

## What Protagoras Meant

- a sermon message compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister.

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The Sunday before last, I introduced an exploration of a virtue that philosopher Paul Woodruff describes as “the forgotten” one – the virtue of reverence. **Virtue is a state of character**, or as Woodruff explains, “virtue is a capacity to do what is right... virtue is the source of feelings that prompt us to behave well... **virtues are habits of feeling**, and these are much harder to learn or forget... Virtues grow in us through being used, and they are used mainly by people living or working together... in community.” And as Unitarian Universalists who tend not to believe in salvation by grace or faith but rather in a life well-lived, **the state of our character is important to us.**

The subject of Paul Woodruff’s 2001 book on the forgotten virtue is drawn from the following ancient myth created by the Greek philosopher, Protagoras:

**Once upon a time** there were gods only, and no mortal creatures. But when the time came that these also should be created, the gods fashioned them out of earth and fire and various mixtures of both elements in the interior of the earth; and when they were about to bring them into the light of day, they ordered Prometheus and Epimetheus to equip them, and to distribute to them severally their proper qualities.

Epimetheus said to Prometheus: "Let me distribute, and do you inspect." This was agreed, and Epimetheus made the distribution.

There were some to whom he gave strength without swiftness, while he equipped the weaker with swiftness; some he armed, and others he left unarmed; and devised for the latter some other means of preservation, making some large, and having their size as a protection, and others small, whose nature was to fly in the air or burrow in the ground; this was to be their way of escape. Thus did he compensate them with the view of preventing any race from becoming extinct.

**And when he had provided against their destruction by one another**, he contrived also a means of protecting them against the seasons [of heaven]; clothing them with close hair and thick skins sufficient to defend them against the winter cold and able to resist the summer heat, so that they might have a natural bed of their own when they wanted to rest; also he furnished them with hoofs and hair and hard and callous skins under their feet. Then he gave them varieties of food-herb of the soil to some, to others fruits of trees, and to others roots, and to some again he gave other animals as food. And some he made to have few young ones, while those who were their prey were very prolific; and in this manner the race was preserved.

Thus did Epimetheus, who, not being very wise, forgot that he had distributed among the brute animals all the qualities which he had to give - and when he came to man, who was still unprovided for, he was terribly perplexed. Now while he was in this perplexity, Prometheus came to inspect the distribution, and he found that the other animals were suitably furnished, but that man alone was naked and shoeless, and had neither bed nor arms of defense.

The appointed hour was approaching when man in his turn was to go forth into the light of day; and Prometheus, not knowing how he could devise his salvation, stole the mechanical arts of Hephaestus (**h ay-F EH S-t uh s**) and Athena, and fire with them (they could neither have been acquired nor used without fire), and gave them to man.

Thus man had the wisdom necessary to the support of life, but **political wisdom he had not**; for that was in the keeping of Zeus, and the power of Prometheus did not extend to entering into the citadel of heaven, where Zeus dwelt, who moreover had terrible sentinels; but he did enter by stealth into the common workshop of Athena and Hephaestus (**h ay-F EH S-t uh s**), in which they used to practice their favorite arts, and carried off Hephaestus' art of working by fire, and also the art of Athena, and gave them to man. And in this way man was supplied with the means of life. But Prometheus is said to have been afterwards prosecuted for theft, owing to the blunder of Epimetheus.

Now man, having a share of the divine attributes, was at first the only one of the animals who had any gods, because he alone was of their kindred; and he would raise altars and images of them. He was not long in inventing articulate speech and names; and he also constructed houses and clothes and shoes and beds, and drew sustenance from the earth. Thus provided, mankind at first lived dispersed, and there were no cities.

But the consequence was that they were destroyed by the wild beasts, for they were utterly weak in comparison of them, and their art was only sufficient to provide them with the means of life, and did not enable them to carry on war against the animals: food they had, but not as yet the art of government, of which the art of war – the art of conflict - is a part.

After a while the desire of self-preservation gathered them into cities; but when they were gathered together, **having no art of government**, they evilly treated one another, and were again in process of dispersion and destruction. Zeus feared that the entire race would be exterminated, and so he sent Hermes to them, **bearing reverence and justice** to be the ordering principles of cities and the bonds of friendship and conciliation.

Hermes asked Zeus how he should impart justice and reverence among men: should he distribute them as the arts are distributed; that is to say, to a favored few only, one skilled individual having enough of medicine or of any other art for many unskilled ones?

"Shall this be the manner in which I am to distribute justice and reverence among men, or shall I give them to all?"

"To all," said Zeus; "I should like them all to have a share; for cities cannot exist, if a few only share in the virtues, as in the arts. And further, make a law by my order, that he who has no part in reverence and justice shall be put to death, for he is a plague of the state."

- **Source:** Reading on The Myth of Prometheus, as told by Protagoras to Socrates in Plato's dialogue Protagoras (320d-323a)

<http://faculty.washington.edu/scstroup/Protagoras.html>

The interesting thing about this myth is that Protagoras was a well-known agnostic of his time – so why did he craft such a story about the gods? Why insist that the foundation of society is both justice and reverence?

“Protagoras understands what poets have been teaching since Homer: **that justice is not enough.**”

Woodruff maintains that we have much to learn from the ancients - “The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people’s lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.” (Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*)

Paul Woodruff’s central aim [in his exploration of reverence] is to remind us of the importance of the acceptance of limitations in moral and, especially, political life. “Reverence,” he tells us, “begins in deep understanding of human limitations” (p.5). This deep understanding is centrally embodied in feelings. “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (p.8). It is **“to be defined as a capacity for certain feelings” (p.53), not as a matter of belief.** Without these feelings, ceremonies become empty of significance; human life becomes more wholly animal (e.g., meals become feeding times and homes become kennels [p.19]); common enterprise collapses into egoist grasping; and shared civil, deliberative life gives way to faction and manipulation. In general, **“without reverence, things fall apart”** (p.13).

In our present condition, according to Woodruff, “we are losing the idea of reverence” (p.36). Reverence persists as a matter of feeling in certain pockets of familial, civic, and religious life; it is “an ancient virtue that survives among us in half-forgotten patterns of civility, in moments of inarticulate awe, and in nostalgia for the lost ways of traditional cultures” (p.3). **But it is not articulately understood**, and we are in danger of losing the feelings along with the idea. “What I am [Woodruff is] proposing is that we restore the idea of reverence to its proper place in ethical and political thought. We will be better off...if we know what it is and why it matters. Only then can we consciously preserve and cultivate it as we run down the rapidly accelerating current of cultural change” (p.38).

In developing his account of the nature and importance of reverence, Woodruff makes two important, related argumentative claims. First, **only feelings have motivational force primitively.** Rules, even moral rules, are such that people must be motivated to follow them, and the relevant motivation must come from feelings or what grows from feelings, not from the rules themselves. In short, **there can be no stable and successful moral practice without the virtue of right feeling, including reverence.** In particular, “justice has very little motivational power. It is a fairly dry virtue, guided more by judicious thought than by trained feeling, . . . [and it] is not a motivational restraint” (p.174). Hence virtue ethics is properly more fundamental than talk of moral rules...(pp.62–63).

Second, “reverence has more to do with politics than with religion” (p.4). Plato’s claim that justice is sufficient for all the reverence you need **is false**, and we should in contrast prefer the wisdom of Thucydides (thUU-sih-dih-dees), who praised reverence as a moral virtue, quite

apart from any belief in particular gods (p. 11). Woodruff's conception of reverence as a distinctly political virtue is based on a central point **that reverence for shared ideals is the only thing** that can bind together leaders and followers, and teachers and students, in a common practical enterprise pursued with mutual trust, as opposed to self-seeking and cynicism.

**Reverence is a matter of “remembering what it is to be human” (p. 79) or of “remembering your humanity” (p. 88), not a matter of belief in any particular gods.** Hence it is possible to have “Reverence across Religions” (p.135) and “Reverence without a Creed” (p.117)... in order to be reverent, “you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: **it cannot be changed or controlled by human means**, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent” (p.117). “True reverence . . . cannot be for anything that we humans make or control” (p.28). But this condition can be satisfied by objects as diverse as various gods, various traditions, nature (the starry heavens above), family life, and harmonious order, understood as self-subsistent and partially exemplified in different ways in different regions of human life. Hence reverence **can exist** across different specific traditions and across differences of specific religious belief. It is, as Woodruff might have put it, the meta-virtue of being virtuous or of having a character that is not wholly appetitive and grasping, **and it is the best, and perhaps the only ultimate, check against violence.** “If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent” (p.15).

- **Source:** <http://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=fac-philosophy>

This is what Protagoras meant.