

'Protagoras on Political Skill: Plato Protagoras 320c-328d'

Nicholas Denyer

Nicholas Denyer (M.A. Oxon. 1981; M.A. Cantab. 2008) is Fellow, Director of Studies, and College Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, at Trinity College, and University Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Classics. His most recent book came out in 2008, and is an edition, for the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics Series, of Plato's *Protagoras*. In an earlier book, *Language, thought and falsehood in ancient Greek philosophy* (Routledge 1991), he looked at Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the Measure of All Things.

Introduction to the seminar paper for 11 May 2009

James Harrington's *The commonwealth of Oceana* (London 1656) reminds us:

But that such orders may be established as may, nay must, give the upper hand in all cases to common right or interest, notwithstanding the nearness of that which sticks to every man in private, and this in a way of equal certainty and facility, is known even to girls, being no other than those that are of common practice with them in divers cases. For example, two of them have a cake yet undivided, which was given between them: that each of them therefore might have that which is due, "Divide," says one to the other, "and I will choose; or let me divide, and you shall choose." If this be but once agreed upon, it is enough; for the dividant, dividing unequally, loses, in regard that the other takes the better half. Wherefore she divides equally, and so both have right.

I relish such devices: without external coercion, they compel the otherwise potentially fractious to a harmonious agreement.

Ancient democracies relished such devices too. In fifth-century Greece, Protagoras of Abdera had a spectacular and lucrative career teaching a ‘political skill’, or art of running city-states, that included such devices. Of Protagoras’ own writings we have only scanty fragments. However, by using materials from Plato’s dialogues the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, it is possible to tell what may be something like Protagoras’ own story of what his political art is, and why it should be needed. The art is one of producing social harmony, by bringing about wholesome values, by bringing about consensus on those values, by means that at their most sophisticated and professional include cunning devices like that for cake division.