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CHAPTER TWO

Protagoras's Cooperative Know-how

James Kierstead

So Zeus, afraid that our species might go extinct, sends Hermes to bring a sense of conscience and justice to humans, so that political communities could be organized and people could be brought together in joint activity. And Hermes asks Zeus how he should give out the sense of conscience and justice to humans. 'Should I hand them out like the other types of know-how? They get handed out like this: one person knowing medicine is enough for lots of people who don't, and it's the same for the other types of practical know-how. Is that how I should put a sense of justice and conscience into humans, or should I deal those out to everyone?' 'To everyone', says Zeus, 'and let everyone have a share of them; for political communities could not come into being, if only a few had a share of them like with the other types of know-how. And make a law for me that anyone who doesn't have a share of conscience and justice should be killed as a cancer on the body politic'.

That's why, Socrates, when there's a question about how to do carpentry or any other sort of practical know-how, the Athenians and everyone else think that only a few people should have a part in the discussion, and if anyone else from outside those few

*people offers advice, they don't put up with it, like you say – rightly, too, I'd say – but when it comes to a discussion about what's best for the political community, which has to go through a sense of what's right and people's common sense, then they're right to accept advice from everyone, since everyone has to have a part in this sort of thing; otherwise there'd be no political communities at all.*¹

At the beginning of Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates asks the celebrated sophist what it is he claims to teach. After some discussion, Protagoras agrees with Socrates that what he teaches is a kind of cooperative know-how (*politikē tecĥē*), later also referred to as cooperative ability (*politikē aretē*) (314c–319a).

Socrates then asks Protagoras to explain something he has noticed about the Athenians. In the Assembly, Socrates observes, 'when the political community has to do something that has to do with construction, they send for construction engineers to give their advice about the construction, and when it has to do with building ships they send for the shipwrights', and so on; and 'if anyone else tries to give them advice who they don't think has that practical know-how, even if he's really hot or rich or from a great family, they'll have none of him, and they'll mock him and shout him down' (319b). In contrast to that, 'when they have to discuss something to do with the direction that the political community is going in, anyone can get up and give their advice, the carpenter just as much as the metal-worker or shoemaker, the merchant just as much as the ship-owner, the poor just as much as the rich, the common man as much as the aristocratic type, and nobody complains' (319d).

Protagoras's lengthy response to this has come to be known as the 'Great Speech' (320c8–328d2), and it contains one of the earliest defences of popular rule that we have from ancient Greece. For Cynthia Farrar, the speech shows that Protagoras was 'the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world' – at least 'as far as we know'.² Even this speech, of course, is really a product of Plato's mind rather than Protagoras's, but most scholars now seem happy to take it on trust that the speech reflects the thought of the historical Protagoras, or at least captures the gist of some of his main arguments.³ Even if it does not, it would still represent a rare example of an ancient *apologia* for democracy.⁴ On top of this, Protagoras's approach to democracy is an unfamiliar and insightful one. His key argument is that in order for the essential good of political community to be secured, it must be both possible and obligatory for all of us to practice political virtue. So let us now look at the Great Speech in more detail.

The speech begins with two titans, Prometheus and Epimetheus (Forethought and Afterthought), handing out capacities to the various species

of mortal beings. Epimetheus distributed strength, speed, 'flying with wings, or the ability to live underground', as well as other attributes and abilities, to the various newly-created species (320d–321a), but he forgot to give any of these capacities to man, so that Prometheus was forced to steal 'tecŸical smarts' (*entecŸon sophian*) along with fire from Hephaestus and Athena, to ensure that humans survived (321c–d). And humans did survive, mainly because their 'practical know-how' (*dēmiourgikē tecŸē*) enabled them to develop language and to figure out how to make clothing and homes for themselves, as well as to produce their own food through farming (322a).

The only problem was that humans lived 'scattered about the place, and there were no political communities; so they started to be killed by wild animals' (322b). As Protagoras explains, 'their practical know-how was enough to get them food, but not enough for fighting against the wild animals – they didn't have cooperative know-how yet, and knowing how to fight together (*polemikē tecŸē*) is part of that' (322b). In reaction to this, 'they tried to get together and be safe by starting up political communities' but 'they did unjust things to each other because they didn't have cooperative know-how; so they scattered about the place and started to be killed again' (322b). At which point our passage begins.

Protagoras himself almost certainly did not believe that the events described in his story actually happened, but we can understand the story as a way of talking about certain natural characteristics of human beings. We can also see the stages of human development as a series of counterfactuals, designed to explore what life would have been like if we had not been endowed with certain characteristics.

So, for example, since we lack great size or claws or the ability to fly, we probably would have perished without a) fire and b) the practical know-how to learn how to use words and to produce clothing, shelter and food for ourselves. And we would not have been able to get political communities going without cooperative know-how. Cooperative know-how is one part *aidōs* (a sense of conscience) and one part *dikē* (a sense of justice). These enable us to live together because they force us to moderate our actions in response to the reactions of others.

A crucial part of Protagoras's argument is that we *all* have to have cooperative ability if our political community is going to survive (and here we might add 'and to flourish'). Why do we *all* have to exercise our cooperative know-how? Because cooperative know-how is the kind of know-how that, unless it is practiced by everybody, will not do the community any good. This is why Zeus tells Hermes to share out conscience and justice to everyone 'since everyone has to have a part in this sort of thing; otherwise there'd be no political communities at all' (322d). That makes them different to other types of know-how, like medicine; as Hermes says, 'one person knowing medicine is enough for lots of people who don't' (322c).

We do not all need to be doctors to have the benefits of medicine; indeed, although it is usually considered a good thing for a country to have more

doctors rather than fewer, a society that consisted entirely of doctors would not be a flourishing one. But a society in which everybody had a sense of justice and conscience *would* be a flourishing one; in fact, if we believe Protagoras, *everybody* having some sense of justice is a necessary condition for the existence of political community in the first place. Here we might well wonder whether Protagoras has been over-ambitious. Surely all that he needs is the proposition that lots of people, or most people, have to have a conscience and a sense of justice if political community is to be possible. And that condition might seem more easily attainable.

This would be to misunderstand what Protagoras means by ‘cooperative ability’. Everyone does not have to act perfectly the whole time for political community to function. They just all have to have a conscience and a sense of justice, and they need to be surrounded by people who also have those qualities. A person who commits a crime is not necessarily lacking in cooperative ability. They are lacking in cooperative ability only if they feel no remorse for the act and if they fail to react to the kind of rehabilitative punishment advocated by Protagoras (323d–324d).

On the other hand, if they do feel no remorse and have no ability to learn from their punishment, then they might well be lacking in cooperative ability. In this case, the punishment is death. Zeus himself, after all, lays down the law that ‘anyone who doesn’t have a share of conscience and justice should be killed as a cancer on the body politic’ (322d). This might seem a bit harsh, and to be out of kilter with Protagoras’s otherwise enlightened views on punishment. In fact, it is perfectly in accordance with them. It is precisely because Protagoras views punishment as moral teaching that there is no point in punishing someone who has no capacity for moral learning. (It might help to say that in modern terms, Protagoras is talking not about criminals, even hardened criminals, but psychopaths and sociopaths, that is, individuals who appear to have been born without the capacity to feel guilt.) This is why nobody admits that they have no cooperative ability, in the way that you can admit to not being able to play the flute; because ‘everyone has to have some kind of cooperative ability, or they’re not part of the human race’ (323b).

The fact that we *all* need to have cooperative ability if the political community is to survive and flourish explains why we all need to monitor one another (at least, that is what Protagoras thinks; we will discuss more hierarchical ways of monitoring citizens in a minute). It is in every person’s interest to make sure that everybody else is employing their cooperative ability, since if only a few people do not do so, our ability to operate as a complex whole is compromised. Moreover, monitoring the cooperative know-how of others is a way of employing our own; and at the same time as we are giving feedback to others about their cooperative know-how, we will inevitably be receiving feedback about our own. We are all constantly both teaching and learning the skill of doing things with others.

At this point, we may detect a similarity with Aristotle's account of man as a *zōon politikon*, that is, a political animal, or (less succinctly) an animal whose nature is to live in a political community (*Pol.* 1253a). Protagoras's emphasis on cooperative know-how or ability may also remind us of Aristotle's statement that political knowledge (*politikē epistēmē*) is the 'most authoritative and architectonic' (*Nic. Eth.* 1094a) sort. Ober has even developed an Aristotelian defence of democracy in which engaging in political activity is a way of exercising one of our essential capacities as political beings, and is thus a kind of good in itself.⁵ Protagoras instead values political skill or virtue as a necessary condition for the creation of states, which are in turn necessary for our survival, rather than as a good in itself.

Protagoras's theory thus has a pragmatic and even consequentialist cast to it: the point of exercising our cooperative faculties is because if we fail to do so we will perish. In this his account of the creation of states is reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes, who postulated a stateless 'State of Nature' in which a continual 'war of every man against every man' rendered human life 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (*Lev.* 13). At the same time, in his concept of a universal moral/political capacity, Protagoras's account differs from that of Hobbes. For Hobbes, the only escape from the State of Nature is for individuals to give up their freedom to a sovereign capable of imposing order and security (*Lev.* 14). Once the Leviathan we have pledged our obedience to has started to make laws, we can begin to speak of justice; for Hobbes, 'no law can be unjust' because justice is whatever the Leviathan does (*Lev.* 30). For Protagoras, by contrast, the sense of justice inherent in each of us is what enables us to construct states. And because justice is inherent in each of us, the states that we can construct are cooperative endeavours, not hegemony to which we have ceded power.

Protagoras thus conceives of the state, not as a separate coercive apparatus imposing order on a subject population, but as a continual form of collective action carried out by the citizens themselves. In other words, Protagoras lacks the modern conception of the state as it is found, for example, in the work of Max Weber. For Fred Rosen, this is a limitation of his theory; but we may prefer to consider the possibilities that it opens up. As Cynthia Farrar suggests, for Protagoras, 'Society is social interaction [and] social harmony is the result of internal (not institutional) constraints. . . . Political interaction . . . is self-sustaining, for it fosters the very qualities and attitudes on which free social order depends.'⁶

In other words, social interaction is the state and the state consists of social interaction. Once we accept this as a feature of Protagoras's way of seeing things, it becomes easier to understand his concept of *politikē tec̃hē* or *aretē*, which runs over the division we might like to make between 'moral sense' and 'political expertise' (hence my translation, 'cooperative know-how' or 'ability'). Arthur Adkins's main complaint about Protagoras's

speech was precisely that it conflates ‘an assemblage of moral excellences’ with what is required to give ‘skilful advice’, and ‘co-operative excellences with administrative and political skills’.⁷ But the point of the conflation was not, as Adkins suggests, to enable the sophist to offer something both to administrative elites and to the ordinary citizen. Morality and politics are brought together by Protagoras because there is, in his view, no firm boundary between them.

As citizens of a modern, representative democracy, this last point may seem hard to swallow. Surely, it might be said, we cede power to various representatives and civil servants precisely because voters are too ignorant, irrational and indifferent to make decisions on complex issues for themselves.⁸ But we should consider the particular kinds of decisions Protagoras is evoking when he talks about the *politikē tecÿē* or *aretē*. These are political and/or moral questions, and should be contrasted with merely tecÿical matters, the province of practical know-how. If we consider that in modern democracies there is (at least in theory) a distinction between policy-making, which is the province of the people’s representatives, and the *implementation* of policy, which is the province of civil servants, Protagoras’s views may not seem so alien after all. And this is because genuinely political questions are not merely tecÿical or factual in nature, but are rather ethical or normative: they are not questions about how the world is, but about what we ought to do.

And deciding what to do as a community will call on the same inborn qualities of conscience and justice that govern our relationships with our fellows in our day-to-day lives. Rather than seeing democratic practices as a means of attaining an ideal form of reasonable discussion (as theorists of deliberative democracy do), Protagoras sees democracy as a consequence of the kinds of moral communication we engage in every day. We do so naturally, because we are all endowed with a moral sense (psychopaths excepted); but also because *politikē aretē* is the sort of virtue that everybody must practice if any of us are to enjoy its benefits. In this respect, Protagoras joins forces with the political scientists who argue that democracy is superior in securing various sorts of goods (security, prosperity and so on).⁹ Protagoras’s *apologia* thus has a double aspect, combining as it does a naturalistic claim about equal political capacities with a consequentialist claim about the benefits of political virtue.

For one of our earliest known democratic theorists, then, democracy is a consequence of the nature of human beings and of the cooperative ability with which we are all endowed. We need political community for our survival and flourishing; in turn, if the political community is to survive and flourish, we need to exercise our cooperative ability. We can do this in a number of different ways, from engaging in moral communication with our fellows in social settings, to participating in the formal institutions of the state. But we *all* need to take part, and we need to encourage and enable *all* of our fellow citizens to take part too. This is the final message of Protagoras’s theory of democracy for us today – and its real challenge.

Notes

- 1 Plato, *Protagoras*, 322c–323a. All translations are my own. I thank the editors of this volume, especially Xavier Márquez, for asking me to write this essay and for their feedback on it. I also thank Stephen Lambert for his comments and encouragement.
- 2 For this proclamation (and others along similar lines), see Fred Rosen, 'Did Protagoras Justify Democracy?', *Polis* 13, no. 1–2 (1994): 12–30.
- 3 See e.g. Rosen, 'Did Protagoras Justify Democracy?', 16.
- 4 Peter Nicholson, 'Protagoras and the Justification of Athenian Democracy', *Polis* 3, no. 2 (1981): 14–24, is among a dwindling minority of scholars who have denied that the Great Speech is about democracy at all.
- 5 Josiah Ober, 'Natural Capacities and Democracy as a Good-in-itself', *Philosophical Studies* 132, no. 1 (2007): 59–73.
- 6 Rosen, 'Did Protagoras Justify Democracy?', 19.
- 7 Arthur Adkins, 'ἀρετή, τέχνη, Democracy and Sophists: Protagoras 316b–328d', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 3–12.
- 8 See e.g. Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- 9 See e.g. Morton Halperin, Joe Siegle, and Michael Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2004).