

# “Socrates’ Κατάβασις and the Sophistic Shades: Education and Democracy”

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the unusually elaborate dramatic context in Plato’s *Protagoras* and effect of sophistry on democratic Athens. Because Socrates evokes Odysseus’ κατάβασις in the *Odyssey* to describe the sophists in Callias’ house (314c-316b), I propose that Socrates depicts the sophists as bodiless shades residing in Hades. Like the shades dwelling in Hades with no connection to embodied humans on Earth, the sophists in the *Protagoras* are non-Athenians with no consideration for the democratic body of the Athenian πόλις. I conclude that sophistry can be detrimental to Athenian democracy because it can produce education inequality founded on wealth inequality.

Keywords: Plato; sophistry; Homer; literary interpretation; education; politics; democracy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: OUTSIDERS

Plato, in the *Protagoras*, presents minor but crucial details in his description of the scene at Callias’ house when Socrates and Hippocrates arrive to converse with the great Protagoras (314c-316b). The *Protagoras* is part of a minority of dialogues, including *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*, in which the dramatic context is elaborate and complex. Indeed, in the *Protagoras*, Plato spends nearly two Stephanus pages merely describing the scene. There are references to the *Odyssey*, a specific picture of Protagoras’ promenade, and other particular details about the activities occurring inside Callias’ house. Why does Plato draw such attention to the drama behind the λόγος? Despite the extensive literature on the λόγοι in the dialogue, the dramatic context of the *Protagoras* is often overlooked. Few see it as integral to the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. For example, W. K. C. Guthrie finds philosophical meaning in the dialogue, “in spite of the importance of the dramatic element” (Guthrie, 1956, 9, emphasis mine). Yet some do address the dramatic context; most prominent in this regard are David Corey in *The Sophists in Plato’s Dialogues* (2015) and Heda Segvic in *From Protagoras to Aristotle* (2009). Corey argues that Plato’s aim is not necessarily to villainize the sophists or treat them as enemies of philosophy (Corey, 2015, 3). He deepens our understanding of the sophists and adds nuance to the ways the sophists are treated in the Platonic dialogues, particularly in the *Protagoras*. In contrast to Corey, Segvic draws the following conclusions from Socrates’ characterization of the sophists in this opening scene of the *Protagoras*:

By presenting them as heroes of the nether world, Socrates seems to be making

an ironical comment on the image the three Sophists [Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus] have of themselves. They like to think of themselves, and to come across, as extraordinary. Socrates attempts to deflate, with irony, what he regards as the Sophists’ pompousness. Placed in the underworld, the three Sophists appear as shadowy figures, lacking in full-blooded life (Segvic, 2009, 39-40).

While I ultimately do agree with Segvic here, she does not address the consequences that this allusion brings to light and the critique of sophistry as a whole. After all, why would Plato paint such an unusually detailed picture of the dramatic scene with allusions to the underworld? Corey also argues very convincingly that the sophists cannot be considered as a singular entity. For Corey, the Platonic dialogues ought not to be read as an overarching criticism of the sophistic profession but rather as individual appraisals of individual sophists. Plato engages with each sophist in a different way and for a different purpose (Corey, 2015, 202). Corey does an excellent job contextualizing the nature of each individual sophist, but I question Corey’s conclusion that Socrates finds the sophists present in the *Protagoras* to be worthy of respect, simply because of the threat to the Athenian democracy that they pose, the case for which I make below.

In this article, I will show exactly why Socrates’ description of Callias’ house is evocative of Odysseus’ descent into Hades in the *Odyssey*. Socrates twice explicitly refers to Book XI of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus’ descent unfolds (315c, d). While each point of parallel individually is not conclusive, taken together, we can begin to see why Plato dramatizes the dialogue in such a long and elaborate way. Additionally, there are certainly

points of disanalogy that must be addressed as well, as these too shed light on the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. I shall argue that because Socrates considers the sophists to be like bodiless shades residing in Hades, he is making a much more scathing and poignant criticism of sophistry than simply belittling the sophistic profession by outdoing Protagoras in λόγος. Rather, like the shades that dwell in Hades who have no concern for or connection with embodied humans on Earth, the sophists in the *Protagoras* are foreigners with no care for or reliance on the body of the Athenian πόλις. As foreigners, the sophists do not share in the benefits of belonging to the πόλις and are not subject to its νόμοι in the same way that natives are. That is, these sophists have no obligation to protect the city's wellbeing and keep it healthy. Any intrinsic motivation for teaching young men to be good citizens and democrats is annulled. I shall argue that this is the political point being made in this dialogue. Protagoras claims to teach πολιτική τέχνη, and yet he is not involved in the Athenian political scene as a voting member of the Assembly. While he was invited by Pericles to write the constitution of Thurii in 444, Protagoras is not a member of the Athenian δῆμος. Instead, he teaches πολιτική τέχνη to the youth who will use that knowledge in the Assembly to govern. Athens, at this period, is a democracy; everyone has an equal say in how the πόλις should be run. Yet those who can afford to study with a sophist will be more persuasive than those who cannot afford it – they have learned the rhetorical art. Their voices will be more consequential in the Assembly. And this is decidedly anti-democratic: a democracy is supposed to give equal weight to every person.

In essence, for Socrates, the sophists are akin to wandering, homeless nomads with only their charming and Orphic-like voices for sale.

In contrast to the sophists, I shall argue that Socrates is concerned solely for the good of the πόλις, and he devotes his entire life to the welfare of the city and its youth. Socrates is a loyal Athenian, who – conspicuously – almost never leaves the city walls and never takes payment from his followers. Yet some of the youth present for the conversation in the *Protagoras* become notoriously bad citizens – a fact that would not be lost on Plato's contemporary audience. For example, Alcibiades, Critias, and Charmides all were among the “Thirty Tyrants,” and Andron and Critias were part of the “Four Hundred” oligarchs. What role does education play in politics? How can we make sense of this apparent failure of Socrates?

In his descent into Hades to encounter the bodiless shades, Socrates alludes to the danger sophistry has to the wellbeing of Athens. It is not the sophists' foreignness *per se* that is problematic, for Socrates. Rather, it is their attitude toward their students and their civic commitment. Sophistry is undemocratic: the wealthy who can afford a sophisticated education learn the political art from the experts. Those who cannot afford the education are left behind.

## 2. SOCRATES' DESCENT

The *Protagoras* opens with Socrates happening by chance upon an acquaintance along the road who asks Socrates to recount the conversation that he just had with Protagoras (*Prt.* 310a).<sup>1</sup> In Socrates' very first line in the dialogue, he labels his acquaintance as “a praiser of Homer” (*Prt.* 309a). Plato immediately places Homer at center stage in the dialogue. According to Segvic, by making a Homeric reference in his first line in the dialogue, Socrates alerts the reader that

Homer and μῦθοι will play an important role in the events to come (Segvic, 2009, 32). As we shall see, many more references to Homer are forthcoming in the dialogue.

Socrates begins to narrate his morning by reporting that the young Hippocrates roused him from his sleep and begged to be taken to hear the wise Protagoras lecture. Socrates explicitly mentions that Hippocrates burst into Socrates’ bedroom “in the course of this past night, when morning had not quite broken” (*Prt.* 310a). Segvic calls to mind the parallel in Book X of the *Odyssey* (Segvic, 2009, 38). After dwelling with Circe for a year, Odysseus and his crew are anxious to depart for Ithaca. “When the sun set and darkness came on” Odysseus begs Circe to fulfill her promise and let him return home (*Od.* 10.499). Circe instructs Odysseus to descend into Hades to learn his fate and the passage home. Odysseus finishes narrating her detailed directions by stating that “dawn rose in gold as she finished speaking” (*Od.* 10.563). Odysseus dreads this unavoidable descent into Hades: “This broke my spirit. I sat on the bed / And wept. I had no will to live, nor did I care / If I ever saw the sunlight again” (*Od.* 10.519-521). While Segvic brings to light this comparison, much more interpretive work must be done to uncover the meaning behind this allusion. Odysseus knows how small the chances of survival are for him and his men, who have been loyal to him for the entire journey. Nevertheless, at daybreak Odysseus departs for Hades. In parallel, Socrates reluctantly agrees to introduce Hippocrates to Protagoras, Hippocrates’ would-be teacher, since he has a reputation for bewitching all those who hear him speak. Just like Odysseus and Circe, Socrates and Hippocrates discuss during the night the proper approach to take toward Hades/Protagoras. Socrates is unsure if he and Hippocrates will

make it out of Callias’ house untouched by Protagoras’ charm; nevertheless, they make the downward journey to Callias’ house just after daybreak. Additionally, as I will show later, Socrates is not sure the Athenian democracy can survive the influx of political/moral education by the sophists. By traveling at daybreak, a customary time to begin a journey in antiquity, Plato implies that this visit to the house of Callias will be more arduous than a quick meeting among friends. Rather, Socrates will be undertaking a journey that will lead him through the underworld.

For further evidence that Plato is alluding to Odysseus’ descent, historical context must be considered as well. We learn in Xenophon’s *Symposium* that Callias resides in the Piraeus (Xenophon, *Smp.* I.2).<sup>2</sup> As in Socrates’ descent to the Piraeus in the *Republic*, he again travels down to the Athenian port to encounter the sophists who seem to be in the underworld. In *Being and Logos* (1996), John Sallis makes clear that by visiting the Piraeus, the Athenian harbor, Socrates is in essence descending into Hades.<sup>3</sup> To meet the sophists in Callias’ house, Socrates must travel down to the land beyond the river – “beyond the river Lethe or another of those rivers that must be crossed in order to reach Hades” (Sallis, 1996, 316). When Socrates and Hippocrates arrive at the gate of Callias’ house, they encounter the first instance of dehumanization – the doorman is a eunuch (*Prt.* 314c). Plato subtly emphasizes that down in the Piraeus, things are already not entirely as they should be. This slight detail alerts the reader to pay attention to other occurrences of deprivation at Callias’ house. Much like Socrates’ allegory of the cave illustrated in the *Republic*, Callias’ house is a cave of sorts, and Socrates will need to navigate for himself the upward way out of the cave of sophistical λόγος.

### 3. INSIDE THE GATES: INTRODUCING THE SHADES

#### 3A. PROTAGORAS

Upon entering the house, Socrates paints an elaborate picture of Protagoras and those immediately surrounding him. “Once inside, we came upon Protagoras walking about [περιπατοῦντα] in the portico. And *walking right along with him* [συμπεριεπάτου] were, on the one side, Callias son of Hipponicus, his maternal half-brother Paralus son of Pericles, and Charmides son of Glaucon; on the other side were the other son of Pericles, named Xanthippus, Philippides son of Philomelus, and Antimoerus the Mendaean” (*Prt.* 314e-315a, emphasis mine). The first sight that Socrates and Hippocrates witness is a parade with Protagoras in the middle flanked by powerful men on either side. They are all walking *together*, not behind Protagoras, presumably in a clumsy line, all vying for the closest spot to the great teacher in order to ingratiate themselves. In comparing this scene with the first sight that Odysseus beholds in his κατάβασις, we discover that the imagery is similar.

The souls of the dead gathered, the ghosts  
Of brides and youths and worn-out men  
And soft young girls with hearts new to sorrow,  
And many men wounded with bronze  
spears,  
Killed in battle, bearing blood-stained  
arms.  
They drifted up to the pit from all sides  
with an eerie cry (*Od.* 11.35-41).

The souls have gathered around the pool  
of blood from the sheep that Odysseus has

sacrificed. The first sights of both Socrates and Odysseus upon entering the Piraeus and Hades respectively is of disorderly groups of souls. Both illustrations paint the same picture – everyone trying to get the closest spot to the hero to hear what he has to say.

In stark contrast to these first seven men, Socrates next describes the unnamed followers who are walking behind Protagoras in a beautiful order: “I was especially delighted at seeing this chorus because they were taking noble precautions never to be in Protagoras’ way by getting in front of him. Instead, when he himself and those with him turned around, the listeners nicely managed to split apart on both sides while maintaining their order, and going around in a circle, they always went most beautifully to their places in the back” (*Prt.* 315b). Here Socrates compares Protagoras’ listeners to a well-ordered Greek chorus that is beautiful to behold. The listeners form a single-file line that curves around and behind Protagoras when he switches direction in the portico. In order for the listeners to bear witness to the conversation without disrupting it, they need to act with precision. This orderliness pleases Socrates.

Similar imagery can be found in Odysseus’ encounter with the shades in Hades. Odysseus wishes to question each of the spirits individually, but they all flock around the pool of blood at once. So that they would not all bombard Odysseus, he shields the blood with his sword so no one can drink. “They came up in procession then, and one by one / They declared their birth, and I questioned them all” (*Od.* 11.234-235). It is this chorus-like orderliness that pleases Socrates, not Protagoras’ λόγος, which Socrates does not narrate. This is curious, since Socrates is undoubtedly a lover of λόγοι. Yet Socrates does not tell his acquaintance what Protagoras was saying; he

takes particular care to relate the scene surrounding the λόγος and not the λόγος itself.

### 3B. HIPPIAS

Socrates next relates to the interlocutor his encounters with Hippias and Prodicus. Now the references to Book XI of the *Odyssey* are outright: “‘After him, I noticed,’ as Homer said, Hippias the Elean, sitting [καθήμενον] in an elevated chair [θρόνῳ] in the portico opposite” (*Prt.* 315b-c). Hippias is sitting in a seat of authority looking down upon Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Andron. These three men are sitting around Hippias, and “they appeared to be closely questioning Hippias concerning certain points in astronomy pertaining to nature and the things aloft, and he, seated in his chair, was rendering his judgement to each of them and going through their questions in detail” (*Prt.* 315c). Sitting in this great chair, Hippias’ feet are presumably not touching the ground. This dramatic characterization alludes to the fact that Hippias is not concerned with earthly matters that are significant to the here and now. That is to say, Hippias is discussing matters pertaining to the heavens rather than something human, e.g., politics, ἀρετή, or τέχναι. In essence, Hippias is acting similarly to the Socrates portrayed by Aristophanes in *Clouds*: Hippias is acting hubristically.

It is puzzling, however, that Socrates equates Hippias with Heracles – a Greek hero. Most commentators, if they address the matter at all, admit the difficulty of finding a point of comparison between Hippias and Heracles.<sup>4</sup> Hippias is an expert in many branches of knowledge, and one could argue that Socrates considered Hippias’ “encyclopedic” knowledge to be comparable to the myriad of Heracles’ heroic feats. I argue that this interpretation

is inadequate because it does not reflect the scene in the present dialogue – here Hippias is only discussing one topic, namely, astronomy.

If we look closely at the passage that Socrates refers to in the *Odyssey*, we can shed some light on this comparison. In the underworld, Odysseus does not actually encounter the *shade* of Heracles – he encounters his *phantom*:

And then mighty Heracles loomed up before me—

His phantom [εἶδωλον] that is, for Heracles himself

Feasts with the gods and has as his wife Beautiful Hebe, daughter of great Zeus And gold-sandaled Hera (*Od.* 11.630-634).

Both the shades and Heracles’ phantom are not fully human: they are disembodied, and they are not alive. But Heracles would in fact be best able to discuss the heavens, since he dwells on Mount Olympus. This is exactly the position, hubristic for Hippias yet appropriate for Heracles, that Hippias takes up in the *Protagoras*. Yet, while Heracles does not belong in Hades, he is still just as much a stranger to the earth as the shades. Furthermore, Hippias’ knowledge, while broad, has little depth (cf. *Hippias Major* – he only has the *appearance* [φαίνεσθαι] of wisdom, not wisdom itself – Hippias is unable to offer Socrates an adequate definition of beauty). Yet Plato still associates Hippias with a bodiless soul that has no business engaging in earthly affairs. Hippias is a foreigner, just like Protagoras, with no business telling young Athenian men how to run their city.

As we see later in the dialogue, not only is Hippias unfit to tell Athenian youths how to act, but he should keep silent about the activities of his friends and colleagues as well.

When Socrates threatens to leave the conversation because Protagoras will not engage in proper dialectic, Hippias, among others, tries to persuade Socrates to stay and continue the conversation. Hippias proposes that an arbitrator referee the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras to moderate the length of the speeches (*Prt.* 338b). Hippias, the Heraclean figure from Mount Olympus, undoubtedly implies that he should fill the role of arbitrator himself, but Socrates immediately rejects Hippias' proposal for a mediator. For, if inferior to the interlocutors, the mediator could not appropriately judge the superior. Electing an arbitrator who is equal to the interlocutors would fail as well: "one who is similar to us will also do similar things so that his election will have been superfluous" (*Prt.* 338b). Lastly, electing an arbitrator who is superior to the interlocutors would be categorically impossible since Protagoras is the wisest (*Prt.* 338c). Thus, not only does Hippias' suggestion prove to be of no use to the conversation, but it is also potentially insulting to Protagoras.

In the *Odyssey*, Heracles is mentioned two other times as well as in Book 11: at 8.244 and 21.24. All three instances involve archery. In Book VIII, Odysseus, in challenging the Phaeacians to athletic contests, boasts that he can outshoot anyone present, but he does not claim to be better than the past heroes – Heracles and Eurytus – who challenged the gods themselves. In Book XI, Heracles' phantom appears in a fighting stance: "He looked like midnight itself. He held his bow / With an arrow on the string, and he glared around him / As if he were always about to shoot" (*Od.* 11.637-639). Finally, in Book XXI, we learn that the bow that Odysseus uses to kill the suitors is the same bow that Iphitus, son of Eurytus, exchanged for Odysseus' sword and spear as a token of friendship. A short

while after this exchange, Iphitus is killed by Heracles while being entertained as a guest in Heracles' home (*Od.* 21.9-35). These three references to archery and combat, if placed within the framework of the *Protagoras*, set a foreboding mood against which Socrates, the guest, should be on his guard. Heracles disregarded the wrath of the gods in killing his guest, and Socrates would do well to distrust his hosts and avoid a similar fate to Iphitus.<sup>5</sup>

What can we as readers of the dialogue learn from these references? Sophists, like Heracles' phantom in Hades, are always ready to shoot down their opponents in λόγος. All three of the sophists featured in the *Protagoras*, not just Hippias, seem to bear some resemblance to Heracles, or at least to combativeness and fighting. Corey reveals that this illusion to Heracles may refer to Prodicus as well, since Prodicus authored a fable about Heracles' conflict between virtue and vice (Corey, 2015, 74-78). Additionally, Protagoras is said to have authored a text entitled *Καταβαλλόντων* (*Knockdown* [Λόγοι]). We need only look in the *Protagoras* to the first discussion concerning the unity of the virtues for evidence of this combativeness as present in the dialogue. Here Socrates gives the following characterization of Protagoras: "by this time Protagoras was in my opinion feeling riled up for a fight and contentious, and he stood prepared, as for battle, to answer me" (*Prt.* 333e). Protagoras is under the impression that he and Socrates, rather than engaging as equals in dialectic, should be prepared to speak only with the aim to "win" the get-together. This implies that rather than searching for the truth, sophists simply wish to win λόγοι, get paid, and get out of town. Protagoras visits Athens primarily to gather paying followers, not truly to teach the Athenian youths about the political art. If it were not for the tuition,



why would Protagoras bother? Why would any sophist? If they have no qualms about making the weaker λόγοι the stronger, they clearly do not care about the political outcomes of what they teach their students. Socrates will eventually emerge from the get-together without becoming bewitched by Protagoras, but Plato does not assure us that Hippocrates shared a similar fate. Hopefully the final word in the dialogue, the plural ἀπῆμεν [we left], includes Hippocrates and possibly others, but we cannot be certain. Socrates meets his acquaintance immediately after departing from Callias’ house, and no mention is made at the beginning of the dialogue of anyone still walking along with Socrates.

### 3C. PRODICUS

Finally, Socrates and Hippocrates observe Prodicus teaching his followers. Unlike Protagoras who is walking and Hippias who is sitting close to the heavens, Prodicus is reclining and is wrapped up in blankets. Socrates again references Book XI of the *Odyssey* in describing Prodicus’ drama. “‘And I espied Tantalus too’ – for Prodicus the Cean was visiting as well” (*Prt.* 315c). The passage referred to in the *Odyssey* does not have any details about Tantalus save the representation of him stretching for food and drink that is out of reach. Odysseus does not speak with Tantalus at all (*Od.* 11.611–621). Corey argues that Plato is alluding to the fact that Prodicus claims to know concretely about divine matters – like Tantalus, who tasted the divine foods – and delivers it to humans (Corey, 2015, 81–82). Prodicus seems to believe himself to be akin to the divine, and perhaps the *Protagoras* serves as a lesson in hubris for Prodicus. Segvic offers the following explanation of Prodicus’

portrayal as Tantalus: Prodicus practices a linguistic form of sophistry concerning the precision of language to avoid equivocations. But, like Tantalus’ predicament, any wisdom to be gained from his linguistic analysis eludes him (Segvic, 2009, 40). I agree with both Corey and Segvic, but I believe more work needs to be done to understand fully the meaning of the allusion for the dialogue as a whole and also for Socrates’ overarching critique of sophistry. Prodicus is not portrayed very favorably in Socrates’ exegesis of Simonides’ poem, and Socrates foreshadows his failure by equating him with Tantalus. When Protagoras claims that Simonides’ poem is guilty of contradiction, Socrates admits that “I was made dizzy and woozy by what he’d said and by the uproar of the others. Then—so that I’d have time to consider what the poet meant, to tell you the truth—I turned to Prodicus and called to him” (*Prt.* 339e). Protagoras has rendered Socrates temporarily speechless, and in order to gather his thoughts and think of a response, Socrates pulls Prodicus – Simonides’ fellow citizen – into the conversation. Socrates uses Prodicus solely as a distraction, not to further the conversation or to help him understand Simonides’ poem.

Socrates even manages to trick Prodicus, the philologist, into agreeing that “difficult” [καλεπὸν] and “bad” [κακόν] are equivalent in meaning (*Prt.* 341c). The conclusions that result from this equation are ridiculous and laughable: Simonides then must have thought that it is bad to be noble. Socrates has killed two birds with one stone: he bought himself the time he needed to gather his thoughts, and he publicly ridiculed Prodicus. Corey makes the argument that Prodicus himself must have been aware that this definition is incorrect as well (Corey, 2015, 91). As such, Corey claims that we might perhaps be too quick to



dismiss the parallels between Prodicus and Socrates: both appreciate the need “to detect and negate merely apparent contradictions” (Corey, 2015, 89). Corey invites us to think of Prodicus’ method as a precursor to Socrates’ method of collection and division. While Prodicus’ methodology might be appropriate, he still fails to ascertain the distinction between difficulty and badness. According to Marina McCoy, Socrates’ primary aim here is to ridicule Prodicus’ sophistical method of philology “which affixes fixed, precise meanings to words without attention to their context” (McCoy, 1999, 353). Prodicus has failed to make the correct distinctions in the exegesis of Simonides’ poem, and his contribution only detracted from the conversation and muddled the meaning of the poem even more. Despite his effort, the truth is always just out of Prodicus’ reach.

Yet McCoy does not proceed far enough in her interpretation, I argue. She does not consider the rest of Socrates’ initial narration of Prodicus when describing the scene in Callias’ house. Socrates does not simply mention this line from the *Odyssey* and move away from Prodicus. He mentions as well other specific details which illuminate more clearly that Prodicus’ shade-like disembodiment is not fitting for an educator of the young men of Athens. Socrates remarks that Prodicus “was in a certain room [οικήματι] that Hipponicus [Callias’ father] had used previously for storage [ταμείω] but that now, on account of the number of the lodgers, Callias had emptied out and made into lodgings for the foreigners” (*Prt.* 315d). Prodicus has been stuffed into an old closet which has been converted into a makeshift bedroom. Additionally, we cannot be sure that the room was reserved for Prodicus alone. There could be many other foreigners lodging in the storeroom

with him. Indeed, Corey points out that those listening to Prodicus in this storeroom include prominent and attractive men, such as Pausanias and Agathon (Corey, 2015, 71). For those who think as highly of themselves as the sophists, it is a wonder that Prodicus can tolerate these conditions.

This dramatic description symbolically portrays Prodicus as not being fully human – these cramped and degrading conditions would have no bearing on a mere shade without bodily concerns for relaxation or privacy. Furthermore, we learn that Prodicus is “wrapped up in some sheepskins and very many bedclothes” (*Prt.* 315d). Corey argues that this dramatic presentation of Prodicus implies that Prodicus is lazy and living in vice: “to use soft blankets to improve one’s sleep, to sleep late into the day, to surround oneself with attractive boys and inflame one’s desire for food and drink by consuming these in inappropriate ways and at inappropriate times” (Corey, 2015, 77). Corey argues that Prodicus is acting contrary to his own advice given in his fable about Heracles. I agree with Corey here, but I would like to push the interpretation even further: Plato is describing Prodicus as unfit to offer any political and moral advice to the Athenian youth. He is not properly able to judge the virtuous from the vicious in his own life. While he may be able to speak about Heracles’ virtuousness, he is unable to follow the advice in his own life. Prodicus’ body is physically covered, and his head was likely covered as well, since Socrates is unable to hear what Prodicus was discussing because of his muffled voice and the noise around him (*Prt.* 315e-316a). Just as Odysseus never hears what Tantalus has to say, Socrates also does not get the opportunity to listen to Prodicus teach.

The dramatic characterization of Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus provides clear evi-

dence that Socrates likens his visit to Callias’ house to a descent into Hades to encounter the shades of the underworld. In the *Odyssey*, all the shades that Odysseus encounters in Book XI ask him about their families and loved ones on Earth – they have no connection with earthly events.<sup>6</sup> One could make the argument that the shades are absolutely concerned with human and earthly matters, as they all desire to question Odysseus about the status of affairs on earth. In this sense, they act in the opposite way from the foreign sophists who do not care at all for the welfare of their students and the communities in which the youths are members. But I argue that this is exactly how the sophists act – they are concerned about the welfare of their students but they are without civic commitment. They have no stake in the Athenian democracy.

Furthermore, one could also make the argument that Protagoras and the sophists are very much concerned with care of the body, and Socrates is not likening them to shades because Protagoras is able to give examples of things that are advantageous to the body. In response to a prompt from Socrates to determine whether or not one can call anything advantageous to human beings, Protagoras answers in the following way: “For my part I know many things that are disadvantageous to human beings – food and drink and drugs [φάρμακα] and ten thousand others – but some that are advantageous” (*Prt.* 334a). His next sentence, however, has nothing to do with care of human beings: “Some things are neither the one [advantageous] nor the other [disadvantageous] for human beings, but are for horses; some are only for cattle, others for dogs. And some things are for none of these but for trees” (*Prt.* 334a). From the evidence we see in the dialogue, Protagoras knows just as much about care of the human body as he

does about the care for cattle, dogs, and trees. If Socrates were to press Protagoras to discuss in detail specific examples of health, he would need to appeal to expert physicians, as he does at 334c regarding the proper uses of olive oil. Thus, Protagoras cannot articulate in λόγος anything more about the human body than what he learned from an expert, not from experience.

#### 4. PROBLEMS WITH PROTAGORAS’ SOPHISTICAL METHOD

There is one other curious comparison that we cannot ignore: Protagoras and Achilles. It is important to note that Protagoras’ claims about being the greatest sophist contrast starkly with the noble and honored Achilles’ emphatic statement when Odysseus encounters him in Hades and tries to console him concerning his predicament: “Don’t try to sell me on death, Odysseus. / I’d rather be a hired hand back up on earth, / Slaving away for some poor dirt farmer, / Than lord it over all these withered dead” (*Od.* 11.510-513). Achilles is the epitome of the Bronze Age hero worthy of emulation, but Protagoras acts in the completely opposite manner – he is boastful that he lords over the sophists. While others are ashamed of the title of sophist, according to Protagoras, he actively embraces it. This character foil between Protagoras and Achilles becomes apparent later in the dialogue, immediately before the discussion of courage that ultimately leads to Protagoras’ defeat in λόγος. Socrates praises Protagoras and lauds his superiority as a sophist: “I [...] gladly converse with you more than with anyone else, believing you to be best at investigating (in addition to other things) what it is reasonable

for a decent man to investigate, and virtue in particular. For who else other than you?" (*Prt.* 348d-e). Socrates' words echo Odysseus' praise of Achilles that prompts the above quoted response from Achilles:

But no man, Achilles,  
Has ever been as blessed as you, or ever  
will be.  
While you were alive the army honored you  
Like a god, and now that you are here  
You rule the dead with might. You should  
not  
Lament your death at all, Achilles (*Od.*  
11.503-508).

The statements of Socrates and Odysseus are similar – both praise the leader (of the sophists and the shades, respectively) for being the finest.

There is, however, one crucial difference: Socrates is being ironic. As is made manifest in the conversation that follows about the unity of the virtues, if Protagoras truly possessed wisdom, then he would have discussed virtue, specifically courage, much more nobly. Protagoras argues that the virtues are unified like parts of a face, but that courage is separate from the virtues because one can be courageous and also impious, immoderate, etc. Courage underlies all the other virtues (*Prt.* 349d). But Socrates points out that if this is the case, then courage is separate from knowledge, and that makes virtue unteachable. If virtue is not teachable, then Protagoras has nothing to teach and his entire profession is negated.

This statement about courage as the basis of virtue is very much akin to something Achilles would say. Achilles is essentially the embodiment of courage itself, and while Protagoras seems to be courageous by declaring openly that he is a sophist, his defeat in λόγος

is decidedly uncourageous. When Socrates finally leads Protagoras into a contradiction in his positions, Protagoras refuses to answer Socrates and simply nods, and finally he tells Socrates to finish the dialectic by himself (*Prt.* 360d-e). The great Protagoras has been rendered speechless, and he does not swallow his loss nobly. In contrast to Achilles, who dies honorably in battle, Protagoras slinks away in silence and accuses Socrates of being a lover of victory, rather than a lover of wisdom (*Prt.* 360e).

If the sophists are like disembodied shades with no connection to the earth, and are proud of their position, the question then arises: what is Socrates implying about sophistry in general, specifically the practice of foreign wise-men whisking away the Athenian youth to teach them what is best for their democracy? What is the risk in sending the youth to these foreigners to learn? I argue that Plato is drawing an analogy between the living body and the πόλις. The shades in Hades lack human bodies, and the sophists lack a communal belonging to the πόλις in which their students live. Charles Griswold argues that Protagoras' disinterest in the wellbeing of his students as individuals implies that he does not care to cultivate them as autonomous thinkers with the critical abilities to lead responsible and prosperous lives (Griswold, 1999, 293). I argue that the problem cuts deeper. Of course, Protagoras claims to have the ability to teach young men to be successful citizens, but he has no motive for caring about the outcome of his teaching. Protagoras is a foreigner – he does not live under Athenian rule. Teaching young men how to manage a household or to be a democrat requires a personal and engaged teacher. Protagoras, in contrast, is a public figure, but since he is a foreigner, he is not accountable to his students. The sophists teach

everyone the same lessons, but πολιτική τέχνη should not be a “one size fits all” curriculum. This is potentially dangerous for the πόλις, and for this reason, Socrates is wary of bringing Hippocrates to Callias’ house.

Yet Socrates seems to be the only one that does not fall for Protagoras’ charm. The irresistible nature of Protagoras is likened to Orpheus – Socrates describes Protagoras’ audience at the onset of the dialogue in the following way: “of those who followed along behind them [Protagoras and the six other named men in the portico] listening to what was being said, the majority appeared to be foreigners. These Protagoras brings from each of the cities he passes through, bewitching them with his voice like Orpheus, and they in their bewitched state follow his voice. There were also some natives in the chorus” (*Prt.* 315a-b). Protagoras bewitches all who hear him, foreign and native alike. His hearers follow doggedly in his footsteps and, in a sense, renounce their fatherland to join this wandering sophist.

We might see evidence of Protagoras’ irresistible charm in what was possibly an extremely awkward moment. Hippocrates, at least, had the good sense to seek Socrates’ guidance and receive a proper introduction from his teacher to this traveling expert. In contrast, two of Socrates’ loyal students, Alcibiades and Critias, entered Callias’ house after Socrates (*Prt.* 316a). Callias’ house was probably the *last* place they expected to see their teacher! The awkwardness might have been addressed: “so once we were inside, we again passed time on a few small matters and, with them disposed of, we went over to Protagoras” (*Prt.* 316a). Perhaps Socrates rebuked Alcibiades and Critias for trying to sneak into Protagoras’ company without his guidance. This might possibly explain Alcibiades’ ex-

cessive defense of Socrates at 336c-d. Critias, not to be outdone, derides Alcibiades for just wanting to win (the approval of Socrates, that is). While this is merely speculation, we can conclude from the conversation that Socrates and Hippocrates have before making the journey to Callias’ house that Socrates is very wary of young Athenians visiting the sophists with no guidance or accompaniment. The question then must be asked – why does Socrates agree to take Hippocrates to see Protagoras at all? Protagoras has already been in town for two days, and Socrates presumably did not intend to visit him himself. Yet Socrates is always willing to learn, and it would be presumptuous and hubristic to assume that one will not learn anything from someone else before even meeting him or her. If Socrates were unwilling from the start to engage with Protagoras, he would be betraying his entire devotion to philosophy. Furthermore, Socrates changes his opinion during the dialogue as well. He opens the conversation by claiming that virtue is not teachable, but by the end of the conversation, he determines that it is indeed teachable. Socrates is not too proud to admit a mistake.

## 5. THE EFFECT OF DISENGAGED SOPHISTICAL TEACHING UPON ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

When Hippocrates first expresses his desire to hear Protagoras, Socrates reproaches Hippocrates for wishing to study with Protagoras without knowing who the foreigner is or what he teaches. Socrates illustrates to Hippocrates the absurdity of his desires by comparing a sophist to a physician: if it were care of the body that Hippocrates were in search of, he

would have consulted both his friends and expert physicians before deciding on a treatment, “but as for that which you believe to be worth more than the body, namely the soul, on whose usefulness and worthlessness depends whether all your own affairs fare well or badly – about this you’ve communicated with neither father nor brother nor any one of us who are your comrades as to whether or not you should turn your soul over to this newly arrived foreigner” (*Prt.* 313a-b). Hippocrates simply takes for granted that Protagoras is the best teacher in Greece, and he has no desire to question the hearsay: “[you] are ready to spend both your own money and that of your friends, as though you already knew well that it is absolutely necessary to get together with Protagoras, whom you neither know, as you say, nor have ever conversed with” (*Prt.* 313b). Without ever encountering a sophist, Hippocrates has already fallen under the spell of sophistry. Hippocrates would be a madman to trust his body with any physician without question, and, as Socrates points out, it is even less rational to trust an unknown foreigner with the care of one’s soul. Untrustworthy teaching, particularly from someone whose only motivation for teaching is monetary, cannot easily be corrected.

Socrates, as we see from other dialogues, is no xenophobe. He does not distrust the sophists for being foreigners intrinsically; rather, he is suspicious because they also take payment for their teachings. The sophists must advertise themselves, and even in antiquity, advertisements were known not to be trusted. Socrates offers the following advice to Hippocrates:

See to it, comrade, that the sophist, in praising what he has for sale, doesn’t deceive us as do those who sell the nourishment of the body, the wholesaler and

retailer. For they themselves too, I suppose, don’t know what among the wares they peddle is useful or worthless to the body—they praise everything they have for sale [...] So too those who hawk learning from city to city, selling and retailing it to anyone who desires it at any given moment: they praise all the things they sell (*Prt.* 313c-d).

Here we are given the most cogent criticism of the sophists in the dialogue. Just as the shades in Hades have no involvement with bodily matters, so too the foreign sophists have no desire to care for the πόλις. In fact, they are decidedly anti-democratic, since they make their living catering to the wealthy so that they might influence the political sphere.

While the sophists may claim to possess the ability to teach πολιτική τέχνη, they merely profess what the students and their fathers want to hear (cf. Aristophanes’ *Clouds*). When Socrates first presents Hippocrates to Protagoras, the latter boasts, “on the very day that he gets together with [me], Hippocrates here will go away in a better state and improve every day thereafter” (*Prt.* 318d). The sooner Protagoras’ students begin to show improvement, the sooner they will be willing to continue taking lessons. Immediate gratification is perhaps the greatest selling-point of a sophistic education – it keeps the students from growing discouraged, and it guarantees that Protagoras will receive the tuition. By claiming that he can improve his students on just the first day of instruction (318a), Protagoras is able to receive his own gratification for professing sophistry, namely, the fee, immediately so he can travel to the next city as soon as possible. Any negative effects from the sophistry upon the student are not realized until much later, when the student tries to apply his learning in the Assembly or

his household, and by then, the sophists have long since fled the scene and cannot be held accountable. For this reason, sophists have no qualms in making the weaker λόγος the stronger because they do not remain within the city to feel the effects of their teaching upon the πόλις or οἶκός. It is not the sophists’ foreignness that is at issue. Rather, it is the fact that they lack accountability due to a lack of belonging to the community.

Protagoras needs to walk a fine line here: virtue is teachable – he does have something to offer his students – and yet democracy is still a valid form of government – everyone deserves to be respected when it comes to governance. We see Protagoras navigating this difficulty in his Great Speech. Protagoras relays a myth which proclaims that *everyone* has been blessed by Zeus with justice and shame (*Prt.* 322c), so everyone has the potential to be a great speechmaker and politician. Protagoras himself will only help his students to cultivate and perfect their natural skill. Thus, he is able to travel around to different cities teaching similar things, rather than studying each city’s laws and practices to offer the best and most relevant education possible. For Griswold, Protagoras’ worldliness results in a detachment from local community and morality, and he is instead driven solely by the acquisition of baser goods – affluence, reputation, and longevity (Griswold, 1999, 299). Protagoras, unlike Socrates, is not moved by a duty to the city. Rather, he is motivated solely by wealth and fame. Socrates, in contrast, notoriously almost never leaves the πόλις. His interest in philosophy is bound to the πόλις. Griswold’s point is well taken, but he does not address the root of the issue. For Socrates, I argue, not belonging to a πόλις is like not having a body. One is cut off and isolated. This is why he makes so many analogies to the shades in

Hades in the *Protagoras* – they lack a physical body, and the sophists lack a political body – they wander around Greece, never remaining in one place for long. It is in this sense that they are disembodied – they lack *belonging*.

According to Griswold, since Protagoras is not rooted in a particular community, he would be incapable of delivering a persuasive and beautiful speech like Pericles’ funeral oration – a speech championing democracy. Protagoras has a third-person perspective that clashes with the mentality of those who uphold the professed ideals of virtue in the community (Griswold, 1999, 299-300). Unlike Pericles, who possesses the ability to speak to the heart of the Athenian people, Protagoras, and sophists in general, must rely on bewitching his followers, rather than actually teaching something worthwhile to the wellbeing of the city. An example can be found right in the *Protagoras*: Hippias, in trying to coax Socrates to sit back down when he threatens to leave, displays his complete disregard for the Athenian νόμοι: “For like is by nature akin to like, but law [νόμος], *being a tyrant over human beings* [τύραννος ὦν τῶν ἀνθρώπων], compels many things through force, contrary to nature” (*Prt.* 337d, emphasis mine). For the Athenians, laws are certainly not perfect, and they are by no means tyrannical. Only to a foreigner, who does not understand the νόμοι, would they appear tyrannical. Fittingly, in his next breath, Hippias, the Heracleian figure down from Mount Olympus, proposes that he act as a judge to rule over the speeches.

The problem cuts deeper than simply a disrespect for the law. Protagoras is subjected to a perspective that is at a distance from concerns and ideals that matter the most to the community. Instead, Protagoras instructs his students to concentrate on becoming “δυνατώτατος” (most able, powerful) in both



deed and word in civic matters” (Griswold, 1999, 300). Protagoras teaches his students to adopt the same attitude that he has, namely, an individualistic and selfish approach to politics. Protagoras and the rest of the sophists gathered at Callias’ house are there to mingle with the natives and advertise themselves and their teachings in order to gain followers. The conversation that ensues when Socrates arrives, however, proves that Protagoras is unfit to give lessons concerning the nature of the virtues and knowledge because he does not understand the virtues himself. Initially, he claimed that virtue is indeed teachable, but by the end of the dialogue, Socrates has caught him in a contradiction, and he has to conclude that virtue is not teachable. He is forced to admit that his profession (teaching virtue) is futile.

## 6. CONCLUSION: BELONGING

What, then, are we to make of this criticism of the sophists? Why liken them to disembodied shades in Hades? And why is it not enough for Socrates just to win the λόγος and shame Protagoras through λόγος? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look to an example of someone who teaches in the completely opposite way from Protagoras and instead cares for the good of Athens as a whole, rather than his individual affluence. In particular, we must turn to a moment in which Socrates is forced to defend himself and his teaching to those who have already been persuaded by sophistry – a form which takes many shapes. Near the end of his defense in the *Apology*, Socrates speaks the following words:

I neglected the things which most men value, such as wealth, and family interests, and military commands, and public

oratory, and all the civic appointments, and social clubs, and political factions, that there are in Athens; for I thought that I was really too honest a man to preserve my life if I engaged in these affairs. So I did not go where I should have done no good either to you or to myself. I went, instead, to each one of you privately to do him, as I say, the greatest of benefits, and tried to persuade him not to think of his affairs until he had thought of himself and tried to make himself as good and wise as possible, nor to think of the affairs of Athens until he had thought of Athens herself; and to care for other things in the same matter (*Ap.*, 36b-c).

Socrates dies for the sake of his city. He forgoes an easy, prosperous, and wealthy life to wander barefoot through the ἀγορά and annoy his fellow countrymen to such an extent that they kill him for it. Thus, Socrates cares more for the good of Athens than his own life.

For this reason, Plato likens the sophists to disembodied shades – they do not belong to democratic Athens. Instead, they actively work to undermine that democracy. They teach, for a fee, how to speak persuasively. The result is that wealthy Athenians will be more eloquent in the Assembly, so their positions will become law. Because of sophistry, Athenian democracy benefits the wealthy.

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- 5 Odysseus also slaughters the guests in his home, but in Book XXI, he is more of a guest than the suitors. He is also guided by the gods, in contrast to Heracles, who has disobeyed them (*Od.* 21.26-27).
- 6 For example, when Odysseus meets Achilles’ shade, he asks Odysseus if Neoptolemus and Pelus are alive and well. Achilles reacts with great pride upon learning of his son’s accomplishments (*Od.* 11.514-566).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 We know that this is a chance meeting along the road because the companion asks Socrates if he has the time to relate the conversation to him: “why then not relate to us the get-together, if nothing prevents your doing so?” (*Prt.* 310a). The meeting has not been planned ahead of time.
- 2 As pointed out by Segvic (2009, 39). Segvic makes this connection, but she fails to interpret the meaning behind this connection.
- 3 According to Sallis, “the name ‘Piraeus,’ which, according to certain ancient writers, was related to the belief that the Piraeus was once an island separated from Athens by a kind of river; thus, the name is said to have been derived from ‘*peraia*,’ which (derived, in turn, from ‘*peras*’) means literally ‘beyond-land.’” (Sallis, 1996, 314-315).
- 4 Coby (1987); Griswold (1999); Segvic (2009) all propose the following view.