

Working Papers in Philosophy:  
Registers of Philosophy

Szerkesztők: Kovács Gábor  
Paár Tamás

2019/1

## Response to Michael Erler's paper

Péter Lautner

*Pázmány Péter Catholic University*



---

**Institute of Philosophy**  
Research Centre for the Humanities  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

---

## About the author

**Péter Lautner** is professor of philosophy at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University. He studied classics, philosophy and history at Eötvös University Budapest. Part of his graduate studies was done at King's College London. He was fellow at several institutes, e.g., the Warburg Institute, London, and the Villa I Tatti, Florence, the Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington DC, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies and the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. He also worked as Gastwissenschaftler at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin (Topoi Project). He published extensively on the philosophy of late antiquity, particularly on physics, epistemology and the theory of the soul.

## Abstract

The response aims to show that (a) the passage in the *Gorgias*, referred to by Prof. Erler, allows for another interpretation which accounts for the failure of some of his arguments, and that (b) the metaphor of the child in us in the *Phaedo* could be confronted usefully with the similar metaphor of the parts of the soul in *Republic IX*.

## Péter Lautner: *Response to Michael Erler's paper*<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin by thanking Michael Erler for having made the commentator's task such an easy one. Not only has he carved out a distinctive position in a field thick with competing interpretations; he has also provided us with a detailed map to guide us there, setting out from a fine survey of the texts and navigating us safely past various pitfalls. One can agree that the dramatic structure of Plato's dialogues does play an important role in assessing and reconsidering the formal arguments themselves. My aim will be to supplement the picture he draws and show the possibility of other explanations within the confines of the dramatic setting.

Most importantly, Prof. Erler makes it clear that the dramatic features of certain dialogues serve as a comment on the general thrust of the argument. In some dialogues ending with an *aporia* proper attention to such features may make us reconsider whether the argument comes really to a dead end. Perhaps, they might hint at a positive solution. The final word of the *Protagoras* (ἀπῆμεν – “we departed”) suggests that Socrates was successful at the end because the debate with Protagoras persuaded Hippocrates to give up his plan to join Protagoras. It is a very interesting ending, indeed, which has an impact on the overall assessment of the formal arguments. As a positive contribution of my own, let me dwell on the passage first. I fully agree with Professor Erler that the first-person plural in ἀπῆμεν refers to Socrates and Hippocrates, and that must be taken into account if we strive for a more sophisticated understanding of the dialogue. However, I believe that the final passage gives us cue for other, diverging interpretations as well.

Towards the end of the dialogue Socrates comes to the surprising conclusion that by showing that the virtues are united by knowledge and therefore teachable he refuted his original position since he had started out by denying that virtue can be taught. On the other hand, Protagoras is also at a loss; he turned out to be right concerning teachability but his views on the disparate nature of virtues have been confuted. Furthermore, he is also puzzled as to which method is to be followed in teaching the virtue as a unity. The argument offers a new start but Protagoras has got enough. Now I quote the text (361d6-362a2):

καὶ ὁ Πρωταγόρας, ἐγὼ μὲν, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐπαινῶ σου τὴν προθυμίαν καὶ τὴν  
διέξοδον τῶν λόγων. καὶ γὰρ οὔτε τᾶλλα οἶμαι κακὸς εἶναι ἄνθρωπος, φθονερός τε  
ἤκιστ' ἀνθρώπων, εἰρήναι καὶ περὶ σοῦ πρὸς πολλοὺς δὴ εἶρηκα ὅτι ὢν ἐντυγχάνω πολὺ

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy IV.,” May 26, 2018, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

μάλιστα ἄγαμαι σέ, τῶν μὲν τηλικούτων καὶ πάνυ· καὶ λέγω γε ὅτι οὐκ ἂν θαυμάζοιμι εἰ τῶν ἐλλογίμων γένοιο ἀνδρῶν ἐπὶ σοφίαι. καὶ περὶ τούτων δὲ εἴη αὖθις, ὅταν βούλη, διέξιμεν· νῦν δ' ὦρα ἤδη καὶ ἐπ' ἄλλο τι τρέπεσθαι.

ἀλλ', ἦν δ' ἐγώ, οὕτω χρῆ ποιεῖν, εἴ σοι δοκεῖ. καὶ γὰρ ἐμοὶ οἷπερ ἔφην ἰέναι πάλαι ὦρα, ἀλλὰ Καλλία τῷ καλῷ χαριζόμενος παρέμεινα.

“For my part, Socrates” said Protagoras, “I applaud your enthusiasm and the way you pursue your arguments. I don’t think I’m an inferior person in any respect, but in particular I’m the last man to bear a grudge: for I’ve said to many people that all of those I’ve met I like you far the best, especially of those of your age. And I declare that I should not be surprised if you become famous for your wisdom. As to these questions, I shall pursue them some other time, whenever you wish; but now it’s time to turn to something else.”

“Indeed that’s what we should do”, I said, “if you prefer. In fact, quite a while ago it was time for me to go where I said, but I stayed to indulge the beautiful Callias.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, it is fairly clear that Protagoras’s ego has not been shaken by Socrates’s arguments. Generously enough, he even finds a way to praise him. He says that his interlocutor is the best among those he has met and quite an exception to men of his age, which means that, with all his excellence, Socrates may not be so good as he is himself. He also says that it would not be a surprise if he became famous for wisdom, which means that, in his eyes, Socrates is not famous for wisdom yet.

It is clear that such praise invites some response. Socrates’s is short. He came and *stayed* to take pleasure in the beautiful Callias (Καλλία τῷ καλῷ χαριζόμενος παρέμεινα). How to understand the response? Is it just a prompt riposte or did Plato mean to say something more? I suggest that it may be more than a quip. It says that Socrates remained in Callias’s house not just in order to continue arguing with Protagoras. He was concentrating on Callias, the beautiful or the noble (ὁ καλός), not on Protagoras. Of course, the expression Καλλία τῷ καλῷ is a pun – Plato is fond of making this kind of linguistic play many times. But, in order to hit it must contain some truth. By using these words, Socrates indicates that his mind was elsewhere. It explains why some of his arguments were admittedly wrong. It indicates also that the whole discussion on the teachability of virtue was just a (side-)show with the aim of grabbing the host’s attention. Or, it was pursued out of a slight pressure since there are indications in the text that Callias was very much concerned with keeping the

---

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Protagoras. Revised Edition*, translated with notes by C. C. W. Taylor, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. Translation slightly modified.

conversation of Socrates and Protagoras going. Socrates could not resist the persuasion. Given his attitude and the circumstances, it is not a surprise that some of his arguments went wrong. But even so, he has got the prize; he left with Hippocrates.

Again, I am in full agreement with the thesis that examination of the dramatic structure adds important elements to our understanding the dialogues. In the case of the *Protagoras* it may lead us to the assumption that some failures in the formal arguments are explained with reference to the motives of one of the protagonists. It may also give rise to a suspicion. Unlike in other aporetic dialogues where, as Prof. Erler has pointed out, we have hints in the plot that the results may not be so aporetic after all, the end of this dialogue seems to give a reverse effect. Some of Socrates's arguments are bad, indeed, but the failure is due to factors indicated by the storyline.

Following the practice of the early poets, Plato also used metaphors to describe the situations. The metaphors have poetological functions as well and can be interpreted as cues for the philosophical interpretation of the text. The motifs of "running away" and "the child in man" are indicative of strategies that Plato follows in order that the readers see the problems in the proposals of Socrates's interlocutors. The former alludes to the distinction between belief and knowledge, showing that Euthyphro, for instance, left the scene because he could not prove his thesis which Plato himself endorsed in the *Republic*. The latter metaphor, taken from the *Phaedo*, is meant to show that there is an element in us which is responsible for fear, and in general, for the emotions. As one of his visitors remarks, there is a child within himself who is full of fear, like children are of a bogeyman (77e). In order to get free of the fear of death the child has to be persuaded. The way of persuasion must be appropriate; the person has to sing charm to the child within every day until he charms away his fear. We have to use songs or charms to chase away fear. Prof. Erler reminds us that the metaphor anticipates the appetitive part in Plato's threefold division of the soul. It also anticipates one of the methods of dealing with the appetites. One might claim, however, that the child represents the spirited part as well since fear might belong rather to this part than to the appetite which, on the first run at least, contains desire for food, drink and sex. But the way of taming it shows that it must belong to the appetite because songs and charms are means to educate such desires. Perhaps, one might suppose that the metaphor represents important elements of both the appetitive and the spirited part of the division in the *Republic*.

But, as I see it, the transition from the *Phaedo* to the *Republic* raises a further question. If the child within symbolizes the non-rational emotions, then it must refer to the appetitive part of the soul. However, the metaphor carries a picture on emotions that is difficult to

harmonize with another metaphor. In Book IX of the *Republic* Plato illustrates the tripartite soul with three living beings. The person is compared to a man who contains within himself a little human being, a lion and a many-headed beast. Reason is represented by a little human being, a homunculus, whereas spirit is symbolized by a lion. The representation of the appetitive soul seems to be quite different from the metaphor in the *Phaedo*. I quote the relevant passage (*Rep.* IX 588c2-7):

ποίαν τινά; ἢ δ' ὅς.

τῶν τοιούτων τινά, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, οἷαι μυθολογοῦνται παλαιαὶ γενέσθαι φύσεις, ἢ τε Χιμαίρας καὶ ἡ Σκύλλης καὶ Κερβέρου, καὶ ἄλλαι τινὲς συχναὶ λέγονται συμπεφυκυῖαι ἰδέαι πολλὰ εἰς ἓν γενέσθαι.

λέγονται γάρ, ἔφη.

πλάττε τοίνυν μίαν μὲν ἰδέαν θηρίου ποικίλου καὶ πολυκεφάλου, ἡμέρων δὲ θηρίων ἔχοντος κεφαλὰς κύκλω καὶ ἀγρίων, καὶ δυνατοῦ μεταβάλλειν καὶ φύειν ἐξ αὐτοῦ πάντα ταῦτα.

“What sort of an image?” he said.

“One of those natures that the ancient fables tell of,” said I, “as that of the Chimaera or Scylla or Cerberus, and the numerous other examples that are told of many forms grown together in one.”

“Yes, they do tell of them.”

“Mould, then, a single shape of a manifold and many-headed beast that has a ring of heads of tame and wild beasts and can change them and cause to spring forth from itself all such growths.”<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor portrays the appetitive part of the soul as a many-headed beast resembling the monsters of Greek mythology. How could it happen that the portrait of the emotions as a harmless child has turned into a picture on evil creatures? The two metaphors have very different connotations. Although it is quite plausible to suppose that the symbol of the child within foreshadows the appetitive part of the soul as it has been described in the *Republic*, the difference between the child and the many-headed beast signals a shift in Plato's attitude towards non-rational emotions. How to explain the shift?

To my mind, it shows that even if we have a plausible transition of ideas between two dialogues at the level of the metaphors it needs another kind of inquiry to explain the possible

---

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, with an English translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Heinemann, 1963.

difference between the two metaphors of the same phenomenon. Perhaps, we may explain the difference here with reference to the different contexts (fear of death on the one hand and the danger, social and otherwise, posed by the unjust man on the other) or to the considerably different views that the two dialogues make on human soul with its inner conflicts and dynamisms.

This said, I think it is important to realize, with Prof. Erlen, that a full examination of Plato's doctrines must include an inquiry into the literary aspects of their presentation. Among other things, the dramatic aspects of the dialogues offer insights that may make us reconsider the range and efficiency of the formal arguments.

