

**A DAY IN ATHENS; WITH  
SOCRATES: TRANSLATIONS  
FROM THE PROTAGORAS  
AND THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO**

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A Day in Athens; With Socrates: Translations from the Protagoras and the Republic of Plato by  
Plato & Ellen F. Mason

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## PREFACE.

THESE dialogues have been brought together, not with the idea that they will afford any adequate conception of Plato's philosophy, — the outgrowth of the teachings of Socrates, — but because they embody one of the most vivid pictures which have come down to us of the age in which these men lived and taught. It would be hard, indeed, to find a more perfect illustration of the distinctive characteristics of any age than is contained in the dialogues of Plato. Painter and poet no less than philosopher, he borrows colour from the scenes which surround him, and finds voice for his loftiest theories in the conversations of the men with whom he is in daily intercourse. As we follow the drama enacting before us, we feel that the lapse of centuries forms no barrier between that age and our own. Only when the action is set aside for the extended consideration of some abstract theme, are we made aware that our want of familiarity with the intellectual standpoint of that day too often proves an obstacle to a clear apprehension of the argument. Some of these difficulties may perhaps best be met by a glance at the position occupied by the newer schools of philosophy in relation to those that had gone before.

In earlier ages, intent upon examining "things under the earth and in the heavens,"<sup>1</sup> philosophers seem habitually to have withdrawn themselves to solitary heights of specula-

<sup>1</sup> Apology, 19 B.

tive thought, whence, to use Plato's words, "they look down with exceeding contempt upon us common men, and make but small account of us; nor even when they hold discourse do they take thought whether we keep pace with them or are left behind: each man of them goes on his own way."<sup>1</sup>

But the day was at hand when "common men" would no longer submit to entire exclusion from the world of philosophy. By this time, however, the inadequacy of systems which strove to "explain the unexplainable" had become but too apparent. An inevitable re-action took place in favour of the practical; and, answering to the new requirements of the day, a new school arose, which proclaimed the instruction of men in the right conduct of life as its chief end and purpose, and cultivated the arts of rhetoric and argumentation, which were yet novelties, as a help towards the attainment of this end.

It is easy to see, that to the active and subtle Greek mind, studies such as these would offer a peculiar attraction, and, pursued with a dangerous facility, might prove fatal to the end which they were at first intended to serve. "The Greek," says Taine, "is a reasoner even more than a metaphysician or a *savant*. He takes pleasure in delicate distinctions, in subtle analyses. He delights in splitting hairs, in weaving spiders' webs. In this his dexterity is unrivalled. Little matters it to him, that, alike in theory and in practice, this too-complicated and fine-drawn web is of no use whatever: he is content to watch the separate threads as they weave themselves into imperceptible and symmetrical meshes. Here the national vice is a final outcome of the national talent. Nowhere else has been seen a group of eminent and popular men who taught with success and

<sup>1</sup> Sophist, 243 A.

glory, as did Gorgias, Protagoras, and Polus, the art of making the worse appear the better cause, and maintained with an appearance of truth an absurd proposition, however shocking it might be."<sup>1</sup>

Ethical problems, to solve which was the avowed object of this new school of philosophy, but too frequently were abandoned for a training intended to ensure worldly success and fame; high ideals, sometimes even moral standards, were practically ignored; ability in discussion, facility of expression, came to be regarded not merely as helps to reach truth, but as the sole end of education, the "greatest good of man."<sup>2</sup> It is doubtless true that to class all the immediate predecessors of Socrates indiscriminately in one school is as unfair as to make their supposed method a mere synonyme for specious argument. Also in their favour it should be remembered that an inestimable service was rendered by these men in preparing the ground for Socrates himself, and through him for all subsequent philosophers. Had the doctrine that "Man is the measure of all things" not been proclaimed by Protagoras, the conclusion would less soon have been reached, that not only is philosophy made for man, but that man also is made for philosophy; and that hence his bounden duty, nay, his privilege it is, to apply to each act of his life the test whereby the true may be separated from the false, the real from the unreal.

But between the teachings of these men and those of Socrates there is a wide divergence — one less of degree than of kind, less of method than of aim and purpose. The long-winded harangues of other teachers, their confident dogmatism which induced an uncriticising acquiescence on the part of their pupils, differed indeed radically

<sup>1</sup> Taine, *Philosophie de l'Art en Grèce*, pp. 25, 26.   <sup>2</sup> Gorgias, 45<sup>a</sup> D.



from that rigid cross-examination in the light of which the confusion and poverty of thought hitherto covered by pompous fluency of diction were laid bare, and the listener was compelled to give an account of his real opinions, and either to substantiate or abandon them. Not until Socrates had "called down philosophy from the clouds,"<sup>1</sup> was the truth discerned that the work of self-examination is no vicarious task, but that to study and find out of what use you can be to men — in a word, to "know thyself" — is the study of studies, to last as long as a man shall live.<sup>2</sup>

In the pages before us we find the account given by Socrates of two famous conversations, — one between himself and Protagoras at the house of Callias, the other on the occasion of a visit to the venerable Cephalus and his household. It is surely no fanciful parallel which may be traced between the character of the dialogues themselves and the atmosphere of the households in which they took place. The bustle and confusion which already at break of day reign in the home of Callias offer a striking contrast with the repose and calm which in the evening hour, symbolic of the evening of his declining years, pervade the well-ordered abode of Cephalus; the pressing insistence with which Socrates is detained by the eager Callias well offsets the courteous dignity with which Cephalus invites him to be his frequent guest. But no less marked throughout is the contrast presented between the *Protagoras*, with its restless movement, its apparent absence of unity, and want of definite purpose, and the *Republic*, with its broad and stately sweep, its calm deliberateness of aim. Yet the one is the fitting precursor of the other; if in the second we find

<sup>1</sup> Cic. Tusc. Disp. V. iv. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Xen. Mem. IV. ii. 24-30, and Apology, 38 A.

the perfect growth, in the first we have the promise of fruition. On purely artistic grounds, however, whether in point of vividness of colour or vivacity of action, it would be difficult to assign preference to one of these brilliant word-pictures over the other. In each, the subtle touches which lend to the narrative its vivid reality are felt only in their result, and all unknown to ourselves we are made to breathe the air, to enter as it were into the very heart of the Athens of old. In each, transported unconsciously to the every-day scenes of Athenian life, we seem to become, not eye-witnesses only, but actual participators in the action. Surely, if the true test of art is its apparent absence, then is art here found in its consummate form.

In the *Republic*, following Socrates to the home of his aged friend, we find ourselves one of the group who cluster round the good old Cephalus, listening with delight to the words of wisdom which fall from his lips. And when, as head of the family, he has left us that he may perform the evening sacrifice,—when Thrasymachus, arrogating to himself the direction of the argument, attempts by force of sheer insolence and bravado to impose his ill-considered doctrines upon his unwilling listeners, we enjoy with them the discomfiture of the intellectual bully, as at every turn he becomes more hopelessly entangled in his own admissions; and finally we exult in the triumphant overthrow of his brutal paradox, that the really wise man is the man who is “perfect in injustice.”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Protagoras*, penetrating with Hippocrates into the very bed-chamber of Socrates, we listen to the breathless outpourings of the young enthusiast, and hear the sympathetic but restraining words of Socrates, who is no whit

<sup>1</sup> *Republic*, 348 D.

disconcerted or annoyed by this ill-timed invasion. And when, following the two friends to the hospitable mansion of Callias, that "bird of fine plumage which was plucked on all sides,"<sup>1</sup> we are at last admitted by the reluctant porter, we find ourselves in the presence of the most celebrated teachers of the day. But a few vivid touches, and each stands in the very flesh before us.

In the opposite portico we catch sight of the self-complacent Hippias, whose claims to universal knowledge are certain everywhere to draw around him a miniature court of admirers. At this moment, encircling the chair of state in which he is seated, they are listening with rapt attention, while with pompous fluency he expounds the questions which they propose. Hard by, in the store-closet, now converted from its former use to that of a bed-chamber, lies Prodicus, still in bed, — a self-indulgence which his weak health may serve to justify, if excuse may not be found for it in the earliness of the hour. He too has his circle of visitors, and already they are gathered around him, anxious to lose no time in beginning that "complete education in grammar and language"<sup>2</sup> which it is his boast to impart.

But we must not linger over these lesser luminaries. Directly in front of us, supported upon every side by a phalanx of admiring followers as with stately mien he paces the portico upon which we enter, behold the great light, Protagoras the Sophist! In his delineation of this character, with its odd blending of dignity and petulance, self-sufficiency and pliability, Plato has not allowed himself to be unduly influenced by his inveterate hatred of the so-called Sophists. Throughout the dialogue Protagoras is represented as an upright and honourable man, not unmindful of his high

<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes, *Birds*, 234-237.

<sup>2</sup> Cratylus, 344 B.