

Conclusion: Why Read the *Protagoras*?

Seeing it in this way, as a phenomenon with its own historical moment precisely defined in space and time, imposes certain methodological rules for interpreting the tragic works... [each play] is a text that can be only fully understood when account is taken of its particular context. It was the context that made it possible for the author to communicate with his fifth-century public, and that same context makes it possible for the work to rediscover its full authenticity and to convey its full significance to the reader of today.

--Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 29-30.

The *Protagoras* is at first sight a puzzling dialogue. A modern reader familiar with Plato's other early dialogues will undoubtedly be left with many unanswered questions after a first reading of the dialogue. Why does Socrates appear to advocate hedonism? Why does Socrates, who in other dialogues raises many objections concerning the use and discussion of poetry, here offer a sustained and improbable interpretation of Simonides' poem?

These seemingly inexplicable elements of the dialogue may leave a reader unable to discern any kind of general thrust or purpose to the dialogue. It is certainly unclear at first what we are meant to take away from the dialogue as a whole. A puzzled reader might not find fully satisfactory aid in contemporary scholarship—it has been uncommon for scholars in the latter half of the 20th century to undertake a general interpretation of the *Protagoras* that accounts for all the dialogue's parts. It is rare to see scholarship that treats either Protagoras' great speech or the interpretation of Simonides' poem, despite the fact that the latter is almost one fifth of the whole dialogue.

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