, Protagoras interpreted a democratic approach to politics in opposition to Socrates since his myth/hypothesis conditioned a new view of the place and acquisition of virtue in human development. As a result of using his hypothesis he could incorporate a wider range of empirical data to support his view and construct better corresponding arguments – which he does successfully. Consequently, the moral and intellectual consequences of Protagoras' position can be associated with clearer examples and are more inline with the vision of a good state.

Protagoras goes on to refer to the Athenian custom of punishment and how it targets the unjust and irreligious rather than those who suffer from physical disadvantages. Regardless of the craft one is skilled in, the potential for virtue exists in all men. And since different forms of injustice are punished in different ways, Protagoras deduces that all men believe it is the case that virtue can be taught because they do not punish someone for some natural disadvantage but only for bad personal qualities and the existence of vices (323b). Also, Protagoras recognizes that states have a consequential view of punishment, i.e. they administer it to educate people and prevent crime, which he sees as proof that citizens believe virtue can be taught. This proves, for him, that even though humans are predisposed to being virtuous that one ultimately becomes virtuous through teaching – learning how to enhance one's potential to be good (324b). Protagoras then responds to Socrates' example of the failure of virtuous men to teach their children how to be good.

In response to Socrates' examples of good men who fail to teach people virtue Protagoras again builds on the view stated in the myth, that virtue is integrally related to political practice and citizenship. Protagoras argues that the fact that a state exists at all proves that all men partake of virtue (324d). He also gives examples from the state education system and how different subjects are taught with the vision and intention of creating good citizens (325d-326e). As for the sons of good men who turn out bad, Protagoras does not see this as a dilemma for his theory. Once again he refers to the fact that the potential to learn virtue is connected to the existence of the state and he goes on to explain that natural talent is not determined only by one's family ties and influences – one reason for why Socrates' argument fails (327a). "[Socrates] draws on the same questionable following of young men as the sophists; and he, like Protagoras, questions the adequacy of their traditional upbringing and envisages a rational art or discipline to guide one's life, private or public. But, unlike Protagoras, Socrates uncompromisingly insists on the idea of a special expertise, in spite of its obvious consequences for our attitude both towards traditional values and democratic tenets."[18] For Protagoras, Socrates' argument makes a bad inference from bad sons of good men to the inability to teach virtue. Protagoras draws an analogy with language and points out that there are no specialized teachers of language but no one would state that language could not be taught. And the same with virtue – all are taught because, being able to set up and live in a state, they have the natural capacity to learn it as a consequence of functioning in a city.[19]

[18] M. Frede's introduction to Plato (1992) pg. xiv.
[19] I am giving Protagoras's arguments more credit than some scholars have attributed to them (for criticisms of Protagoras' arguments see C.C.W. Taylor's introduction to Plato [1996] pp. xv-xvi). As a unity, the myth and the arguments have far more rhetorical weight and more compelling insight into the issue than Socrates' arguments.

3.2.4 *Mutual scaffolding*

I want to now consider the connection between the arguments and the myth further using mutual scaffolding in order to illuminate how the two compliment each other and explain how they need to be understood as parts in a dialectical unity.[20] The myth presents us with a clear hypothesis in narrative form, i.e., put succinctly, political skill and good citizenship are essentially linked to virtue; therefore virtue can be taught. The hypothesis is made possible because virtue is presented as indispensable to administering the art of politics successfully and therefore living as a good citizen – a definition which was necessary for proposing a hypothesis involving virtue. Basically, virtue is expressed when one fulfills their political responsibility as a good citizen. The myth makes it very clear that virtue is a natural predisposition and that one is obliged as a citizen to enhance it in oneself and teach it to others. Based on these points, facts implied by the hypothesis, Protagoras holds the proposition that virtue can be taught and all of Protagoras' arguments support the myth/hypothesis.

Features of the myth are presupposed or appear in the arguments as logical components or premises. Conversely, the story incorporates, or rather anticipates, examples brought up in the arguments in interesting ways. Protagoras' arguments revolve around the idea that virtue is realized through the art of politics, practiced with the intention of becoming a good citizen. The arguments build on this view towards virtue which is proposed earlier in the myth. In the myth, Protagoras describes how all have "the qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice" (322c) as a natural predisposition, which is essential to creating bonds. The fact that humans were given the capacity for these attributes was a consequence of receiving fire and artistic skill. Both of these are

[20] For an interpretation that recognizes the interdependent relation between the myth and the arguments see Tarrant (2008) p. 5. Tarrant understands that the myth is an explanation of political excellence as inherent and the *logos* is an explanation of how and why it does not require special teachers. However, he does not explore the interdependence between the two based on shared inherent structures, common supporting themes and does not expand on the connection between them in order to discover a necessary meaningful unity.

divine but mean very little without an essential element needed to administer their use. As a natural consequence to being granted fire and skill in the arts human beings founded cities but without political skill they were unsuccessful in maintaining themselves. The significance of the use of political skill in directing all our other skills successfully is that it gives rise to virtue. Because one is in a community where one learns artistic skills, one also learns how to use them correctly for the benefit of the community, which leads to political skill, and becomes a good citizen. Therefore, in line with the view presented in the myth, good citizenship is equated with virtue. It is this point of clarification that provides the basis for the aspect of the hypothesis that virtue can be taught – a crucial aspect of the hypothesis that then functions, like the other parts, in the arguments.

The myth represents an influential view of human nature that, generally speaking, we possess a tendency to create language, provide sustainable living conditions for ourselves, and gather in communities on different scales.[21] The arguments presuppose this view of human nature and it is not incumbent on Protagoras to go into an account of how and why these things come about.[22] Since the issue at hand is the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught Protagoras feels that an account of the origins of certain human capacities that best incorporates the view that we all share a sense of justice is sufficient. The myth/hypothesis is designed in such a way that it anticipates what arguments will be used and the arrangement and content of the arguments to prove that virtue can be taught. Based on particular central features in the myth one perceives human nature in a particular way and can accept that the following arguments are viable if we see things from that perspective. Therefore, much of the Greek practices that Protagoras refers to are proof of the concept of man stated in the myth and not interpreted in ways that may conflict with that view.

[21] Zilioli presents an interesting anti-objectivist interpretation of the myth that incorporates modern debates concerning cultural relativism ([2007] pp. 105-112).
[22] Van Riel argues that the myth promotes the Platonic view that we all posses certain basic human capacities ([2008] pp. 9-10).

After considering Protagoras' presentation of the myth and arguments promoting the theory that virtue can be taught, against Socrates' theory for the contrary, it is obvious that Protagoras holds a position more conducive to intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of moral perfection. At this stage of the dialogue Protagoras appears to be the more 'Socratic' of the two. It is clear that Protagoras identifies political life with the pursuit of virtue, which education must be directed towards. Also, punishment must be conducted with the intention of cultivating virtue within the punished and the community at large. The myth/hypothesis, and the definition of virtue that preceded the arguments, allow for a way to interpret certain facts pertaining to politics, education and punishment. The consequences of working with Protagoras' myth/hypothesis promotes an active and enthusiastic development of one's natural capacity not unlike the way Socrates' myth/hypothesis in the *Meno* avoids laziness and encourages a search for knowledge. In the rest of the dialogue we witness Socrates, without use of a well thought out working hypothesis, pedantically picking on details that may or may not lead to a stage in the inquiry that pertains to actual consequences. Socrates' demand for definition (329c-331e) fails as a constructive and informative discussion as does the following line of dialectic (332-334). The most significant difference between Socrates and Protagoras is the systematic development and unity of Protagoras' approach as opposed to the unclear direction of Socrates' question and answer method, the sometimes ad hoc nature of choosing the focus of his investigation, and his lack of consideration for the consequences that may be drawn from his propositions. Protagoras' myth and arguments operate together in a mutual scaffolding relationship that pays more attention to the implications of the premises and conclusion and prescribes a more profound and practical understanding of human nature and its connection to the state. Protagoras, as he is presented by Plato in this particular dialogue, deserves far more credit than the tradition of scholarship on the dialogue has given him. The representation of Socrates in this dialogue must be reconsidered seriously in contrast to a more philosophically and ethically admirable and productive Protagoras (cf. fn. 19). Frede's comments on the responsibility of philosophical hypotheses and her consideration of consequences in

contemporary society, and on future generations, illuminate the qualities exhibited by Protagoras' vision and account.

> It does make a difference to our lives what, in the end, we want to have succeeded in; it makes a difference what we think it takes on our part to succeed, what abilities and kinds of competence we think we need in order to be, as we say nowadays, competent human beings; we want to know what it would take to be the kind of person one would, on reflection, like to be, if that were possible; whether and how one could acquire this ability and competence, and what roles natural endowment, upbringing, and reflection play in this.[23]

The dialogue ends with Socrates narrating that he is unsure whether the two interlocutors agree or disagree on whether virtue can be taught. However, the end of the dialogue leaves one believing that, in accordance with Athenian practice, Athenians do generally hold the belief that it can be taught and that it is better to believe this than the contrary. Certain behavior, undisputedly admirable, displayed by Athenians is based on the culturally accepted principle that virtue is teachable and one must live and act with full awareness of the consequences that the reality of this principle entails (the existence of this as a principle seems to be tacitly accepted and not prescribed or clearly stated by anyone). Protagoras' position, although open to criticism from different angles, seems to be the more plausible and it is interesting that it begins with a myth that reverberates through the arguments and provides a clear indication of how the arguments, both individually and collectively, will conclude.

What is interesting in the example of the *Protagoras*, like the *Meno*, is how a hypothesis can lead and determine an argument in specific ways – and not using a hypothesis or an undeveloped hypothesis often leads to *aporia* if pressed. In some instances, hypotheses that seem to be essentially contradictory to each other can be equally convincing. But what is important to consider is that hypotheses and their

[23] M. Frede's Introduction to Plato (1992) pp. vii-viii.

corresponding arguments constitute a whole. It is misleading to interpret the hypothesis as a whole that comprises of elements in the form of premises. If we consider a myth/hypothesis along with premises, empirical data and consequences as part of a dialectical whole that defines a cogent and comprehensive perspective on ethics, education, government and other social and philosophical phenomena, then the standard by which we judge a theory to be acceptable shifts from a merely logical cohesion to a more profound and characteristically historical, social, cultural and human criteria.

3.2.5 *Plot structure*

I want to elaborate further on the plot used in Protagoras' myth which I will argue influences many other parts of the *Protagoras* and the text as a whole. It is important to discuss the myth first because one of the main arguments I use to justify the place of myth in a philosophical text is that it invites a paradigmatic plot structure which can incorporate a working hypothesis, whereas a hypothesis by itself or a proposition does not create the same effect or have the same quality. It is important to emphasize that plot structure is constructed, meaning that it is artificial but not arbitrary, which means that the myth/hypothesis is epistemologically *a posteriori* but functions as though it were *a priori*. When introduced into a philosophical investigation it acts as an epistemological condition for approaching an issue. It determines what data you use to support the claim or view; what arguments you feel are most relevant; who you refer to as sympathetic to your view; what theory compliments your view; and how you arrange and interpret this material.

The plot structure that controls the myth in the *Protagoras* has, like other myths of this kind, a combination of themes familiar to us from other mythic plot structures. I do not wish to explore the details of these similar myths or place Protagoras' myth in historical or cultural relation to similar myths. I think it is only relevant to mention

mythic plots which share themes and motifs with Protagoras' myth to indicate the essentially human, social and epistemologically paradigmatic nature that these mythic themes and motifs have. In relation to Protagoras' myth I think it is important to consider the themes such as "paradise lost" or the idea of the "fall of man" along with different myths featuring the theme of friendship or partnership.[24]

> After all, it is Socrates who suggests that he and Hippocrates make their way to Protagoras and the other Sophists (314b6-c2), just after he has issued a stinging rebuke to Hippocrates for his uninformed desire to do so, and at an important juncture in the dialogue Socrates assures Protagoras that his cross-examinations have as their goal the discovery of the truth about virtue, about a question that perplexes Socrates himself. His conversation with Protagoras is intended to make certain one or more of Socrates' own thoughts, as only conversation with or "testing" of another can do (347c5-349a6; consider also, e.g., 328d8-e1, as well as 357e2-8: Socrates is not consistently concerned with harming the business prospects of the sophists, Protagoras included).[25]

As I mentioned earlier the dialogue consistently confronts us with examples of mutually beneficial partnership where each party contributes an essential, yet different, component (see my list in the last section). The myth features two brothers, titans, who have been given a task by the gods to assign all animals, including humans, with certain powers to ensure their survival. Epimetheus fails to complete the task adequately causing Prometheus to sin against the gods in trying to repair the damage. Due to Prometheus' blasphemy humans find themselves in a situation where they require intervention by the gods in order to survive. Zeus' grace rescues humans from extinction but also puts humans at an existential crossroads they were not originally intended to be in. Humans must now endeavor to gain happiness and salvation and this requires that they develop

[24] U. Zilioli suggests another kind of structure which begins with an inferior stage of human society (the Epimetheus stage) and progresses to another stage where survival is ensured (the Prometheus stage) before entering a more advanced level of community dynamics (the Zeus stage), ([2007] pp. 98-100) No doubt, there is a 'progressive' historical theme to the story however giving too much prominence to this plot distracts from the themes I referred to (the fall, origins of an inherent potential for virtue, partnership) which I argue are integral to the pivotal working hypothesis.

[25] R.C. Bartlett's comments in Plato (2004) p. 68.

their gift from the gods: the natural predisposition for respect and justice. This, of course, must be perfected to the best of one's ability in the context of a community or state. One can interpret, unambiguously, from this myth that the original state of being preordained for humans was not so different from other animals. As a result of a botched up effort by the brothers, the result of bad teamwork, humans now find themselves having to deal with morality which involves free will.

A comparison between certain features of Protagoras' myth and myths describing the 'fall of man' does not involve stretching the story too far. Many scholars have interpreted the Prometheus story as a prototype of the Biblical tale and many similar stories can be found in different cultures. I do not aim to conduct a cultural study of the place and influence of the plot. I believe it is simply relevant to acknowledge that Protagoras' myth is structured in very similar ways to other myths from various traditions. Recognizing this connection illuminates certain important points about the myth which can inform a reading of the dialogue in illuminating ways.

1) The myth presumes there was a natural tranquility that has now been lost forever (in some forms of this myth this stage may be a golden age of civilization. However, this is not necessary in this case since for Plato the emphasis of the original state is more the nonexistence of social and cultural norms, particularly morality).
2) There were two partners and one made a mistake causing the other to commit original sin.
3) The sin effected human destiny.
4) Humans are no longer in their original mode of being and now find themselves in a more advanced social and cultural setting where they must develop virtue in order to be saved.
5) God spared humans; he did not let them kill each other. God blessed mankind by giving them a last chance in the form of a gift, but under certain conditions.

The plot structure of Protagoras' myth can now be used to understand the dialogue as a whole and some of the symbols represented in it. For instance the theme of partnership between contrasting pairs is exemplified from the beginning. I have already mentioned symbolism such as the introduction between Socrates, a known figure, and an unknown companion; the transitions between darkness and daylight; and outdoor setting and indoor setting (see opening section on 'Theme introduction, setting and narrative mode'). Of course, a crucial partnership to consider in the text, and not merely symbolic, is between Socrates and Protagoras which does not adhere to the binary oppositions familiar to us from other dialogues: philosopher and sophist/ inquirer and teacher/ Athenian and foreigner/ young man and elder/ uninvited and invited. Like the myth the dialogue expresses partnership and the perils each party may fall into if the working relationship is not attended to carefully. But the dialogue moves on from the negative basis provided by the myth and adds a potential scene: mutual benefits that can be gained through coordination. This feature is an example of how the dialogue departs from the limited framework of Protagoras' myth and adds a form of addendum or sequel; a kind of reworking of the plot displayed in Protagoras' myth as well as the many other traditional myths it has affinities with.[26]

The two main interlocutors begin by presenting their views on virtue, and if it can be taught, in the way they prefer. Socrates switches his line of argument at 332a when he sees that it is not going in the direction he aimed and then the debate is in danger of being relinquished by Socrates because Protagoras does not answer briefly, the way Socrates demands. But before the conversation breaks down the group of men present are successful in reconciling the two and encourage them to continue by way of "discussion, not a dispute" (337b). The partnership struggles to find common ground on various levels. Socrates demands brief answers but immediately after he demands this condition he responds to Protagoras' question on poetry with the longest answer in the dialogue. When Socrates continues to question Protagoras he focuses on the issue of definition again. Protagoras seems aware that this line of questioning does not pay attention to

[26] Van Riel (2008) p. 5.

context and other nuances but only analyses the definition as an isolated term. Socrates seems to be moving away from a healthy discussion and becomes rhetorical instead of looking for new insights into the topic.

> The Protagoras gives us a vivid picture of the practice of dialectic, of how the respondent can be fair or unfair, cooperative or uncooperative, of how the questioner can conceal the aim of his questioning, of the role the audience plays, of the possible need for an umpire (cf. 338a8). But our dialogue also allows Protagoras, the main character besides Socrates, repeatedly to break this scheme; for example, to exchange roles with Socrates (338e6 ff.), or to hold forth in long speeches.[27]

Frede's interpretation implies a criticism of Socratic elenchus and fixation on establishing a definition in order to proceed with an inquiry. Socrates is basing his argument only on the notion that 'if knowledge, then teachable'. Throughout this section the narrator is presenting himself in a good light but the reader is led to be suspicious of whether the narrator is misleading the listener or reader as to the sophistication of his performance in the story.[28] The story ends when both agree to come together for another productive discussion. Before the end (361c-d), the myth is referred to by Socrates which implies that the dialogue is both influenced by the plot and also that the later part of the dialogue is a form of 'sequel' to the story of a failed partnership. The partnership theme in the myth helps understand the course of the dialogue especially at 337 by showing an interesting link between partnership, community setting and healthy dialogue. It is an example of how virtue, the agreement to search for knowledge together, is expressed in the context of a gathering (resembling the use of political skill in the myth).[29]

[27] Frede's introduction to Plato (1992) p. xvi.
[28] Frede's introduction to Plato (1992) pp. xvii-xviii.
[29] For further clarification on the meaning of the terms used by Prodicus, particularly those relating to 'argue' and 'wrangle' see Taylor's commentary on the *Protagoras* in Plato (1996) pp. 136-137.

3.2.6 *Character selection*

a. *Socrates*

The narrator in this dialogue, in contrast to the *Meno*, is clear: Socrates is the explicit narrator. Very little of Socrates' personality is expressed in his conversation with the unknown interlocutor before the recalling of the story and even less, if any at all, through out the text. However, Socrates' communication with the unknown companion reveals some telling features of Socrates' character as the narrator of the dialogue which is also reflected to a certain extent in the narrative itself. But one must be cautious not to conflate Socrates as narrator with the way Socrates depicts himself in his own narrative. As narrator, Socrates' conversation has no setting and the personality of the unnamed interlocutor is difficult to decode.[30] The little background we have is reference to Socrates' physical relationship with Alcibiades. Almost everything about this introductory conversation, from the casual tone with which they discuss Socrates' attraction to Alcibiades to the use of Homer as an authority, gives a very conservative impression or at least signals that what is going on is commonplace amongst the *status quo*.[31] Socrates is not represented here as a critic of conventional, mainstream practices and ideas but practically 'a member of the club'.

Socrates' character in the main dialogue of the *Protagoras* is in sharp contrast to Socrates in the *Meno*. In fact, through out the dialogue, there is almost no trace of trickster characteristics being attributed by Socrates to himself. There may well be a connection between the fact that Socrates is the narrator and the fact that there is no significant trickster device used here. Many consequences of using the trickster device in

[30] Ebert (2003) pg. 15. On page 16 Ebert states: "Since he remains an anonymous interlocutor, he is, as it were, anybody from Athens. Thus, his anonymity makes him a perfect representative of the *polloi*."
[31] My negative understanding of this aspect of the opening scenes is not shared by some interpreters. See Frede's introduction in Plato (1992) pg. x. Cf. my list in the final section detailing features of Socrates' conservatism.

a literary text – blurring of boundaries, priority of the marginal elements, deconstruction of the conventional – are missing and some ideas and comments expressed in the dialogue counter attempts to understand Socrates as a liminal character.[32] In the setting of the main conversation the spectators are made up of foreigners and citizens, some of which are sophists. But there is no definite distinction or judgment made of them.[33] In fact, the dialogue does not judge whether being a sophist is good or bad but at times only seeks a definition of what he does or what he can teach. For a trickster to operate, for a liminal character to have effect, there must be dichotomies drawn; the writer needs to create opposing sides or elements that are not expected to combine in any way. In the *Protagoras* this is clearly not the case and therefore a trickster, like what we see in dialogues such as the *Meno*, cannot function.

b. *Protagoras*

The character of a sophist is not deplorable in the *Protagoras*.[34] The historical Protagoras played a salient role in the democratic constitution of one of Athens' colonies and the myth he tells in the dialogue defends democratic ideals.[35] We know from the *Republic* that Plato was not comfortable with Athenian democracy but in the *Protagoras* Socrates' socio-political stance is not clearly dichotomized in contrast to Protagoras'. The fact that there is no dualism used to influence the plot, and instead a theme of partnership

[32] Features such as dualism are missing which is often an important structural element in a narrative or situation which involves liminality; there is a socially popular and uncritical recognition of all the people present as citizens – they are not directly challenged but influence the discussion, in some cases, as authorities; there are instances where social norms are respected and Socrates does not attempt to disrupt certain formalities with any kind of 'trick' (the dialogue contains many conservative comments and simply accepts many Athenian customs by using them rhetorically in the arguments – this indicates that in the *Protagoras* liminality, or the role of the trickster, has no place. These reasons must be considered when interpreting the *Timaeus* which does not feature liminality and represents conservative tendencies for different reasons as I will show in my chapter on the Atlantis myth).

[33] At 316d Protagoras gives a short history of sophism and how sophists conduct themselves. There is no criticism of the practitioners of the occupation and their role in society is generally accepted as legitimate as long as one deals with them with caution and knowledge of how to evaluate them.

[34] See Frede's introduction in Plato (1992) pp. xv-xvi. Frede describes the positive character traits exhibited by Protagoras in the text and refers to the desirable forms of argumentation used by sophists, which had influenced Socrates' style of dialectic.

[35] Ebert (2003) p. 17.

heavily influences the story, is one reason why Socrates is not pitted against a 'foe' in this dialogue – there is no hero/enemy dichotomy. Actually, there are no victors, no one relinquishes their positions and the meeting promises to continue on amicable terms. Even Hippocrates comes out of the dialogue in a better situation than before. The plot structure, influenced by the theme of partnership, determines the divisions between sophist and philosopher, Protagoras and Socrates, by not taking for granted that the two represent opposing perspectives, methods and intentions but acknowledging the possibilities made available by a working relationship. However, Protagoras is clearly, in almost every case superior, i.e. the most convincing and intellectually compelling. There is a distinct contrast with the way sophists are represented in other dialogues and I believe this is the direct result of the plot's influence on character selection and their roles.

c. ***The attendees***

The guests at Callias' house are a group of Athenian and non-Athenian well-to-do aristocrats – many of which feature in other dialogues (Prodicus, Paralus, Charmides, Hippias, Critias, Callias, Alcibiades, Xanthippus, Philippides, Antimoerus and Hippocrates).[36] Socrates does not challenge and criticize the rare and random input of the others using his typical methods but treats them as peers. This aspect of the secondary characters and their acceptance by the main characters supports the view that we are witnessing a rather socially uncritical setting where no one really wants to upset the political system and its standard customs.

3.2.7. *Index of themes and motifs*

a. ***Motifs of the partnership theme (cooperation of different elements)***

- Mutual advantage between narrator and narratee (310a)
- No dualisms, no hero/enemy dichotomy

[36] For details on the characters see Taylor's commentary in Plato (1996) p. 68-69.

- There is one significant motif which is worth contemplating because of its place in the text, the detail with which it is expressed and the fact that Socrates' unidentified companion renders it - mention of a runaway slave called Satyrus. What we do know is that in medieval bestiaries Satyrus is a species of ape that gives birth to twins, one good and one bad. Aesop is said to refer to this kind of ape in one of his stories (307, Emile Chambray) and describes the significant differences between the twins (310c)
- Outdoor/indoor (311), philosopher (Socrates)/sophist (Protagoras), dark/light or predawn/ dawn,
- Partnership between Prometheus and Epimetheus – plot (320d)
- Friendship and union (322c)
- Prodicus' advice to Protagoras and Socrates: "Let your conversation be a discussion, not a dispute… carried on among friends" (337b)
- Socrates' quote and interpretation of Homer (348c-d)
- Partnership between Socrates and Protagoras (361c-e)

b. ***Socrates' conservatism***[37]

- Admiration of Alcibiades' beauty and reference to Homer regarding the most handsome age for a male (316a and 309a)
- Distrust of a 'stranger' (313b)
- Inability of porter to distinguish between Socrates and Hippocrates and sophists and his attitude towards them (314c-e)
- Upon entering and observing briefly the situation Socrates makes little or no attempt to pay attention to the topics being discussed but simply identifies those in attendance; superficially admires the manner in which the speaker and listeners ordered themselves as they walked; and criticizes Hippias of Elis while he only understood the general topics he appeared to be discussing (315b-c)

[37] Contrast these attributes and characteristics with Socrates as trickster (liminal figure) in the *Meno*. These personality traits support the argument that Plato may be using Socrates, in this text, as an unreliable narrator.

- Critique of egalitarianism (319)

c. ***Socrates' inconducive attitude***

- Expression of cynicism and concealing intentions in contrast to Protagoras' attitude (317c-d)[38]
- Fixation with definition (329c-d; 331a-b; 333a-b)
- Switching topic of debate when it does not follow his desired course (332a)
- Demanding short answers (334d)
- Long exegesis of Simonides' poem after agreeing to give short answers (342a-347a)
- Strange conclusions drawn from definitions of bravery, cowardice, knowledge and ignorance (359c-360d)

d. ***Protagoras' positive characteristics and favorable representation of sophists***

- bias or suspicion against foreigners such as sophists
- positive account of the history of sophism (different modes of sophist such as poets, prophets and seers, physical trainers, musicians and music instructors – 316d-e)[39]
- Egalitarianism (322c-e)
- Humility (328b)
- Altruism (328c)

[38] It seems that by requesting Prodicus and Hippias to listen to the discussion, and his confidence in challenging Protagoras, Socrates is guilty of pursuing glory – something he accused Protagoras of at 317c.
[39] Compare Protagoras' comments with Socrates' situation in the *Apology*: cf. *Prot.* 317a-e about honesty regarding his profession, his disapproval of escape in the face of hostility and taking precautions against harm for being a sophist.