

THE "RELATIVISM" OF PRODICUS

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THE belief that Prodicus held a relativist position in ethics rests on the statements put into his mouth in the Pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias*, 397 c-399 a. There Socrates reports on argument which had taken place recently between Prodicus and a *μειράκιον* in the gymnasium of the Lyceum. The argument is cut short when the *γυμνασίαρχος* tells Prodicus to leave on the ground that his doctrines are bad for the young men. The dialogue as a whole contains at least one case which seems to show consciousness of Stoic arguments,¹ and this gives a *terminus post quem* for its composition. But the position ascribed to Prodicus may none the less be used as evidence for Prodicus' own teaching,² deriving either from his own writings, or more probably from a dialogue of Aeschines, who is known to have

¹ 404 c 4-405 a 1 ; cf. Sen. Ep. 87, 22 and Eichholz, "The Pseudo-Platonic Dialogue *Eryxias*" in *C.Q.*, vol. xxix (1935), pp. 142-4.

² The reference to the *γυμνασίαρχος* in 399 a is commonly taken to be a reference to the state official of that name who some time after 337 B.C. replaced the *γυμνασίαρχος* who performed the liturgy of the *γυμνασίαρχια*. It is argued that the latter would not possess the power of maintaining public order, while the state magistrate had considerable disciplinary powers. Consequently the reference to the *γυμνασίαρχος* is cited as evidence for the date of composition of the *Eryxias* as a whole (cf. O. Schrohl, *De Eryxia qui fertur Platonis*, Göttingen (1901), pp. 42-3 ; Souilhé, *Platon* (Budé), vol. xiii, part 3, p. 88, Eichholz, *op. cit.* pp. 141-2). As the mention of the *γυμνασίαρχος* occurs in the report of the argument between Prodicus and the *μειράκιον*, Eichholz is led to conjecture that this argument reflects some late fourth or early third century controversy, wrongly put in a fifth century setting, and he finds a similarity which I cannot see between 399 a 5-9 and an argument used by the Megarian Alexinus against Zeno reported by Sextus *Ad Math IX*. 108. But the term *γυμνασίαρχος* in the *Eryxias* means neither magistrate nor liturgist, but simply the superintendent of the gymnasium in which the discussion had taken place. This was seen by Liddell and Scott, *sv.* *γυμνασίαρχος*. Consequently the term cannot be made the basis for inferences either as to the date of composition of the *Eryxias* or as to the date of the supposed argument with Prodicus.

introduced Prodicus into his work.¹ It is not, however, my purpose in what follows to discuss the question whether Prodicus actually held the doctrine ascribed to him in the *Eryxias*, but simply to discuss the nature and meaning of the doctrine itself, which does not seem always to have been properly understood.

As reported by Socrates (397 e 3-12), the *μειράκιον* asked Prodicus in what way he considered being rich was good and in what way he considered it to be bad. Prodicus replied that it was good for the *καλοὶ κάγαθοί* and for those who know the situations in which (*ὅπου*) money should be used, and that it was bad for those who are *μοχθηροί* and who lack knowledge. This principle applies not only to being rich but to all other cases: according to the nature of those who use them, such must be for them the things they use—*ὅποιοι γὰρ ἄν τινες ὦσιν οἱ χρώμενοι, τοιαῦτα καὶ τὰ πράγματα αὐτοῖς ἀνάγκη εἶναι*. Up to this point what Prodicus is saying does not seem difficult to understand: in any particular case, men are divisible into two groups, the good who know how to use things and the bad who do not. The goodness or otherwise of a thing such as money necessarily varies according to the knowledge of the user. But immediately Prodicus goes on to quote with approval the line from Archilochus: *καὶ φρονεῦσι τοῖ' ὀκοίοις ἐγκυρέωσιν ἔργμασιν*. The relation of this to the previous statements is not apparent at first sight. Yet the appeal to poetry is a well-known sophistic procedure² and it is here presumably meant quite seriously. We have three lines of the original poem (fr. 68 Diehl):

*τοῖος ἀνθρώποισι θυμός, Γλαῦκε, Λεπτίνεω παί,
γίγνεται θνητοῖσ' ὀκοίην Ζεὺς ἐφ' ἡμέρην ἄγη,
καὶ φρονεῦσι τοῖ', ὀκοίοις ἐγκυρέωσιν ἔργμασιν.*

¹ Athen. V 220 b = Aeschines fr. 34 Dittmar = Diels — Kranz⁶ 84 A 4 b. Cf. Dittmar, *Aischines von Sphettos*, 198-9. A dialogue *Eryxias* is actually attributed to Aeschines by the Suda, s.v. *Αἰσχίνης*. It cannot be the present dialogue with its Stoic references, and is probably a mistake, cf. Schrohl 6. Nestle (Hermes, vol. lxxi (1936), pp. 157 ff. = *Griechische Studien*, pp. 412 ff.) has adduced passages from Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* which seem to show conclusively that the author of the *Eryxias* is using the same material, and it does not seem likely that the author of the *Eryxias* got it from the *Oeconomicus*.

² Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*,² p. 357 n. 39.

This seems clearly inspired by Homer, *Odyssey* XVIII 130-7, and Archilochus is saying that there is no constancy in men's life or thoughts—we are as it were but echoes of our surroundings.¹ But the third line was given a slightly different twist by Heraclitus fr. 17: οὐ γὰρ φρονέουσι τοιαῦτα πολλοί, ὅκοσοι ἐγκυρεῦσιν, οὐδὲ μαθόντες γινώσκουσι, ἐωντοῖσι δὲ δοκέουσιν.² This shows that Heraclitus read into the line of Archilochus the meaning: men's thoughts reflect accurately the reality which confronts them. It is this which Heraclitus is concerned to deny. Prodicus has said that the goodness of things varies according to the knowledge of the user. He is not likely then to have gone on to say that there is no constancy in men's knowledge, since this would come close to denying the existence of such knowledge and he would then be destroying the criterion which he has just set up for distinguishing between the goodness and badness of things. Accordingly it is more probably in the Heraclitean sense that he understood the line which he quotes from Archilochus. In this case he will be maintaining (1) the goodness of things is relative to the knowledge of the user about how to use them, (2) this knowledge is knowledge of something which has real existence in the situation. It is possible to devise other conceivable meanings for the quotation from Archilochus which would be intelligible taken alongside Prodicus' first contention,³ but in the light of the evidence from Heraclitus I take it provisionally that Prodicus is using the line in the same way as Heraclitus did.

To the position of Prodicus, whatever its exact nature may be, the *μειράκιον* applies the following argument (398 a 1 -b 2). "If someone were to make me wise in the wisdom in which good men are wise, then necessarily at the same time he would make the other things good for me, though he has not concerned himself with those things themselves at all, but simply because

¹ Cf. H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, pp. 185, 470 n. 27. Possibly the much discussed Parmenides fr. 16 also shows consciousness of Archilochus.

² Many would make this accord more closely with Archilochus by bracketing πολλοί and altering ὅκοσοι to ὅκοίσις.

³ E.g. "the wise man's knowledge is adapted to the various situations in which he finds himself and so he knows how to use things rightly".

he has made me wise instead of ignorant. Just as, if someone were to make me this minute a grammarian, he would necessarily make other things also grammatical for me, and if he made me a musician he would make other things musical for me, and just as¹ when he makes me good he has necessarily also made things good for me." However, says Socrates, Prodicus did not accept the last part but he did agree to the previous part. The problem here is to determine what it is that Prodicus accepts and what it is that he refuses to accept, in other words, what is the last part (*ταῦτα*) and what is the earlier part (*ἐκέλευα*). It seems commonly to have been supposed that the part that Prodicus refuses to accept is the case of the man who makes me a grammarian or a musician—this is the last part, while he accepts the statement that if someone makes me wise he makes things good for me and this is the earlier part. This is presumably the basis of the view of Gomperz when he speaks² of "the conception of objects indifferent in themselves, on which value was impressed only by the right use to which they were put if the dictates of reason were obeyed". It is explained in this way by Dupréel: "Il y a des choses caractérisées par des propriétés objectives et fixes comme le langage et les sons musicaux, mais tel n'est pas le cas pour le bon et le mauvais; ces choses-ci dépendent toutes du rapport avec un sujet."³ But there are several objections to this view. The thing which Prodicus rejects should be the last thing mentioned in the passage—this is, in fact, not the case of the grammarian and the musician, but the statement "when he makes me good he has necessarily also made things good for me". Apart from the sense, it is to this that the *ταῦτα* most naturally refers.⁴ Secondly, it is clear that the *μειράκιον* is bringing against Prodicus an argument which he hopes will upset the position he has maintained earlier. *οὐ μέντοι* in 398 b 1-2 shows that this attempt

¹ ὡσπερ. It seems to me clear that this is a mistake for οὕτως. The meaning will then be "Just as, if someone were to make me this minute a grammarian, he would also make other things grammatical for me, and if he made me a musician he would make other things musical, so when he makes me good, he has necessarily made things also good for me".

² *Greek Thinkers* (Eng. trans.), vol. i, p. 429; cf. Zeller *Ph. d. Gr.* I⁶, 1392.

³ Dupréel, *Les sophistes*, p. 169.

⁴ So apparently Souilhé.

failed because Prodicus did not accept the premise offered him from which a refutation was to proceed, and consequently the *μειράκιον* has to make a fresh start which he does at 398 b 3. Prodicus, leaving aside the quotation from Archilochus, had maintained that the goodness of things varies with the knowledge of the user about how to use them. The *μειράκιον* is trying to secure from Prodicus the admission that it is a human function to make things good or bad, and at the second attempt he does secure this admission. Yet on the usual view he has already secured it at the first attempt and there was no reason for the fresh start at 398 b 3. Thirdly, if the object of the *μειράκιον* had been to secure the admission from Prodicus that the musician makes things musical when he makes a man a musician, the admission would not as far as can be seen have helped to refute Prodicus' position in ethics.

Accordingly the alternative possibility should be preferred. What Prodicus is prepared to admit is that the man who makes another musical does make things musical for that man. What he is not prepared to admit is that a man who makes another man wise makes things good which were not previously good. This is perfectly intelligible. It is known from Plato's *Protagoras*¹ that Prodicus makes a sharp distinction between "being" and "becoming". He is maintaining that things such as wealth *are* good for those who know how to use them. He denies that such things *become* good for those who know how to use them when they acquire that knowledge. He would presumably say that they are always good for those who know how to use them so that there can be no question of their becoming good or being made good. The reference to the *γραμματικός* should be understood in the light of Prodicus' insistence on *ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης*. The principle behind his elaborate discussions of apparent synonyms was well stated by Alexander Aphrodisias: *ἐπειρᾶτο ἐκάστῳ τῶν ὀνομάτων τούτων ἰδιόν τι σημαίνονμενον ὑποτάσσειν*.² In doing this he was not only doing something which had not been done before, but it was clear to his contemporaries and no doubt also to himself that he was changing

¹ 340 b = Diels — Kranz⁶, 84 A 14.

² Diels — Kranz⁶, 84 A 19.

and departing from the ordinary usage of words¹ in making the distinctions which he did. Accordingly Prodicus himself in making a man *γραμματικός* would also be making the *πράγματα γραμματικά* in a sense in which they had not been so before the man received the instruction from Prodicus. It is highly probable that Prodicus applied his distinctions also to musical terms, since we know he was a close friend of Damon, and Socrates attributes to Damon as well as Prodicus the art of making distinctions in terms.² But Prodicus is not prepared to extend to terms such as good and bad the possibility of change at the hands of an educator. In this case knowledge is firmly rooted in real facts,³ and it was to illustrate this that Prodicus cited the line of Archilochus.

Defeated in his first attempt, the *μειράκιον* tries again (398 b 3-c 3) and offers Prodicus the choice between two statements. (1) Just as the making of a house is the result of human activity, so human activity makes things good. (2) According as things are good or bad to begin with, so they necessarily continue good or bad. Socrates then says that Prodicus suspected where the argument was going to end,⁴ and, in order to avoid a public defeat, replied that it was a human activity (*ἔργον ἀνθρώπου*). Here it seems clear that Prodicus hoped to avoid defeat by giving the answer which he did. Presumably he saw that if he accepted the other alternative, that things continue

¹ Cf. Plato, *Prot.* 341 c - d ; 358 a - b ; *Euthydemus*, 277 e ff. = Diels — Kranz⁶, 84 A 14 ; 84 A 16. This does not exclude the possibility that for Prodicus the *ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης* when achieved rested on *φύσις*, cf. Chiapelli, *Archiv f. Ges. d. Philos.*, vol. iii (1890), p. 244. Untersteiner, *I Sofisti*, p. 260 n. 42.

² Plato, *Laches*, 197d = Diels — Kranz⁶ 84 A 17.

³ Cf. Momigliano, "Prodicus da Ceo e le dottrine sul linguaggio da Democrito ai Cinici", in *Atti della R. Acc. delle Scienze di Torino*, vol. lxxv (1929-30), pp. 101-3.

⁴ The words *σφόδρα πανούργως* seem to have all the marks of an intrusive gloss and I suggest accordingly that they should be excluded from the text. On this view they were inserted by a commentator who wished to specify the way in which the argument was likely to end. But if this is not so, and the words are an integral part of the text, they seem to go most naturally with the following *ἔφη ἀνθρώπου ἔργον εἶναι*. They were so taken, e.g. by Jowett, and the meaning might then be that Prodicus' answer was a "clever" or "sophistic" answer rather than the one which he ought to have given in the light of his earlier thesis.

good or bad according as they are so to begin with, he would have difficulty in maintaining his original position that the same thing may be good for persons of one class and bad for persons of another class. Presented with a disjunction he chooses the other alternative. But the way in which Socrates describes his choice suggests strongly that he did so only because of the difficulty in which he found himself, i.e. that it is not what he would otherwise have said and does not properly represent his true position.¹ On the view here taken it is in fact the position which he had refused to accept a moment ago, and it may seem surprising that he does accept it so easily on the present occasion. But Socrates' account of the argument is a very concise summary, and if there lies behind it a more extended argument in dialogue form the reasons would probably be much clearer to us than they are.

Whatever the means used, the *μειράκιον* has secured the admission which he wanted. Prodicus has now admitted that good and bad things are in exactly the same position as things grammatical or musical. This leads to the last stage in the attack of the *μειράκιον* (398 c 4-d 8). The steps in the argument are rather compressed, but seem to be as follows. Prodicus naturally holds to the general position that virtue is something which is taught. In grammar, music or similar arts it is pointless to pray to the gods for proficiency—this is acquired either from a teacher or by one's effort in learning. (Again it would be pointless to pray to the gods for music and grammar—when we become musical things become musical for us which were not previously so. The teacher who makes us musical makes things musical for us without any separate activity on his part, cf. 398 a 4.) So likewise in the case of good and bad things. When we pray to the gods for success and for good things for ourselves we are really praying to be made good ourselves, since if someone makes us good he thereby makes things good for us which were not previously good. (But it is just as foolish to pray to the gods to make us good as it is to pray to them to make us musical. In each case this must be learned from a

¹ The implication seems to be that if he had been in private he would have denied that it was *ἀνθρώπου ἔργον*.

teacher or by one's own effort in learning.) Socrates himself then pointed out to Prodicus that in praying for good things to the gods he seemed to be praying for something which they could not give (398 d 8-e 10).

So Prodicus seemed to be talking nonsense (397 d 1-2) to those who were listening. He was preparing to defend himself when he was stopped by the *γυμνασίαρχος*. Even with the admissions exacted from Prodicus, the final argument of the *μειράκιον* is full of assumptions open to attack. But it is the position of Prodicus without the admission forced from him, with which I am here concerned. He has two contentions: (1) the goodness of things varies according to the knowledge of the users as to how to use them. (2) Men's knowledge is knowledge of things really existent. This second proposition is put in the quite general form found in Archilochus. In what follows it appears to be pertinent to the discussion in two different ways: (a) knowledge of how to use things rests on facts independent of the knower—there is a right way, one right way to use wealth;¹ (b) the goodness of a thing used rightly is independent of a person's knowledge about the right way to use it—when someone learns the right way to use a thing he does not *make* the good thing—it was always good if rightly used.

¹ Cf. Momigliano, *op. cit.* p. 102.