

BOOK REVIEW

Prodicus the Sophist: Texts, Translations, and Commentary. By ROBERT MAYHEW. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xxix + 272. £50.00/\$75.00. ISBN 978-0-19-960787-7.

Although Prodicus was an important fifth-century thinker, he remains relatively little known today. Socrates several times alludes to Prodicus as his teacher and we have numerous indications of his concern for correct word usage; but his longest surviving fragment, “The Choice of Heracles,” gives little indication of this concern or of any philosophical sophistication, and most scholars’ picture of Prodicus derives largely from Plato’s vivid and humorous parody in *Protagoras*. A new reassessment is thus most welcome, though I confess that my first thought on being asked to review a book on Prodicus was to question how one could fill a book with the scanty material in Diels–Kranz—twenty testimonia and eleven fragments, of which seven are labeled genuine (including the “Choice”), two doubtful, and two false. Part of the answer is that Mayhew considers not just these texts but “all the relevant ancient evidence.” This amounts to ninety texts, each with a facing translation, grouped into Life and Character; Language; Natural Philosophy, Cosmology, Religion; and Ethics. There follows a commentary, four brief Appendices on doubtful or falsely attributed fragments, notes on the source of each text, a Bibliography, and Indices.

So, what do we learn from Mayhew’s fifty-nine additional texts, all of which are late, some very late? Unfortunately, very little. They provide fodder for speculation about Prodicus and especially about his image in later antiquity, but almost nothing that is reliable enough to help us understand Prodicus’ thought. Some texts are even included “for the sake of completeness” (in one case “to warn against using it as a reliable source”). Completeness is arguably a worthy goal, with no great harm being done by additional texts, even if they add nothing; there is the danger, however, not entirely avoided here, of losing sight of the forest for the trees. This is especially regrettable because Mayhew presents an interesting sketch of Prodicus’ ideas in his brief Introduction.

For Mayhew, Prodicus’ contributions included three semantic propositions (no two words should have the same meaning, no word should have more than

one meaning, a word's meaning should match its etymology), a two-stage evolution of religion (humans first deified aspects of nature, then they deified people who brought them benefits), and a "sophistic" view of morality. This last, in my view, is Mayhew's most interesting suggestion. For him, Prodicus' "Choice" is not an argument for Virtue, as almost everyone beginning with Xenophon has thought, but rather a sophistic "double argument," making the best case for each side. Mayhew stresses the conditional nature of both arguments: "if you want to be great and win honor, follow Virtue" vs. "if you want the most pleasant and easy life, follow Vice" (I oversimplify, of course). Both arguments, he thinks, are valid and so the choice is which kind of life one wants. Choosing Vice is thus not only rational, but is probably the choice Prodicus made for his own life.

My main difficulty with this is that unlike other sophistic double arguments, the Choice is clearly unbalanced: each speaker first argues for her way of life but Virtue then gets to add a long argument against Vice's case, whereas Vice is only allowed one objection to Virtue, that its road is difficult, a point that Virtue herself has already emphasized. Even in the *agon* in the *Clouds* the stronger Logos, who promotes traditional virtues, is far from faultless. By contrast, Prodicus presents nothing but traditional arguments for each side and thus provides no reason to question the traditional judgment that Virtue is preferable.

Far more interesting, in my view, and more characteristic of the sophists, are Prodicus' views on language. Here Mayhew misses a chance to connect Prodicus with other sophistic thought, especially with Protagoras (his alleged teacher), whose views on gender and mood appear as provocative as Prodicus' lexical distinctions. But even here one wonders how much original thought Prodicus contributed. Plato's presentation of Prodicus' lexicology in *Protagoras* verges on ridicule (especially in the discussion of Simonides' poem), suggesting that he may not have taken Prodicus very seriously.

Mayhew's conclusions will not persuade all scholars, but they should, at least, stimulate interest in Prodicus. For this, however, the book's format presents an obstacle. Mayhew presents his views of Prodicus in the Introduction, but his defense of these views comes in the commentary, where in most cases it is scattered among a number of different texts. Finding this defense (without a Subject Index) thus requires readers to work through a lot of the commentary, including much that is of little or no value in interpreting Prodicus' thought. Eliminating peripheral material from the commentary (such as discussion of the dates of other authors like Herodotus) would help; even better, Mayhew could have gathered together the interpretative parts of the commentary into a single presenta-

tion of Prodicus' views, making it easier for readers to evaluate his ideas and leaving it up to them to consult as much (or as little) of the commentary as they wished.

In sum, anyone seeking to produce a full study of Prodicus' thought will find this book useful, indeed essential. For others, however, a much shorter treatment (like Dan Graham's recent redoing of Kirk–Raven–Schofield) will provide virtually all that is wanted.

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