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Plato’s *Protagoras*: Negotiating Impartial, Common Standards of Discourse

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ABSTRACT: Plato’s *Protagoras* casts the leading sophist of the 5th century BCE, Protagoras, against the author’s paradigmatic philosopher, Socrates. In this paper I focus on what is arguably the guiding methodological issue of the dialogue: finding agreement upon impartial, common standards for resolving disagreements over abstract questions. In terms of this conference’s theme, *Protagoras* dramatizes a search for common ground between figures who fundamentally disagree over how to locate that ground.

KEYWORDS: rhetoric, dialectic, speeches, conversations, procedure, normative standards, community of discourse

INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper, Erik C.W. Krabbe (2002) reconsiders the theoretical relationship between rhetoric and dialectic in light of Plato’s *Protagoras*. Professor Krabbe defines “rhetoric” as the theory and practice of speeches, and “dialectic” as the theory and practice of conversations; I shall not challenge the distinction, because I find it useful and illuminating. Aristotle’s differentiation of rhetoric and dialectic in *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations* and *Rhetoric* is the theoretical and critical focus of Professor Krabbe’s paper (actually there are two such papers, but I shall concentrate on the later version, leaving aside Krabbe 2000). After reviewing what Aristotle says about the types and goals of rhetoric and dialectic in these works (pp. 29-33), Krabbe itemizes four common features and four differences (pp. 33-35).¹ The conclusion that is drawn at this point is as follows:

for Aristotle rhetoric and dialectic were clearly distinguished, though related arts (or, on the level of the individual: faculties). In practice, however, the two were even more entangled than appears from the survey [provided elsewhere in the paper]). (Krabbe 2002, p. 35)

¹ The common features of rhetoric and dialectic are as follows: neither is confined to any special science; both can prove opposite theses to a single question; both can be misused; and both avail themselves of inductive means of proof. The differences are as follows: as has been established already, rhetoric has to do with speeches, dialectic with conversations; rhetorical addresses a heterogenous crowd, dialectic a smaller group; rhetoric aims at persuasion, dialectic at truth; and finally, in practice rhetoric is usually applied to practical and specific questions, dialectic to universal and theoretical questions.

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The entanglement of rhetoric and dialectic in practice is illustrated by the encounter between Socrates and Protagoras as it is dramatized in Plato’s *Protagoras* (Krabbe 2002, pp. 35-38). The first lesson drawn from this account is that, in practice, conversations can be embedded as functional parts of speeches and that speeches can be embedded as functional parts of conversations (Krabbe 2002, pp. 38-39). More programmatically, Professor Krabbe (p. 39) encourages argumentation theorists to integrate the theoretical treatment of rhetoric and dialectic, rather than treating the two as antagonistic fields (as Plato seems to do in *Gorgias*, for example) or as distinct spheres for theoretical work (as Aristotle seems to imply).

What I want to do in this paper is return to the text that Professor Krabbe finds so instructive and try to extract some more specific hypotheses from the encounter dramatized in Plato’s dialogue. Using as my guiding concern “dissensus and the search for common ground,” the theme of this conference, I shall concentrate on the dialogue’s middle interlude, in which Socrates and Protagoras are joined by several other interlocutors as they negotiate the conditions under which the discussion will continue. As we shall see, the principal interlocutors in this dialogue come to a procedural and ethical impasse that is deeper than that which is strictly meant by “dissensus” (“widespread ... disagreement in opinion; absence of collective unanimous opinion”, OED), but its resolution is indeed a search for common ground.

Before I begin, one point about the trajectory or telos of the dialogue must be stated: *Protagoras* ends in *aporia*; in fact, it has one of the most strikingly aporetic endings of any Socratic dialogue. Socrates and Protagoras never come to agree on an answer to the question they begin with, that is, “is virtue teachable?” More importantly, they cannot even agree that this is the primary question to ask. Nor does their discussion end with much promise that they might be able to resolve their substantive disagreements at a later time. Socrates diagnoses the source of the difficulty as their hastiness in pursuing the question about virtue being teachable before they had discovered what virtue is, a question Socrates himself had raised numerous times (361c-d).² In the same passage that has Socrates providing this diagnosis, he personifies the argument they have followed, and, according to Socrates, “the argument” (* tôn logôn*) condemns the two of them (360e-361c):

Our discussion (* tôn logôn*), in its present result, seems to me as though it accused and mocked us like some human person; if it were given a voice (*phônên*)³ it would say: “What strange creatures you are, Socrates and Protagoras! You on the one hand [Socrates], after having said at first that virtue cannot be taught, are now hot in opposition to yourself, endeavouring to prove that all things are knowledge—justice, temperance, and courage—which is the best way to make virtue appear teachable .... Protagoras, on the other hand, though at first he claimed that it was teachable, now seems as eager for the opposite, declaring that it has been found to be almost anything but knowledge, which would make it quite unteachable!”

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² All references to Plato’s *Protagoras* (including quotations of Greek and English translations) come from Plato 1924. All page references are to the stephanus pages.

³ Griswold 1999 makes the intriguing suggestion that in this dialogue all discussion of “voice” has implications for autonomy.
In light of this ending, I am not so confident as Professor Krabbe that this dialogue can be used to illustrate anything constructive about the theoretical relationship between rhetoric and dialectic (see also Dubose 1973 and Griswold 1999, p. 302). A dialogue that “fails” as a probative exercise and arrives at no settled conclusions can hardly exemplify this theoretical relationship. So I want to concentrate on where things go wrong and the extent to which Plato indicates how they might be set aright during the middle interlude of the dialogue (334c-338c). Even after favourable conditions for discussion are established during this episode, the dialogue still ends aporetically. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore what goes wrong between 338d and the end of the dialogue.

THE EMERGENCE OF DISSENSUS IN PROTAGORAS (309A-334C)

The main action of Protagoras is a lengthy, lively, wide-ranging and complex discussion between Socrates and Protagoras. But before the two central figures come face to face, there are two framing episodes. The first, an outer frame for the main action, takes place in the street and is a brief exchange of direct dialogue in which Socrates informs an unnamed friend that he departed from a meeting with Protagoras only moments before (309a-310a). When the friend asks for a report of this meeting, Socrates begins by relating an early morning discussion between himself and a young acquaintance, Hippocrates. Hippocrates had come to Socrates’ house in the middle of the previous night looking for assistance in becoming a student of Protagoras (who has recently arrived in town). The discussion that takes place between Socrates and Hippocrates before they meet Protagoras constitutes the dialogue’s second, inner frame (310a-316c). Socrates remains the narrator until the end of the dialogue.4

Protagoras is a guest in the house of Callias, a wealthy young Athenian who was infamous for both his extravagant lifestyle and his patronage of sophists (see Apology 20a for further confirmation). The party of sophists and students at Callias’ is large, and Socrates and Hippocrates have trouble getting past the ill-tempered doorkeeper who mistakes them for newly arrived sophists (314c-d). After the formalities of introductions are completed, Socrates and Protagoras enter into an informal discussion about Hippocrates and his prospects as a student of Protagoras (314c-317c). As Socrates tells the friend to whom he is narrating these events, Protagoras seems eager to turn the interview into a display of his own powers as a public speaker (317c). So Socrates suggests that the two of them open up their discussion and invite all those present to observe it (317c). The remainder of their meeting therefore has the air of a performance, with Socrates representing the interests of Hippocrates (a prospective new protégé for the famous sophist) and Protagoras the representative of sophistry (who must convince Athenians that his educational program offers real benefits). In setting (Callias’ house), in casting (Protagoras, Hippocrates, Socrates, and numerous other historical figures) and in

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4 One further point: As the narrator, Socrates reports virtually every word that is said after Hippocrates enters his house at 310a. The only exception is a discussion between himself and Hippocrates on the doorstep, just before they entered the house of Callias to meet Protagoras. All Socrates says about this discussion is that they remained outside so as not to leave it unfinished (atelés). The discussion continued “until we had come to an agreement with each other” (heós sunómologésamen allēlois, 314c). If Plato had wanted to provide a positive model for conducting a fruitful discussion, then this lacuna in Socrates’ account is curious.
dramatic dating (just as the fifth century Athenian golden age was about to come crashing to an end in the Peloponnesian War [431-404 BCE]), Plato has signalled that this dialogue dramatizes a momentous occasion.

The “performance” commences with Socrates stating some reservations as to the very possibility of teaching what Protagoras professes to teach: good judgment (euboulia), the political art (tên politikên technên), good citizenship (agathous politas) or virtue (aretê) - all of which are used interchangeably to identify the single subject of Protagoras’ instruction (317c-320c). Protagoras responds to this challenge with a lengthy account of how his instruction will improve a student. This defence is a masterpiece of rhetorical oratory which commentators commonly refer to as the Great Speech (320c-328d). The heart of this speech is Protagoras’ version of the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus and the creation of mortal creatures. Every species is equipped by Epimetheus with its own distinctive combination of powers (dunameis) to ensure its survival, except human beings who are left defenceless when he fails to set aside any powers for them (320d-321c). To save these defenceless creatures, Prometheus steals technical knowledge and fire from Athena and Hephaistos, but the separate branches of technical knowledge are dispersed to different people and do not promote communal living; in this condition, political life was not possible and human beings were vulnerable to predation by other species (321c-322c). Zeus then sends Hermes with instructions to impose a sense of shame and justice upon all human beings as a way to regulate cities (322c-323a). In this way, Protagoras characterizes the subject of his instruction (which eventually he settles on calling virtue) as something that does not naturally develop in people but is universally acquired by instruction. The myth is supplemented with several arguments to corroborate this conclusion and explain why the sons of prominent politicians such as Pericles often fail match their fathers in achievement (324d-328d).

It is worth noting that Socrates reports that he was left spellbound by this oratorical performance, that it took a great effort for him to collect himself afterwards—i.e., to rouse himself from the role of an eager but passive listener (epithumôn akouein) and to resume his role as the active representative of Hippocrates—and to articulate a critical response (328d). After Protagoras completes his speech, Socrates reminds everyone that Protagoras’s reputation as a superior speech-maker is matched by another capacity: “he is able when questioned to reply briefly, and after asking a question to await and accept the answer–accomplishments that few can claim” (329b). Here we see Socrates establish a distinction that will be crucial to the rest of the dialogue, a distinction which Professor Krabbe has identified as that between the standards of rhetoric that apply to speeches and the standards of dialectic that apply to conversations.

Having established the distinction between these two modes of discussion, Socrates then requests a dialectical elaboration on the sophist’s conception of virtue (aretê). At times in his speech Protagoras had suggested that virtue is a single quality (e.g., 324d-325a), at others a variegated set of qualities (e.g., 322c). Socrates wants clarification of this one small detail (328e-329d). Protagoras replies that virtue is a complex single quality, and that courage, justice, wisdom, moderation and holiness are its composite parts (329d-330b). There follows a series of question and answer exchanges about the precise nature of the unity of the special virtues, on which Socrates and Protagoras come to no agreement (328d-334c). More precisely, not one of these exchanges terminates conclusively, not even with a shared understanding of the precise
proposition on which they disagree. The disagreement here is quite sharp and profound. As I said earlier, it goes beyond a disagreement of opinion (i.e., dissensus); it is a disagreement over the nature, purpose and means of their conference.

Dramatically, the discussion has shifted incompletely from being a “rhetorical” exercise to a “dialectical” one (or at least, it is on the verge of being a dialectical exercise, since Socrates has not been entirely successful in changing the nature of their engagement). Not only that, but it is clear that the rhetorical episode was directed by Protagoras and the dialectical one primarily by Socrates. Furthermore, since Socrates still had “one small difficulty” with Protagoras’s speech and since Socrates’s questions are not capable of eliciting satisfactory answers from Protagoras, each of these modes is clearly aligned with one and only one of the participants in this discussion. Unsurprisingly, the discussion reaches an impasse. Socrates complains that Protagoras’ answers have gotten too long (i.e., they are too long for a dialectical “conversation”), whereas Protagoras complains that Socrates wants him to make his answers “shorter than they should be” (334c-e). The impasse is procedural and ethical rather than substantive. It is procedural because Socrates wants a dialectical discussion, Protagoras a rhetorical one. And it is ethical because it is fundamentally about the interpersonal conditions of their discussion, i.e., it depends on how much each participant is willing to accommodate the other. But it is not substantive because Socrates has not been defending his own view on the unity of virtue so much as he has been attempting to elicit Protagoras’ views, and Protagoras has eluded attempts to have him clear away the “one small difficulty” that Socrates had with his speech; in other words, the conditions have not yet been established for this discussion to arrive at a substantive disagreement of opinion– i.e., dissensus.

It is fair to say that while the nominal meta-level subject of this episode is the procedural question (short answers or long ones?), what prevents discussion from resuming is the prior ethical disagreement about the nature of the discussion the participants are engaged in: Is it a competitive debate or a collaborative conference. When Socrates requests answers that accommodate his own self-described limitations as a listener (i.e., brief ones), Protagoras makes the following reply:

Socrates... I have undertaken in my time many contests of speech (agôna logôn), and if I were to do what you demand, and argue just in the way that my opponent demanded, I should not be held superior to anyone nor would Protagoras have made a name among the Greeks. (335a)

Whereas Socrates had requested Protagoras’ cooperation (or accommodation), Protagoras here openly announces that he understands the discussion in competitive terms. The impasse is between a dialectical mode that suits the listener (an audience member during Protagoras’ Great Speech and the questioner during the question-and-answerer exchanges) and the rhetorical mode that suits the principal speaker (the speech-maker and

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5 See Benitez 1992 and Gonzalez 2000, p. 147, n. 25. Benitez (1992, p. 252, n. 96) makes an especially good point on the frequency of the term sounousia (association) in this dialogue: “Sounousia appears more times in Protagoras (15) than in any dialogue except Laws (18), a dialogue seven times its size.” More than in any other dialogue, the characters in Protagoras find themselves needing to reflect on the nature of their association with each other.
This is a complex contrast, and at this point it is difficult to know how to characterize it precisely. Do we emphasize the contrast of modes (speeches vs. conversation), of roles (audience member / questioner vs. speaker / answerer) or of the personalities involved (Socrates vs. Protagoras)? Protagoras’ remark at 335a implies that he conceives of it in terms of the final contrast, i.e., between rival personalities. Socrates, on the other hand, seems to conceive of it in terms of the modes or roles; which one of these two contrasts applies to Socrates is not clear at the present moment, but it will become clearer by the end of the next episode of the dialogue.

When difficulties in discussing the unity of virtue become intolerable for Socrates, he prepares to leave (335d). This prompts several members of the audience speak up. Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus and Hippias (these last two being the other successful sophists who are present) offer their own diagnoses of the problems that prevent Socrates and Protagoras from proceeding. Each speaker also proposes arrangements for resuming the discussion in a manner that is satisfactory to everyone (335d-338e). This three-page episode, which is found in the middle of the dialogue, is what I want to focus on.

THE MIDDLE INTERLUDE: EXEGESIS

The interlude is precipitated by a question from Socrates to Protagoras about whether “the good” and “the profitable” are identical (333e). To this Protagoras replies with a speech of less than one page which culminates with the claim that “the good is such an elusive and diverse thing” (333e-334c). It is at this point that Socrates begs Protagoras to accommodate his own limitations as a listener: he is forgetful and cannot remember the subject of discussion when a speech goes on at length; please answer briefly.7

When Protagoras steadfastly refuses to accommodate the request for brevity, Socrates prepares to leave. Thereupon Callias, the host, lays hands upon Socrates and implores him to remain. He says,

We will not let you go, Socrates; for if you leave us our discussions (hoi dialogoi) will not go so well. I beg you therefore to stay with us, for there is nothing I would rather hear (akousaimi) than an argument between you and Protagoras. Come, you must oblige us all. (335c-d)

Callis claims to speak for everyone, but his principal concern is with his own pleasure as a spectator to the performance by Socrates and Protagoras. He goes on: “Protagoras thinks it is only just (dikaia) to claim that he be allowed to discuss in his chosen style, in

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6 There is a further difference to be drawn within these categories of speaker and listener. As Socrates’ initial response to Protagoras’ speech indicates, the oratorical audience is largely passive, whereas a questioner takes a more active role in the question-and-answer exchange. And the orator must make only minimal accommodation for the audience of his speech (see 320c, where Protagoras emphasizes his senior position and begins the Great Speech with a mythos because he believes his audience will find this “more agreeable” than a logos), whereas an answerer must be responsive to the questioner on an ongoing basis.

7 Since Socrates is narrating all but the first page of this dialogue, there can be no doubt that he’s insincere about his memory problem—not only is he capable of remembering it, he does in fact remember it. After all, as our narrator he recites it word-for-word. Within the dialogue, Alcibiades expresses his own suspicions about Socrates’ professed limitations (336c-d).
return for your claim that it should be in yours” (336b). Not only does Callias betray a partisan preference for Protagoras’ side in this procedural dispute, he takes up Protagoras’ interpretation of the fundamental procedural point at issue as being a clash of personal preferences. At the ethical level, justice is assumed by Callias to consist of each person being able to do as he pleases (see Gonzalez 2000, pp. 123-4). We can characterize Callias’ contribution as (a) naive (since he accepts the description of the dispute as being exactly how it is described), (b) personal (Socrates versus Protagoras), and (c) Protagorean (not simply because he takes Protagoras’ side on the procedural question but also because he accepts Protagoras’ interpretation of the dispute as being between competing personal preferences).

Since Callias has claimed to speak on behalf of the group (even if he acts only for his own pleasure), it is entirely appropriate that others join in the procedural discussion. Alcibiades then intervenes on Socrates’ behalf, suggesting that Socrates is more capable of following long speeches than he admits, but insisting that Protagoras must either speak briefly as the conversational mode requires or concede that he is inferior to Socrates in this mode (336b-c). Alcibiades adopts a more sophisticated interpretation of the dispute than Callias [i.e., as opposed to (a) above], for he recognizes that something is operating under the surface of the words. But, like Callias, he sees the dispute as (b) fundamentally personal, and he adopts a partisan stance towards it. Essentially, his interpretation, too, is (c) Protagorean in the sense that he conceives the dispute as a competition rather than a collaboration, even if his partisan allegiance lies with Socrates. Procedurally, Alcibiades’ contribution constitutes no advance over Callias’ because it really amounts to little more than a counter-proposal to Callias’ original appeal to Socrates. But ethically it constitutes a partial advance. Like Callias, Alcibiades conceives of the encounter competitively; at the same time, it is an ethical advance in so far as he encourages the interlocutors to negotiate concessions and counter-concessions which require some mutual accommodation (Socrates acknowledges Protagoras’ superiority at speeches, and Protagoras must acknowledges Socrates’ superiority at conversations). Moreover, while Alcibiades seems to have the same conception of justice as Callias, his conception of the community of discourse is wider and more inclusive than Callias’. He actively invites other members of the party to contribute to the discussion (unlike Callias who simply claimed to speak on behalf of everyone, 335d).

Critias takes up this invitation and points out that Callias and Alcibiades have been playing favourites; Alcibiades, in particular, is seized by his characteristic love of victory (philonikos, 336d-e). The audience should be non-partisan: “It is not for us to contend on either side,” he says (336e). Critias also consciously seeks to elevate the discussion by introducing general principles. He does this not by introducing them himself, however, but by inviting suggestions from the two other prominent sophists present, Prodicus and Hippias. Everyone present has a common (koinê) cause in keeping the discussion alive, but Prodicus and Hippias are appealed to directly as sources of independent, non-partisan insight (336d). Thus, Critias characterizes the dispute in impersonal terms, but without providing (d) the conceptual tools to characterize it precisely or (e) any directions for resolving it.

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8 I have altered the English text slightly, changing Lamb’s translation of dikaios from “fair” to “just”.

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Procedurally, Critias makes no advance over Callias and Alcibiades, but only because of his deference to Prodicus and Hippias—not because he agrees with his predecessors in the interlude. Ethically, he makes a significant advance over his predecessors because he introduces a common standard, one that transcends the partisan divisions that are accepted implicitly in the conceptions of justice by Callias and Alcibiades. The appeal to Prodicus and Hippias, who as sophists make some implicit claims to being knowledgeable, implies further that the common standard he seeks must be impartial, abstract and general. If Protagoras is rooted in the empirical community, the one in which he has won his fame by proving to be a superior contestant in competitive debates, Callias and Alcibiades represent the concerns of those from this community. Critias, by contrast, speaks for those who have grown frustrated with this very community and are critical of its conventional normative standards. But, not knowing where to look for an alternative, Critias turns to the self-described intellectuals in attendance, those figures whose novel and sophisticated approaches to argumentation and discourse seem to offer hope for overcoming existing problems in public deliberation—either in conversations or in speeches.

Prodicus responds first to this special invitation by providing a series of general conceptual distinctions that frame the ethical problem before everyone [(d) above]. The audience, he says, should attend jointly to both interlocutors but pay more heed to the wiser of them (337a). Socrates and Protagoras should not wrangle in a spirit of enmity, but debate as friends in a spirit of fellow-feeling (337a-b). In this way, they will earn the sincere good opinion of the audience and not merely signs of praise (337b). And the audience will be intellectually satisfied, not merely pleased by the experience (337b-c). Thus, Prodicus provides some analytical tools for understanding the discussion and some formal, ethical criteria for evaluating any subsequent proposed solutions for its continuation. But he provides no direct advice for solving the problem at hand, that is, how to overcome the particular impasse before Socrates and Protagoras. So in responding to the first part of Critias’ invitation (d), Prodicus addresses problems concerning the ethical dimension of their discussion, but in remaining silent about the second part of Critias’ invitation (e) he makes no contribution to the procedural dimension.

Hippias then offers a practical suggestion for resuming the discussion that addresses both the ethical and procedural dimensions of the impasse. He begins with a preamble about the natural kinship of the Greeks (as opposed to merely customary and enforced association), which would be shameful to betray in churlish quarrelling (337d). He proposes a “middle way”: Socrates should not be so fastidious in demanding brevity, whereas Protagoras should rein himself in (337e-338a). He encourages the group to deputize an umpire, “who will keep watch for you over the due measure of either’s speeches” (338a). Having praised everyone present for their natural affinities and wisdom in his preamble, Hippias introduces his procedural proposal with the following remark: “Now let me beg and advise you ... to come to terms arranged, as it were, under our arbitration ...” (italics added, 337d-e). The suggestion amounts to this: since everyone present is endowed with natural good sense, any one among them may be selected to serve the umpire’s role.9 Any one of the audience members would be as good as any of

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9 Several commentators have detected hints in Hippias’ remarks that he himself would be the best umpire, but I cannot agree with this interpretation. Nothing he says implies that he has any special qualifications for
the others. And, of course, if a single person played this role, any future disagreements on procedure would be settled conclusively (albeit somewhat arbitrarily, not on the basis of independent criteria). So Hippias has found a way to address the second problem opened up by Critias [(e) above] and to frame it with a response to the first problem [(d) above]. Everyone except Socrates approves Hippias’ proposal (338b). Socrates’ own proposal for supervising the discussion builds on Hippias’ praise for the natural intelligence of all those present:

If Protagoras does not wish to answer, let him ask questions, and I will try to show him how the answerer, in my view, ought to answer; and when I have answered all the questions that he wishes to ask, in his turn he shall render account in like manner to me. So if he does not seem very ready to answer the particular question put to him, you and I will join in beseeching him, as you besought me, not to upset our conference. And for this plan there is no need to have one man as supervisor; you will all supervise it together. (338d-e)

When everyone accepts this revision of Hippias’ proposal, Socrates has, in one important respect, completed a transformation in the group dynamics that is quite significant. As his own first-personal account of the effect of Protagoras’ speech implies, Protagoras’ oratory (and presumably any effective speech) has the effect of dulling the critical judgment of its audience, and it requires a tremendous effort to activate those critical faculties afterwards. Socrates managed to rouse himself and generate a critical response to Protagoras’ speech at 328d; the current proposal is designed to activate the critical judgment of the entire group, that is, to transform them from a passive collection of spectators of his discussion with Protagoras into active participants. The supervisory responsibilities that Hippias had proposed be invested in the (potentially arbitrary) judgment of a single person is now to be shared collectively by everyone in attendance.

As with Hippias’ contribution to this interlude, the preamble to Socrates’ procedural proposal merits some attention. Whereas Hippias’ proposal had invested the final decision on matters of procedure in the person of the umpire (whoever that turned out to be), Socrates emphasizes the criteria on which such decisions must be based:

if he who is chosen ... is to be our inferior, it would not be right to have the inferior overseeing the superior; while if he is our equal, that will be just as wrong, for our equal will do very much as we do, and it will be superfluous to choose him. You may say you will choose one who is our superior ... [but it is] impossible–to choose one who is wiser than our friend Protagoras .... (338b-c)

Wisdom is the quality necessary for the position of responsibility identified by Hippias, and the criterion upon which a judgment is based must be rationally defined (see also Garver 2004, p. 366). But, as Socrates’ trilemma demonstrates, there is no sense in looking for one person in the group who enjoys some special advantage in this regard. His own suggestion escapes between the horns, so to speak: they must all attend critically to Protagoras. In this way, Socrates’ proposal is more logically consistent with Hippias’ appeal to have Socrates and Protagoras submit to the group’s arbitration. Whereas Hippias had the group concentrate its powers into the hands of one member, Socrates proposes that they retain collective responsibility. This is not to say that a group is this job (or that any special qualifications are needed), and everything he does say indicates explicitly that everyone present possesses the minimum qualifications for the role he defines.
guaranteed to be wise; rather, as we shall see, it is that a properly constituted group (one that aspires to find and respect impartial normative standards of discourse) is less constrained by its existing epistemic limitations than an individual.

But Hippias is not the only one whose contribution during this episode is modified by Socrates’ proposal. Let me review the episode in light of Socrates’ final suggestions. Callias was the only one who appealed to Socrates exclusively and directly to remain and continue the discussion, but the conception of justice operative in Callias’ appeal was unable to mediate the differences between Socrates and Protagoras. Now Socrates reminds everyone that he had been appealed to in this way (“as you besought me”), but he encourages everyone to evaluate the discussion according to transpersonal standards and to demand that Protagoras respect these standards. Alcibiades had encouraged Socrates not to concede to Protagoras’ preferred mode of discourse; additionally, he introduced the idea that standards of superiority and inferiority applied to such situations. Now Socrates proposes a non-partisan, normative standard, and he appeals to the entire group to respect it (just as Alcibiades appealed to the entire group to speak up). Critias had called on Prodicus and Hippias as intellectuals to provide some non-partisan direction for overcoming the impasse. Now Socrates offers a proposal that emphasizes the role of knowledge (wisdom) but does not presume the need for specialized knowledge. Prodicus had worked out a normative, theoretical framework for both the speakers and the audience of a discussion, but he sharply differentiates the speakers from the audience and offers no procedural guidance. Now Socrates has altered the theoretical framework by virtually dissolving the division between the interlocutors and the audience, and he has provided a procedure for resolving the impasse. Finally, Hippias had partially dissolved the division between interlocutors and audience by recommending that one member of the audience be selected to oversee the discussion—effectively turning this one spectator into a participant. Now, as we observed, Socrates dissolves this division almost entirely by calling on all of the audience to take on this responsibility, that is, by turning them all into participants.

The part of Socrates’ proposal which is purely procedural is the suggestion that he and Protagoras exchange roles. This clears up one lingering uncertainty about how he conceives of the impasse between himself and Protagoras. Has he dug in his heels in defence of his preferred mode of discussion (conversation over speeches) or over his own role in a conversation (as questioner rather than as answerer)? At the beginning of the interlude it looked as if Socrates was asserting some right as a questioner to receive short rather than long answers. But the proposal to switch roles makes his demands clearer. As far as Socrates is concerned, it is the mode of discussion, not the assignment of roles (questioner or answerer), that is crucial.

INTERPRETATION OF THE INTERLUDE

One might be tempted to say that, in getting the group to accept his proposal for continuing the discussion, Socrates has imposed his own stamp on the proceedings and secured a procedural victory; that is, in this “contest of speech” (agôna logôn) Socrates has succeeded in forcing Protagoras to “argue in just the way [his] opponent demanded”. Interpretations of this dialogue which claim that Socrates is outwitting the sophists in
their own game seem to imply this. But this description concedes that Protagoras was correct in his ethical conception of what is at stake in this impasse: that it is a clash between Socrates’ way and Protagoras’ way of proceeding, between contesting for superiority on Socrates’ ground or Protagoras’ ground. Socrates’ real “victory”, so to speak, in securing this outcome consists in elevating the discussion from that of a contest to that of a collaborative venture. Yet it remains a collaboration in which all the participants fulfil their function by maintaining a critical posture towards each other. Moreover, it is not really “Socrates” victory at all, for this description of the interlude fails to acknowledge the crucial instrumental role of the other speakers. It was their common concern to maintain the discussion that propelled this elevation, even if their individual reasons for desiring its continuation were quite diverse. Socrates’ own proposal depended on the contributions of all those who preceded him–Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus and Hippias. If nothing else, he has made it difficult for Protagoras to retreat behind a false dichotomy between his own way of proceeding and Socrates’ way.

When this interlude began, Protagoras had suggested one strategy for the two of them to find common ground: Socrates could move to the sophist’s territory and compete on Protagoras’ own terms. Had Socrates accepted this condition, the only thing “common” about this ground would that both Socrates and Protagoras occupied it. Protagoras wanted to retain control over the conditions of discussion, especially the normative standards of discourse. Now we see the entire group, spurred by Socrates’ threat to abandon the discussion, move to new ground. In one sense this is Socrates’ ground, but only in the sense that he prefers to operate under conditions arbitrated by the group and in accordance with impartial standards rather than those preferred by Protagoras. Unlike Protagoras’ common ground, Socrates has no proprietorial claims over this new territory. No one controls it. This is, ultimately, the crux of Socrates’ criticism of the proposal to name a single umpire: thereafter the discussion would be constrained by that person’s individual judgement. Additionally, this kind of domination is what differentiates rhetoric (understood as the giving of speeches–in the terminology of

10 I don’t want to single out any of the authors cited in my references, for this strategy is common–not the unique contribution of this or that scholar.

11 I don’t think sufficient attention has been paid to the dramatic byplay in this episode, especially to the question as to why this diverse group should be so keen to keep the discussion going. Usually, there’s little direct evidence for the “motives” behind the secondary characters in a Platonic dialogue, but in this case we are encouraged to speculate a little. The motives of Callias and Alcibiades are fairly clear. Callias comes across as a kind of intellectual voyeur who derives personal pleasure from attending debates and speeches but does not get involved in the trenches–he only wants to perpetuate the spectacle. Alcibiades has a partisan desire to see his friend Socrates triumph over the renowned Protagoras. Both Prodicus and Hippias must be imagined to relish the prospect of a leading rival being humiliated by Socrates before a group of patrons. (Interestingly, they get too close to the action when they, along with Protagoras, are induced to endorse hedonism at 357b-358c; when this thesis proves problematic for Protagoras, it has devastating implications for them, too.) Critias is much more difficult to pin down this way, but we might imagine him speaking sincerely as someone who has grown frustrated with interminable partisan wrangling, and who mistakenly believes the problems can be solved procedurally and technically. I must admit that I’m not very confident about these speculations, which is why I have not made my interpretation depend upon them.
Commentators have long suspected that Socrates’ complaint in response to Protagoras’ brief speech about the good (333e-334e) is not really about the length of the answers themselves. Alcibiades is entirely correct to point out that Socrates is not as forgetful as he says he is. In any case, Protagoras’ Great Speech was much longer, and in a few pages Socrates will give the second-longest speech of the dialogue (341d-347a). We are given some indication by Plato not to take this demand literally; all the same, we need to take it seriously and consider what it ultimately amounts to. It is usually taken to be an indirect demand that the answer be relevant to the question (Krabbe 2002, p. 37; see also Miller 1978 and Cohen 2002). However, in Protagoras no special emphasis is placed on the criterion of relevance, a material condition concerning the subject of discourse. Certainly, long speeches are not intrinsically susceptible to irrelevance; Protagoras’ Great Speech, for example, seems to reply to the questions which prompted it. However, speeches are subject to the control of the speech-maker, and Socrates’ “forgetfulness” is invoked as part of a request that Protagoras relinquish some control over the discussion and accommodate his questioner and his audience. It is significant that Socrates prepares to leave when Protagoras denies having any obligation to make such an accommodation. And it is only when the audience members—in a collective effort to save the discussion—transform the ethical conditions of the conference that Socrates agrees to stay.

In a collectively regulated exchange of questions and answers, no single person controls the discussion. Both questioner and answerer must submit to standards of length, relevance, truth, inference, etc. that must be defined independently of their own individual preferences or interests. Such standards are, so to speak, outside their exclusive domain of control. And when Socrates proposes that the audience become active participants, as the collective umpires of the subsequent dialectical exchange, then there is a sense in which everyone must take ownership of the discussion and accept responsibility for its success or failure. But Protagoras must be cajoled into releasing normative control of the discussion and submitting to the collective regulation of the audience. It is no wonder, then, that he takes up his new role of questioner “very unwillingly” (panu ouk êthelen, 338e). The resolution has obliged him to make a choice: either move from his own ground and accept terms for discussion other than his own or withdraw from the discussion entirely. But his audience has moved, and he must either move with them or let them move on without him.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to examine one episode in Plato’s Protagoras closely. In this task, I have been trying to extend Professor Krabbe’s work and examine the dialogue for some specific hypotheses about the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic, not to reconsider how the dialogue is used in Professor Krabbe’s own argument. Nevertheless, I think it is worth noting in closing that Plato endorses a sharper distinction between these two modes of discussion than that which is endorsed in Krabbe 2002, and that he expresses a clear preference for dialectic over and against rhetoric. We see not only Socrates but the entire group (except Protagoras) slowly disentangling rhetoric
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(speech-giving) from dialectic (conversation) in a multi-party exchange that itself exemplifies dialectic. Indeed, judging from this episode of Protagoras, Plato seems to prefer public discourse that is purged of rhetoric and consists entirely of conversations, but not because there is something intrinsically wrong with long speeches or because there is something procedurally superior about brevity. Rather, it is because control cannot be monopolized in a conversation in the way it can be in oratory, and the community of discourse can be wider and more critically engaged in a conversational forum than in an oratorical forum. As I read this episode, the message underlying Protagoras is not that speeches and conversations can be functionally parts of each other, but that in a properly constituted conference discussion will proceed as a conversation in which all the participants respect impartial standards of discourse. This point is, of course, ethical, not procedural, and it envisions an ideal community, not the empirical community in which Socrates found when he first entered the house of Callias. But the ideal is not merely some theoretical abstraction or utopian conception. It is something that can be realized, however imperfectly and incompletely, through negotiations that aim to preserve the conversation as a critical forum for intellectual engagement, the kind of negotiation dramatized in this wonderful episode of Protagoras.

REFERENCES