Theory and Practice in Plato's Theaetetus: The Question of Knowledge and the Primacy of Dialectic

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Most studies of the *Theaetetus* concentrate on Plato’s examination of Protagoras’s ‘Man is the Measure’ doctrine—and rightly so. The bulk of the dialogue is after all devoted to an exhaustive critique of this doctrine and its consequences, and in order to understand Plato’s views it is surely crucial to determine what position he sets up in contrast to his own. Commentators differ, however, when it comes to the finer points of Protagoras’s position—particularly concerning the validity of Plato’s infamous self-refutation argument against the Measure Doctrine at 171a6-c7—and its relation to Heraclitean flux. After some preliminaries on the overall structure of the *Theaetetus*, I single out in this paper two interpretations of the Measure Doctrine: Myles Burnyeat’s relativist reading and Gail Fine’s more recent infallibilist reading.

These interpretations require close investigation and comparison to determine which better fits Plato’s argument in the dialogue. Nonetheless, one of my aims here is to suggest that Plato allows both these readings of the Measure Doctrine: Protagoras’s position is inherently ambiguous, and by distinguishing between theoretical and practical objections to his doctrine, I argue that the *Theaetetus* provides a fitting response to both relativism and infallibilism. Furthermore, once Plato’s critiques of the Measure Doctrine and Heraclitean flux are read together, the consequences of Burnyeat’s and Fine’s interpretations turn out to be compatible. Plato’s strategy in this first part of the dialogue is to argue that Theaetetus’s empiricist theory of knowledge ultimately fails because it makes the shared agreements that are the touchstone of philosophical analysis either pointless or impossible. Before inquiring into the conditions for knowledge, therefore, he must first determine the conditions that make rational inquiry and discussion meaningful. Focusing on this latter demand assigns a purpose to the *Theaetetus* that has not yet been fully appreciated: a concern with the practice of dialectic. It also, I believe, yields some distinctly Platonic conclusions.

1. Sticking To Agreements

The word ‘agreement’ (homologein) occurs frequently throughout the *Theaetetus*.\(^1\) One might even say the dialogue takes place on this basis, for at the outset of the work Socrates forces his young interlocutor to engage in discussion by holding him to a point they have both “agreed upon” (hômologêmena, 145c3). Theaetetus has just granted at 145b1-5 that it is important to consider how alike he and Socrates are—as Theodorus, his teacher, maintains earlier on in the work. Having secured this point Socrates compels him to participate in dialectic, asserting that “now is the time for you to show yourself and for me to examine you” (145b6-7). Theaetetus is forbidden, subsequently, from retreating from argument and instructed to have the courage (tharrôn, 145c5) to stick by his agreement (homologiai, 145c5).

It is on this basis that Plato’s most sustained investigation into the question of knowledge takes place. To be sure, the importance of agreement is highlighted all the way through the *Theaetetus*—most potently in Plato’s famous “exquisite” argument against Protagoras’s ‘Man is the Measure’ doctrine at 171a6-c7. The doctrine ends up refuting itself, in fact, precisely on account of the agreements and admissions that Protagoras makes.\(^2\) The issue

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1. The term and its cognates occur over forty times during the work. See Leonard Brandwood, *A Word Index to Plato* (Leeds: W.S. Maney and Son, 1976). All references to the *Theaetetus* in this paper are to The *Theaetetus* of Plato, translated by M.J. Levett and revised by Myles Burnyeat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), unless otherwise noted. In quoting the original Greek, I have followed John Burnet’s *Platonis Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903).

2. The emphasis that the self-refutation passage places here on ‘agreeing’ has also been noted by Sarah Waterlow, “Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171a6-c7,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977), pp. 29-32 and by Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
I would like to focus on in this paper, however, is the way in which Plato regards agreement—not only between individuals, but in human judgement itself—to be even possible. Another way of phrasing this issue which is more clearly in tune with the stated theme of the *Theaetetus* is to ask what conditions are needed, for Plato, for the question ‘What is knowledge?’ to be a meaningful one—a question that can be answered.

In tackling this problem, my method here will be to reorganise somewhat the way in which this dialogue has traditionally been read. On most interpretations, the *Theaetetus* is divided into three parts, in line with the three major conceptions of knowledge that are developed in the work. Myles Burnyeat’s extensive commentary on the dialogue is a case in point—an analysis that is especially valuable for the thorough account provided of the development of Plato’s argument. Nevertheless, for reasons that will soon be clear, I find it just as valuable to consider the dialogue in an alternative way.

2. A Two-Part Reading of the *Theaetetus*

As I see it, the *Theaetetus* falls quite naturally into two separate parts that expound differing approaches to the question of knowledge. On this reading, there are two lines of argument pursued in the dialogue, positioned neatly before and after Socrates’ digression on the philosopher at 172c-177c. The first line adopts what is at least broadly-speaking an empiricist argument: all knowledge is drawn from experience or, more specifically, from perception. The second part of the dialogue, before the digression, can be summed up as ‘knowledge is found out there somewhere.’ The mind or soul (psuchê) acts as a passive receptor of a great welter of experience that is ever-changing and indeterminate. Thus knowledge, too, becomes indeterminate.

In opposition, the second part of the dialogue pursues what I shall refer to here as an anti-empiricist argument: knowledge is to be located in a mind that is actively engaged in the world. The slogan here, after the digression, is...
expounded succinctly at 186d2-3: "knowledge is found not in the experiences (pathémasin, 186d2) but in the process of reasoning (sullogismôi, 186d3) about them." On this view, the mind is an active participator in the practice of acquiring knowledge—Plato's inquiry shifts at this point from the tangible empirical world to the more intangible workings of the psuchê. The focus here is on processes of reasoning, calculation, and thought, which are described as activities of the mind or soul "when it is busy by itself about the things which are" (187A5-6). According to this argument, moreover, our knowledge of things is assumed to be determinate.

On the reading of the Theaetetus I have just outlined, 186d2-3 is clearly the single most important turning point in the dialogue. Socrates suggests as much, in fact, when he asks Theaetetus soon after to "[w]ipe out all that we have said hitherto, and see if you can any better from where you have now progressed to" (187B1-2). I do not take this interpretation to be controversial. All the same, it is crucial to see how Plato sketches two different approaches to the question of knowledge in the Theaetetus, which lead (at least for him) to starkly different results. My main aim in what follows is to spell out in detail some of these results in the first part of the dialogue—specifically, to draw attention to the salient features of Plato's arguments here, as well as the substantive lessons he leaves us with.

I shall argue that Plato's problem with the thesis that knowledge is perception in the first part of the Theaetetus is that it gives rise to intolerable absurdities and inconsistencies. This differs significantly, however, from the problem we are left with at the very end of the dialogue, since here it's the fact that Theaetetus's final conception of knowledge (true judgement with a logos) remains intolerably circular. To be sure, the second part leaves us with some difficult questions and formidable worries. Nonetheless, this second anti-empiricist approach overcomes the important defects of Theaetetus's initial thesis. The question of knowledge is left unresolved at the end of the dialogue, but it is not incoherent: we have been provided with space for further discussion and inquiry—for language—and this is surely no mean feat.

My study here is principally concerned with expanding on this last point. What are the defects of an empiricist approach to knowledge? How are these defects brought to light in the Theaetetus and in what way does the approach that Plato favours remedy such problems? I claim above that the first part of the dialogue generates "absurdities" and "inconsistencies" for Plato. But these are subtly different criticisms. So then: how does the view that knowledge is perception turn out to be absurd? How is it inconsistent? Socrates connects this thesis from the very beginning with Protagoras's 'Man is the Measure' doctrine (151E8-152A4). Protagoras's theory is subsequently connected with another "secret doctrine," namely, Heraclitean Flux (152C8-E1). It will be worth our while, therefore, to spend time examining each of these theories to see why Plato believes they entail one another.

Much work has been devoted to this issue. Recent scholarship has focused especially on interpreting and assessing the validity of Plato's argument here in linking Protagoras's and Heraclitus's doctrines with Theaetetus's empiricist conception of knowledge. Doing full justice to these interpretations is beyond the scope of this paper and would, furthermore, detract from its purpose, which is to determine whether or not the Theaetetus provides us ultimately with anything philosophically constructive. Hence, by considering the defects of an empiricist approach to knowledge in the first part of the dialogue, I hope to anticipate some of the more positive conclusions that Plato reaches later on, where he develops an anti-empiricist conception of knowledge. In doing so, we shall have

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6 I know of no other dialogue in which such a claim is made. Taken at face value, it's almost as though Socrates is saying here that the entire first part of the Theaetetus is worthless. But if this is the case, why does Plato go to such lengths to work out an empiricist view of knowledge in the dialogue? Why does he not begin instead at 186d2-3? As I shall argue here, the first part of the dialogue is by no means worthless—Plato draws our attention to what an empiricist view of knowledge commits us to, and in this respect there are some clear lessons to be learned.


8 The circularity here is that we are left with in the dialogue: Theaetetus's final definition of knowledge as 'true judgement with an account' (201C9 ff.) is found to be wanting since no other definition of 'account' can be given by Socrates except 'knowledge of the differentness' that distinguishes the unknown object from other objects (210A4). The final definition thus cashes out to: 'knowledge is true judgement with knowledge of the differentness.' See also p. 2n. 3, above.
occasion to note some of the nuances of Protagoras’s and Heraclitus’s doctrines in connection with Theaetetus’s proposal that knowledge is perception, but remarks on finer points will have to be abbreviated.

3. Three Doctrines of Empiricism

How, then, do these three empiricist theories hang together? Plato develops an argument in the first part of the dialogue that combines a theory of judgement (Protagoras) with a theory of the world (Heraclitus), which together are assumed in some way to support Theaetetus’s definition of knowledge as perception. But it is not at all clear, first, how we should understand these theories and, second, whether they are in fact interrelated. I shall examine them here in the same order that Plato does after Socrates’ digression (177c ff.), where he provides us with a recap of the three doctrines before dispatching them and developing a new approach to the question of knowledge.

(PM) **Protagoras’s Measure Doctrine.** “Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not” (152A1-4). Protagoras’s well-known thesis makes an early appearance in the *Theaetetus* and is significant enough to merit Socrates’ consideration for almost half the dialogue—no other theory, as a matter of fact, preoccupies him to the same extent. "^9" Plato certainly found it important to contend with Protagoras, and expects us to do the same in considering the manifold implications of his doctrine.

(HF) **Heraclitus’s Flux Doctrine.** “[T]here is nothing which in itself is just one thing: nothing which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing . . . What is really true is this: the things of which we naturally say that they ‘are’, are in process of coming to be, as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say they ‘are’, since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be” (152d3-e1). This doctrine is associated with PM many times in the *Theaetetus*, and invoked specifically for support together with its guiding principle “that everything is really motion (kinêsis), and there is nothing but motion” (156A4-5).

(KP) **Knowledge is Perception.** Theaetetus’s “first-born” thesis receives a provisional formulation at 151E1-3 and is thrashed out along with PM and HF until 160d5, at which point Socrates submits the doctrine in its entirety. Protagoras’s and Heraclitus’s theories thus come to supply Theaetetus with the hypothetical conditions that are required for his thesis to stand up to scrutiny, and it is on this basis that Socrates proceeds to refute empiricism. In particular, by spelling out the conditions that Theaetetus needs to support his definition of knowledge as perception, Plato suggests that the empiricist’s argument amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum.*^10^ That Plato believes these three theories are connected in the *Theaetetus* is apparent from the dialogue’s many “stage directions,” as Burnyeat terms them. At 160d5-e3, for instance, Socrates maintains rather emphatically that “the various theories have converged to the same thing: that of Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe, that all things flow like streams; of Protagoras, wisest of men, that man is the measure of all things; and of Theaetetus that, these

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^9^ There is good reason for this: as stated here, the quote that Plato attributes to Protagoras can be interpreted in many ways. It seems indeed to be a feature of this doctrine that it cannot be pinned down too easily. Moreover, in light of the several interpretations of Socrates’ argument against Protagoras that commentators have offered, it is safe to say that Plato does not provide us in the *Theaetetus* with an explicit reading of PM. This is fitting, for the indefinite content of Protagoras’s dictum is along these lines reflected further in its indefinite form. It is a testament to Plato’s devotion to philosophy that he nevertheless wrestles so hard with the consequences of this obscure thesis.

^10^ I take this point from Burnyeat, who proposes in his commentary that Plato’s refutation of Theaetetus’s thesis in the first part of the dialogue is an indirect proof or *reductio*, whereby KP supplies the materials for its own refutation independently (*The Theaetetus of Plato*, p. 53). Burnyeat credits Bernard Williams primarily with this view (p. xiii), and expands upon it at great length in “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,” in *Idealism Past and Present*, edited by Godfrey Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 21-4.
things being so, knowledge proves to be perception.” It will therefore be important to keep track of the manoeuvres at work in the *Theaetetus* that link PM, HF, and KP together.11

Before reviewing these doctrines in further detail, however, it is worth affirming at the outset what I take to be Plato’s underlying concern in this part of the dialogue. Most readers, I presume, will agree that Theaetetus’s empiricist conception of knowledge is understood by Plato to be committed to and supported by a Protagorean epistemology which, in turn, is committed to and supported by a Heraclitean ontology. But as I shall argue here, these doctrines also have something to say about the validity of human inquiry, and this is an issue of central importance to Plato in the *Theaetetus*. Specifically, based on PM and HF, the prospect of reaching agreements—in language and in judgement—is thrown into doubt. On this view, not only is the question of knowledge an empty one, but all philosophical investigations are deemed to be either pointless or (worse) meaningless. Much more, then, is at stake in this dialogue than the theoretical question of knowledge alone. By refuting the three empiricist doctrines that make up the first part of the *Theaetetus* and defending his own anti-empiricist position, Plato will be making a case for philosophy: inquiry will be justified as a worthwhile enterprise, and the agreements we reach will be meaningful.

4. Protagoras’s Measure Doctrine: A Dark Saying

Protagoras’s Measure Doctrine is a claim about human judgement: it purports to reveal something about how we assess experience, namely, that things ‘are’ only what they appear to be and that no one person’s ‘truth’ is more correct than another’s. But stated in this way his thesis is notoriously hard to comprehend. To begin with, does it apply to perceptual appearances alone or to any appearances whatsoever?12 Plato, for his part, interprets PM in both ways: at 152A-169D, the thesis is applied solely to the perceptual realm, while at 169D-172B it is construed more broadly to cover ethical and political questions. (In an attempt to give Protagoras a fair hearing, Socrates adopts his argument at 166A2 ff. and actually defends the doctrine by applying it to both perceptual and non-perceptual appearances.) For our purposes here, this is a minor issue and we can take PM in its broadest sense to be a claim about all kinds of human judgement. It is clearly this wide-ranging application of the doctrine that commands Plato’s attention in the *Theaetetus*.

Things get much trickier, though, when it comes to saying anything more about Protagoras’s theory. In particular, debate has centred on the idea of truth that is at issue or implicit in Plato’s reading of PM. Should the doctrine be interpreted as propounding a relativist or a subjectivist conception of truth? The difference between these two interpretations turns on whether Protagoras is making a claim about judgement in which an appearance is merely true with regard to each individual, or a more global claim in which all appearances are absolutely true.13 If Protagoras subscribes to the former idea, he is a relativist; if he subscribes to the latter, he is a subjectivist. These interpretations have been defended, respectively, by Myles Burnyeat and Gail Fine.14 Since both of them are

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11 This amounts to fulfilling what Gail Fine has suitably termed the “connection criterion,” by which she means that Protagoras’s, Heraclitus’s, and Theaetetus’s theories should be interpreted so that they are all committed to and best supported by one another. See Gail Fine, “Protagorean Relativisms,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 10, edited by J.J. Cleary and W. Wians (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 216-7. There are many passages in the *Theaetetus* that aim to connect the three theories in this manner. At 151E8-152A4, KP and PM amount to the same thing; at 152C8-10, HF is considered the “secret doctrine” of PM; and at 156A3-5, Socrates argues to the effect that HF implies PM. For more of these “stage-directions” see Burnyeat (1990), p. 9.

12 The verb ‘appears’ (phainō) conveys the same ambiguity in Greek as it does in English. How things appear to me can refer to a sensory judgement (sweet, green, cold, etc.) or to any judgement at all (beautiful, equal, just, etc.). Fine (1995), pp. 213-4 labels these views “Narrow Protagoreanism” and “Broad Protagoreanism” respectively.

13 Following Burnyeat and Fine, I shall be using ‘absolutely true’ and ‘true (period)’ interchangeably in this paper.

14 Burnyeat considers a subjectivist reading of PM in “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976), pp. 44-69 but argues that Plato provides a “more authentic” relativist reading of the doctrine in “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976), pp. 172-95. This argument is implicit in Burnyeat (1982), p. 25 where the relevant “states of affairs” that PM describes should be “understood relativistically,” and is presupposed in Burnyeat (1990), pp. 19-31. Fine argues against this reading.
furthermore rather credible readings of PM, they are useful for us here as we examine the defects that Plato locates in this empiricist doctrine. For if some common criticism of Protagoras can be gleaned from these two analyses, then it may reasonably be claimed that we have unearthed something essential about Plato’s argument in this part of the Theaetetus.

Why PM is explicated so ambiguously in the dialogue to invite such diverse interpretations is another matter—although, no doubt, an important one. My own view is that Plato represents Protagoras’s thesis in an obscure fashion simply because the doctrine itself, as quoted at 152A1-4, is cloaked in obscurity.¹⁵ We are given just one sentence of Protagoras’s text, and it is an open question whether Plato himself had anything more substantial than this fragment to work with. By its nature, then, PM remains ambiguous: Socrates refers to the dictum at 152c9-10 as a “riddle” or dark saying (êinixato) delivered to the masses, while its hidden meaning must be teased out. Likewise at 155d9-e1, he maintains that the “veiled truth” (alêtheian apokraumenën, 155d10) of Protagoras needs to be revealed, and at 156a2 he speaks of the concealed “mysteries” (mustêria) of the doctrine. Anything that is said over and above what is quoted explicitly in the thesis will therefore be speculative. But it is necessary to embark on such speculation if PM is to be interpreted as making any sort of contribution to the empiricist’s argument in the Theaetetus, and to see what position Plato sets up in contrast to his own. Both Burnyeat’s and Fine’s interpretations of the doctrine supply Protagoras with a strong case in this regard, although they differ of course on what exactly he is saying and thus what Plato himself is arguing against. The point I shall press here, however, is that whether Protagoras is taken to be a relativist (as Burnyeat argues) or a subjectivist (as Fine argues), at least one implication of his thesis remains clear. In either case, the doctrine entails grave consequences for language and, particularly, for the practices of discussion, reflection, and inquiry: for dialectic.

5. Protagoras as Relativist: Burnyeat’s Reading

Let us begin with Burnyeat’s reading. Protagoras is widely regarded as the father of relativism. His declaration “Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not” certainly has a nice relativistic ring to it. And Socrates’ paraphrase of this principle as a claim that “as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you” (152A6-8) seems to corroborate such a reading. It is natural, consequently, to interpret PM along with Burnyeat as the theory of “a relativist who maintained that every judgment is true for (in relation to) the person whose judgment it is.”¹⁶


¹⁵ This is surely related to the fact that Protagoras’s dictum existed for Plato in the form of a text, just as it exists for us today. Protagoras would have been dead for about twenty years by the dramatic date this conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus is said to have occurred (shortly before Socrates’ death), and for at least fifty years by the time the dialogue was composed (shortly after Theaetetus’s death). In the Phaedrus, Plato depicts the written word famously as something unable to answer questions and be examined, because “it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support” (275e3-5). Given this general suspicion of texts, it is likely that Plato thinks the study of Protagoras’s thesis is doomed from the get-go (though see also p. 4n. 9, above). The Theaetetus actually describes PM in line with this metaphor from the Phaedrus as a hapless “orphan” without its “father” (164e2-3), and highlights the written nature of the doctrine often (see 152a4, 162a2-3, 166c8, 166d1-2, 169d10-e2, 170e9-171a1). The best analysis of this subject that I have found is Andrew Ford’s “Protagoras’ Head: Interpreting Philosophic Fragments in Theaetetus,” American Journal of Philology 115 (1994), pp. 199-218.

¹⁶ Burnyeat (1976), p. 172. Of course, an accurate reading of Protagoras’s position cannot stop here but must also draw on other passages in the Theaetetus, as Burnyeat proceeds to do. The chief sections in this regard are found at
Now, the problem with reading PM in this way is familiar. At many stages in his arguments against the doctrine, Plato crucially drops the relativising qualifiers that Protagoras would demand for his thesis. In these cases, Socrates represents Protagoras as saying that all judgements are true (period), rather than true for so-and-so. This objection has been made repeatedly in reply to Plato’s self-refutation argument against PM at 170A ff. in the dialogue. There, Socrates contends that even if Protagoras himself believes that his theory is true, most people believe that PM is false. And for this reason alone, Socrates suggests, the doctrine is self-refuting: if all judgements are true, then the judgement that PM is false must also be true. On the face of it, the blatant contradiction here seems to be a neat way of undermining Protagoras. But Plato has disregarded the relativisation of truth that is ostensibly at the heart of his theory. Protagoras might be making a craftier point—not that all judgements are absolutely true, but that they are true for the individual who holds them. Previously, Socrates had stuck to this principle with deliberate care. Hence, as Burnyeat notes, it is puzzling that Plato drops the relativising qualifiers at the “climactic moment” of his argument by “foisting” on Protagoras the unrelativised premise that all judgements are true (period). In this passage, as well as others, Socrates seems to beg the question against relativism.

The issue here is whether the lesson Plato wants to draw—that PM is false not merely for someone or the other but absolutely false—can be derived without the illicit omission of these relativising qualifiers. Burnyeat affirms that this can be done once the qualifiers are restored appropriately at 171A6-C7 and that Plato’s self-refutation argument against relativism as is a result sound. But other commentators have been less optimistic about the validity of this argument. First of all, if Plato is serious about refuting relativism, why does he drop these truth-qualifiers to begin with? In the preliminary stages before the self-refutation passage Socrates appears quite eager to keep them in place (see, e.g., 170A3-4). Yet as we have noted, they are omitted afterwards at important junctures in his argument. There are, moreover, other periods in the dialogue where PM is stated or purportedly refuted and the qualifiers we would expect on a relativist reading are missing. Second, Burnyeat argues that there is an assumption couched in the self-refutation passage that Plato takes as a given in his argument, namely, “if relativism is not true for someone, it does not hold of that person’s judgments and beliefs.” Once this assumption is granted, the argument indeed turns out to be sound—it validates a move from ‘true for so-and-so’ to ‘true of so-and-so’s judgements’ which means that Protagoras, as a relativist, would have to concede that since there is at least one person (i.e., Socrates) who judges PM to be false, his doctrine does not hold of that person’s judgements/beliefs. That is to say, PM does not describe at least one person’s judgements. Therefore PM is absolutely false, even for Protagoras, since it claims to describe something about all human judgement.

This is surely a resourceful account of the self-refutation passage, for when Burnyeat’s assumption is accepted and the relativising truth-qualifiers are restored at 171A6-C7, Plato’s argument works splendidly. But would a stubborn relativist accept this assumption? Burnyeat remarks in connection elsewhere that “what it means for the

152A-160D, where the three empiricist theses are elaborated in detail; 161C-164B, where Socrates begins to express some qualms concerning Protagoras’s doctrine; 164E-168C, including an important passage where Socrates attempts to “rescue” the doctrine; 169D-172B, including the critical argument at 171A6-C7 where PM is found to refute itself; and 177C-179C, after the digression, where all that has been said is reviewed and Protagoras is finally laid to rest.

18 That Plato wants to derive this strong a claim is clear from Socrates’ conclusion to the self-refutation argument, where he affirms that Protagoras’s theory “is not true for anyone at all,” not even for Protagoras himself (171C5-7). This latter contention is remarkable: Plato seems to be hinting that Protagoras disbelieved his own doctrine, that he wrote it insincerely. (Cf. 152C-10 where Socrates asks if PM was issued “as a riddle for the common crowd of us,” and 161E3-4 where he asks whether Protagoras was perhaps “just playing to the crowd” in devising his theory.)
19 In addition to the self-refutation passage, Fine lists 152C1-2, 158D4, 162A1, 166D1-2, 167A7-9, 167C1, 169D-170C, and 179C1-2 ("Relativism and Self-Refutation," p. 162n. 54).
20 Burnyeat (1976), p. 179. Fine concludes in “Relativism and Self-Refutation” that this is the central assumption on which Burnyeat’s reading of Plato’s argument depends (pp. 162-3).
21 Many critics weigh in on this issue. David Bostock, Plato’s Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 90-1 states that while Burnyeat’s defence of Plato’s argument here is an “ingenious reconstruction,” Protagoras need not accept the assumption on which it relies: “On [Burnyeat’s] account, a claim is taken to be ‘true for x’ if and only
Measure doctrine to be false for someone is that he is not a Protagorean measure: which is to say that his mere belief in a proposition is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the proposition to be true in some relativistic sense.\(^{22}\) But this certainly begs the question against relativism. For Protagoras would insist here that his “mere belief” in something—how it appears to him—is in fact both a necessary and a sufficient condition for it to be true (for him). This is exactly what PM should be saying when interpreted relativistically. By negating this claim in an assumption of his argument against PM instead of deriving the negation from premises that Protagoras might agree to, Plato is (on this view) sidestepping the issue. Protagoras would hence challenge and, I imagine, doggedly reject the assumption that “if relativism is not true for someone, it does not hold of that person’s judgments and beliefs.” And it is easy to see why, for if he permitted this point he would be giving the game away to Plato at the outset of their argument. Without the assumption, however, the line of reasoning at 171A6-c7 is invalid.\(^{23}\)

6. Protagoras as Infallibilist: Fine’s Reading

So how can we rescue Plato’s arguments against PM? Recall that our reading of Protagoras has up until now been pretty much in line with Burnyeat’s relativist interpretation. That is, we have understood PM to deny the existence of absolute truths and regarded Protagoras instead to be saying that all judgments are true for (in relation to) each individual.\(^{24}\) But PM does not have to be read in this way, and Gail Fine has offered a convincing account of Protagoras that does not compel us to restore the qualifiers when they are missing in the self-refutation passage and in Plato’s other arguments against PM, such as 179c1-2 above. On this view, Protagoras is not a relativist but an

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if it is a description of \(x\)’s world which is true (of that world) in an absolute and objective way. It simply states the truth about that world, not specially for \(x\), or indeed for anyone, but absolutely.” Yet a relativist would certainly dispute a move from ‘true for’ to ‘true of’ in this way. To be fair, Burnyeat’s account is more nuanced than my portrayal of it (and, I think, Bostock’s as well) allows. What the move from ‘true for’ to ‘true of’ is intended to spell out is the fact that PM is committed to describing something about the world(s) of each person, which connects the doctrine to an ontology of private objects or Heraclitean flux. But even here there’s a problem, as Fine argues, for this view of PM (which she dubs “private absolutism”) conflicts with Burnyeat’s previous view of the doctrine as a strictly relativist thesis. A strict relativist would not be committed to any ontology at all. Furthermore, on either of these two views, Burnyeat’s argument turns out to beg the question against relativism (“Relativism and Self-Refutation,” pp. 157-9). Ketchum (1992), pp. 85-6 also objects to Burnyeat’s key assumption. On the other hand, Waterlow (1977), pp. 32-5 seems to maintain something like Burnyeat’s second view of PM, although she differs from Burnyeat in suggesting that Plato doesn’t aim to refute this kind of relativism. See also Fine, “Relativism and Self-Refutation,” p. 157n. 44.

\(^{22}\) Burnyeat (1976), p. 188. Derived from 171C1-3, although see Fine, “Relativism and Self-Refutation,” pp. 162-3.

\(^{23}\) I must for the sake of concision baldly state this without further analysing the self-refutation passage in terms of a relativist reading of PM. Perhaps there are other interpretations of relativism that vindicate Plato’s argument here. Matthen (1985), pp. 56-7 gestures at one of these. Fine (1995) considers and rejects other relativist approaches.

\(^{24}\) At this point, an interesting question arises: should PM be read as promoting a theory of truth? Burnyeat (1976), p. 181 clearly thinks so: “Protagoras’ theory is, after all, a theory of truth and a theory of truth must link judgments to something else—the world, as philosophers often put it, though for a relativist the world has to be relativized to each individual.” It is for just this reason, Burnyeat affirms, that PM is committed to a Heraclitean ontology of flux. But note that nowhere in Socrates’ statement of the doctrine at 152A1-4, nor when he paraphrases it at 152A6-8 and elsewhere (e.g., 170A3-4), is there a mention of truth as such. This has lead many commentators to doubt that PM should be interpreted as a theory of truth at all. Ketchum (1992), pp. 74-6 is particularly good here and stresses that Plato often formulates PM simply in terms of being: ‘If \(X\) seems \(F\) to \(S\) then \(X\) is \(F\) for \(S\).’ In this sense the locutions ‘true for \(X\),’ ‘cold for \(X\),’ ‘good for \(X\),’ etc. would all be on a par with one another. Matthen (1985), p. 57 likewise claims in his analysis of Protagoras’s Heraclitean strategy that PM is “primarily about being, not truth.” To be sure, Protagoras is said in the Theaetetus to have written a work titled Truth with PM as its opening sentence (161C3-7), but as Ketchum observes this title could just as well have been meant to describe its subject matter rather than promote a complex semantic theory (p. 76n. 7). See also Fine, “Relativism and Self-Refutation,” p. 140n. 10.
An infallibilist who holds that all judgements are absolutely true. This is a position we labelled ‘subjectivism’ earlier, but because Fine prefers the term ‘infallibilism’ I shall henceforth stick to her expressions.25

The first thing to notice about this infallibilist reading of PM is that the qualifier ‘for so-and-so’ is not required after ‘true’ when Plato reiterates Protagoras’s position. The way things appear to be the way they truly are (period). In conjunction with this thesis, Fine also attributes to Protagoras the converse rule that things truly are the way they appear to be.26 One implication of her analysis is thus instantly obvious: Plato drops the qualifiers in his arguments against PM because he thinks that Protagoras does not require them, and if this is the case we need not object to their absence. On Burnyeat’s interpretation, we found that Plato cannot drop these truth-qualifiers without begging the question against relativism. In contrast, Fine maintains that PM does not propound a revisory theory of truth (as Burnyeat supposes) but rather “an account of the conditions under which statements are true: they are true if and only if believed.”27 As a result, Protagoras on this interpretation holds that all judgements/beliefs/appearances are guaranteed to be true—they are infallible—absolutely true or true (period). The move that Plato frequently makes from ‘p is true for so-and-so’ to ‘p is true (period)’ in expounding PM is, along these lines, justified.

There are further benefits of Fine’s interpretation. Historically, Protagoras has not been portrayed as a relativist by other ancient commentators (notably, Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus), but as someone who regarded all judgements to be absolutely true—that is, as an infallibilist. In addition, these commentators often employ arguments to refute PM that are strikingly akin to the self-refutation passage we find in the Theaetetus. It is thus of some historical benefit that on Fine’s analysis Plato is, as she says, “not the odd man out.”28 But by far, the principal advantage of Fine’s interpretation is that Plato succeeds in refuting Protagoras on an infallibilist reading of the Measure Doctrine. Her arguments here are in general compelling, especially with regard to the self-refutation passage.29 For instance, on an infallibilist interpretation of PM we see clearly how Plato can argue without begging the question against Protagoras that (i) if PM: all judgements are true (period), then (ii) the judgement that PM is false must be true (period), in which case (iii) PM is false. As an infallibilist, Protagoras must accept premises (i) and (ii), and come to the conclusion finally that his theory is inconsistent. Plato’s argument is valid. In fact, upon examining other passages in the dialogue that are problematic on a relativist conception of PM, we find that in each case Plato succeeds in refuting Protagoras once he is understood as an infallibilist.

On the face of it, this is a rather banal conclusion. For isn’t an infallibilist interpretation of PM bound to be self-refuting? In the case of conflicting appearances, it would seem to be patently inconsistent for Protagoras to maintain that, say, my feeling that the wind is cold and your feeling that the wind is not cold are both absolutely true. Burnyeat, accordingly, describes infallibilism as a thesis that no one would be likely

25 Fine (1995), p. 239n. 58. Fine remarks here that her reading of PM is the same view Burnyeat calls subjectivism, but she favours the term ‘infallibilism’ since ‘subjectivism’ has been used in a variety of ways. E.g., a subjectivist is often assumed to hold that all objects and properties are mental entities, but an infallibilist does not make this claim. An infallibilist, rather, claims that “(i) all beliefs are absolutely true, and (ii) there are no truths that are not believed: p is true if and only if it is believed” (Fine, “Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras,” p. 205).

26 Note that although Fine seems to reject this biconditional in “Relativism and Self-Refutation,” p. 140, she retracts that claim in “Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras,” p. 205n. 12.

27 Fine, “Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras,” p. 206. In saying that Protagoras does not have a theory of truth or any “novel understanding of the truth predicate,” Fine appears to be in basic agreement with Waterlow (1977), pp. 32-3 and Ketchum (1992), pp. 74-6. See also p. 8n. 24, above.


29 A thorough account of Fine’s reading is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. She divides, rightly I think, the self-refutation passage into a series of interrelated arguments: (i) 170A-C; (ii) 170C5-E6; and (iii) 170E7-171D8, in which the well-known “exquisite” argument is a part. These arguments are analysed in detail on the assumption that Plato is challenging an infallibilist interpretation of PM and each is found to be a valid refutation of Protagoras’s doctrine. Fine also helpfully explains at many stages in her analysis why Plato’s arguments would be either invalid or question-begging on a relativist interpretation of PM (“Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras,” pp. 208-34).
to defend, since it is "in clear violation of the law of contradiction."\(^{30}\) If this really were the view of Protagoras, it's hard to see why Plato should dwell on the Measure Doctrine so arduously. A relativist reading of PM, on the other hand, seems to be a far more sophisticated thesis. Along these lines, Protagoras would claim that my feeling that the wind is cold remains true for me, while your feeling that the wind is not cold remains true for you. And we have already seen the difficulties that arise in refuting this version of PM.

Fine argues in reply, however, that infallibilism is not in clear violation of the law of contradiction. The subtlety of Protagoras's doctrine is that it appeals for support to a Heraclitean ontology wherein the world consists of objects that are continually in a process of change. In this sense, infallibilism turns out to be a more plausible theory: Protagoras would claim here that our judgements of the world do not really conflict because the world itself is in constant flux. The reason why the wind feels cold to me and not to you is simply because we are experiencing different winds.\(^{31}\) And with this response, Fine can assert that her reading of PM has yet another advantage over Burneyat's version. For if Protagoras were a relativist, he would not be committed to any ontology at all: relativism denies that there's a way the world really is and that there are absolute truths. Such a thesis would not therefore reconcile the problem of conflicting appearances by relying on an ontological principle but, as Fine notes, "by interpreting the truth predicate in a novel way, or by denying that any propositions are flat-out true."\(^{32}\)

In allowing for the presence of absolute truths, then, an infallibilist reading of PM has an additional plus-point over a relativist reading. For the Theaetetus frequently represents PM in association with HF, a doctrine which takes it to be an absolute truth that the world is in constant change.\(^{33}\) If Protagoras were a relativist, however, he would be making use of a certain standard here—in this case a standard of flux, but a standard nevertheless—and this would go against his renunciation of all independent standards, absolute truths, norms, and universal measures. That is to say, a strict relativist should deny that there's an objective way in which things really are, but this is just what Heraclitus's doctrine purports to describe.

Again, I find this argument persuasive. Fine's assessment of PM is on the whole very successful in spelling out the connection between Protagoras's thesis and Heraclitus's doctrine of flux, which we shall examine in more detail shortly. But before doing so, there is a lingering concern that requires attention. Our first objection to Burneyat's relativist interpretation of PM was that it couldn't account for Plato's exclusion of the relativistic truth-qualifiers in his arguments against Protagoras. An objection to Fine's infallibilist analysis asks the opposite: why are these qualifiers present at all? For example, at numerous points in the self-refutation passage, Plato employs the clause 'true for so-and-so' in a way that is quite congenial to a relativist reading of the Measure Doctrine. Socrates in fact emphasises to Theodorus at 170d5-6 that while examining PM he will "assume with Protagoras that your judgment is true for you."\(^{34}\) It seems odd indeed, therefore, that Plato should draw our attention to these qualifiers so conspicuously.

\(^{30}\) Burneyat (1976), p. 46. Burneyat's target in this article is Sextus Empiricus's 'subjectivist' reading of PM, which is essentially the same reading Fine terms 'infallibilism.' See p. 9n. 25, above.

\(^{31}\) Note the different strategies employed here by a relativist and an infallibilist in justifying conflicting appearances. The relativist appeals to something peculiar about human judgement: I experience the wind in one special way and you experience it in another special way. The infallibilist, however, appeals to something peculiar about the world: the wind itself has undergone a change, so we are not in fact talking about the same appearance. This difference will prove to be of key importance when we turn to examine Heraclitus's flux doctrine in Section 10.

\(^{32}\) Fine, "Plato's Refutation of Protagoras," p. 208. An infallibilist interpretation of PM, on the other hand, "does not have an unusual understanding of the truth predicate, nor does it deny that any propositions are flat-out true," which commits it to an ontology of flux in explaining conflicting appearances. See also Fine (1995), pp. 240-2.

\(^{33}\) Recall how, right at the beginning of his exposition of Protagoras's thesis, Socrates describes Heraclitean flux as its "secret doctrine" (152c8-e1).

\(^{34}\) See also 170a3-4 and 170e4-5. Fine, "Plato's Refutation of Protagoras," pp. 218-20 admits that this might seem to be a problem for her reading, but counters that "whether the qualifiers support relativism depends on how they are understood." On her understanding, then, the qualifiers do not invoke an unusual conception of relative truth, nor do they prevent the suggestion that any propositions are absolutely true. "Rather, to say that p is true for A but false for others is only to say that p is true in A's view, but false in the view of others; that is, A thinks that p is true, whereas others think that it is false." The dative case in the Greek (soi... alēthes, 170d5-6) should therefore be read as the dative of 'person judging'—i.e., as simply expressing the judgement of a person. Fine cites Waterlow
This issue leads to a more general problem. One reason I have dwelt at length on Burnyeat’s analysis of PM is to highlight how natural it is to interpret Protagoras as a relativist. Could Plato really have been so blind to this interpretation? Based on Fine’s analysis, we have to assume that Plato was either unaware of a relativist reading of PM or, if he was aware of it, that he didn’t feel confident in his abilities to refute relativism. Two questions thus arise: first, does a relativist interpretation of Protagoras’s doctrine occur to Plato? Second, why can’t he refute relativism? To wrap up our examination of PM, I shall suggest that a relativist reading of the doctrine does in fact occur to Plato. I shall argue further that the reason he does not prove this theory inconsistent in the way he refutes infallibilism is because a relativist reading of PM does not admit of being a theory at all. Rather, Plato rejects relativism for practical purposes.

7. Relativism Revisited

At 152A-160D, Socrates elaborates in great detail on PM and HF to flesh out Theaetetus’s definition that knowledge is perception. In particular, the passage is concerned with developing Protagoras’s account of judgement by connecting it to Heraclitean flux. Plato thus expounds an intricate theory of perception in which “all things become relatively to something” (157B1) between an active world in flux on the one hand and a passive agent on the other. Towards the end of the passage, the following is deduced:

... whether you apply the term ‘being’ to a thing or the term ‘becoming’, you must always use the words ‘for somebody’ or ‘of something’ or ‘relatively to something’. You must not speak of anything as in itself either being or becoming nor let anyone else use such expressions. That is the meaning of the theory we have been expounding. (160B8-C2)

And to round things off, Socrates associates this theory explicitly at 160C8-9 with Protagoras’s thesis that “I am judge . . . of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not.” Now it’s hard in the light of such passages to see how Plato could not be understanding PM in some way as a relativist thesis. Yet we have already noted that when it comes to disproving the doctrine, the Theaetetus is read most convincingly as arguing against infallibilism. Why then doesn’t Plato devote himself equally to refuting relativism when such an interpretation of PM is clearly implied above?

To get a handle on this question, we should reflect on what it is exactly about relativism that might give the theory an air of hocus-pocus for Plato. Consider: what would it mean to ‘assert’ a relative truth? Say I have a belief that I maintain to be true. According to a relativist reading of PM, all I can assert about this belief is that it’s true for me. If I am debating with someone my judgement that the earth is flat or that war is preventable, the Protagorean’s retort would presumably be: “Well, that’s just true for you.” There is no ‘fact of the matter’ in our debate and hence (importantly for Plato) nothing objective that we can argue about or say that will help us arrive at some shared understanding on an issue.

To assert a relative truth, accordingly, comes to much the same thing as making no assertion at all.35 Each time I attempt to claim something with sincerity or conviction, the spectre of Protagoras will pop up and allege that my claim is only true for me. But then he will have to retreat, since the allegation that he makes here—his own claim—will likewise only be true for him. On this view, the practice of inquiry and discussion seems futile. Relativism gives us an excuse to withdraw from such inquiry, an escape clause: since everything is relative, there may perhaps be no agreements we can come to during the course of an argument. It’s better, then, not to engage in discussion at all and assert nothing: to remain passive.

A crucial point to observe here is that this critique of relativism does not focus on a theoretical flaw in the doctrine but a practical flaw—if PM is taken relativistically, Protagoras’s view ought to be rejected simply because

(1977), p. 34 as sharing this view, at least with regard to 170D5-6. There is perhaps something to this interpretation, but as I point out below, there are other descriptions of Protagoras’s thesis in the Theaetetus that Fine does not consider which are blatantly relativist-sounding. In these cases it is difficult to see how such a reading of PM did not occur to Plato.

he cannot participate in any meaningful discussion. Indeed, it is difficult to comprehend in this sense how a relativist interpretation of PM can be a 'theory' at all. Articulating a theory involves communication and engagement with others—it entails putting some statement or another up for approval or disapproval that can be understood on independent grounds and analysed from different points of view. As a relativist, however, Protagoras forbids such communication through a disengagement from inquiry: each individual lives in his or her own solipsistic bubble, with no common basis between us for understanding and analysis. But when construed in this way, how is Protagoras himself articulating anything intelligible? His mantra "That's just true for you" is, at best, a distraction or escape from argument. And if this is the case, we have no reason even to consider PM. A relativist interpretation of the doctrine must thus be abandoned for practical purposes.

This, I believe, provides Plato with just cause to ignore a relativist reading of PM. But did he see it? I think he did, and on examination there are moments in the *Theaetetus* where he highlights this practical flaw in the doctrine. Just after the passage above, in fact, when Socrates has at last brought Theaetetus's "first-born child" to light, he begins to express qualms with Protagoras's theory as it has been developed:

... If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him; if no man can assess another's experience better than he, or can claim authority to examine another man's judgment and see if it is right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual himself can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct... Can we avoid the conclusion that Protagoras was just playing to the crowd when he said this? I say nothing about my own case and my art of midwifery and how silly we look. So too, I think, does the whole business of philosophical discussion (*dialegesthai pragmateia*, 161E6). To examine and try to refute each other's appearances and judgments, when each person's are correct—this is surely an extremely tiresome piece of nonsense, if the Truth of Protagoras is true... (161D2-162A2)

Again, it is difficult not to regard this passage as an indication that a relativist reading of PM occurred to Plato. Furthermore, we have here a clear suggestion of why he does not attempt to refute this version of the doctrine: it's not practically feasible. Socrates affirms above that if Protagoras was a sincere relativist, the examination of other people's judgements through patient inquiry and analysis would be a ridiculous affair. Not only this, but his art of midwifery (described at 150B6-151D6) and practical discussion itself (*dialegesthai pragmateia*) seem entirely futile. So the method we used above to reject relativism is corroborated: Plato cannot argue against such a position since it doesn't allow for argument to begin with. Hence, he has no reason to consider it at all and must for practical purposes disregard this reading of PM.

8. Protagoras Laid to Rest

That just about completes my analysis of Plato's arguments against Protagoras. On the one hand, I have contended against Burnyeat that Plato does not (indeed cannot) seek to refute a relativist interpretation of PM, that all judgements are true for (in relation to) each individual. Rather, I agree with Fine that Plato's arguments in the dialogue work best when he is understood as arguing against an infallibilist interpretation of PM, that all judgements are true (period). On the other hand, I have also suggested that PM in its blunt form is an obscure doctrine that can be read as both a relativist thesis and an infallibilist thesis, and that Plato was mindful of both interpretations. Henceforth, I'll refer to these interpretations as PMr, and PMi, respectively.

Now, I believe the conclusion that should be drawn here is as follows: in order for the agreements we reach with one another in the practice of discussion and inquiry to be even possible, there must (for Plato) be an objective way in which things are—truly are—that is independent of us. This is without doubt the principal difference between the relativist and the infallibilist. PM, denies that there is an objective way in which things truly are, and

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36 Cf. John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth, 1961), p. 67: "The fundamental criticism of Protagoras can now be put thus: to engage in discourse at all he has to assert that something is the case." Burnyeat (1976), p. 190 considers this view and concurs that "Passmore's criticism is essentially correct," although he hesitates to say how clearly Plato saw this practical flaw in the doctrine (p. 195). See also p. 13n. 38, below.

37 Levett's translation of *dialegesthai pragmateia* at 161E6 as "philosophical discussion" is not entirely accurate, for there's no mention of *philosophia* in the Greek. John McDowell renders the phrase "business of dialectic" in his own translation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). I prefer the more literal "practical discussion."
asserts that all appearances are merely true for each individual. In contrast, PM, accepts that there is an objective way in which things truly are, with the added proviso that things truly are the way they appear to be. It is because of this additional claim that Plato can engage in debate with Protagoras at 170a ff. and refute PM, by proving the doctrine inconsistent. In this case, Protagoras must agree as a result of certain premises that his theory contradicts itself.

This is emphasised repeatedly just before and throughout the self-refutation passage. Socrates regrets early on that Protagoras isn’t around to defend his doctrine and agree (hémerologi, 169d10) with him. He informs Theodorus that they will have to come to closer grips with the doctrine and not reach agreements (homologías, 169e3) on behalf of Protagoras, but wrest an agreement (homologian, 170a1) directly from his thesis. Subsequently, in Plato’s famous “exquisite” argument at 171A6-C7, Socrates asserts that since Protagoras agrees (homologon, 171A8) that all men judge what is, he is forced by his own lights to agree (homologei, 171B2) that his theory is false. For he must also agree (homologei, 171B6) that when others judge his doctrine false, they speak the truth. Hence, it will have to be agreed (homologésetai, 171B10) by Protagoras that no one is the measure of anything at all. This argument only works (as we have seen) when Plato is read as arguing against PM, rather than PM, because it is only on an infallibilist version of the Measure Doctrine that agreements are even possible: more precisely, PM, allows for independent and objective grounds between us for discussion and inquiry, while PM, denies that such grounds exist.

In this respect, the image that follows the self-refutation argument at 171C10-D5 is stunning. Plato conceives of Protagoras (literally) turning in his grave and emerging from the earth to denounce Socrates for arguing foolishly (elenxas lêrounta, 171d2) and to reprimand Theodorus, his erstwhile disciple, for agreeing (homologounata, 171d3) with Socrates’ conclusions. Having done so, however, Protagoras runs off without another word. To save his doctrine, he appears to resort here to the guise of a relativist, and we can well imagine his riposte to Socrates: “That’s just true for you!” Yet note that by relying on PM, at this point he has no choice but to withdraw from argument. It is a striking feature of Plato’s image that Protagoras runs off after reproaching Socrates and Theodorus. He has no grounds to stand by his theory and defend it in the practice of discussion.38

Thus we see again how Plato remains perfectly aware of a relativist reading of Protagoras’s doctrine, and we also see why he rejects relativism. In foreclosing the possibility of disagreements Protagoras also, critically, prevents us from reaching agreements. (Note how he rebukes Theodorus at 171d3 simply for agreeing with Socrates.) On this view the activities of discussion, participation, and rational inquiry that are at the heart of Plato’s philosophy remain prohibited. Protagoras advocates instead a passive model of human judgement in which critical thinking and understanding are ineffective enterprises. For if there is no objective way that things are independently of each of us, as the relativist maintains, then it seems we have no real basis on which to reach agreements with each other.39 Our use of language to converse with and understand one another appears absurd. But if this is the case,

38 Burnyeat (1967), pp. 191-2 puts this point eloquently: “If Protagoras does not speak to the human condition, does not put forward his claim that each of us lives in our own relativistic world as something we can all discuss and, possibly, come to accept, but simply asserts solipsistically that he, for his part, lives in a world in which this is so, then indeed there is no discussing with him. His world and his theory go to the grave with him, and Socrates is fully entitled to leave them there and get on with his inquiry.” Note, however, that at this point in his article (pp. 190-5) Burnyeat focuses on what I’ve termed a practical flaw in PM. He also reads the entire preceding passage in terms of this relativist reading and thinks that Plato’s self-refutation argument works for theoretical reasons (pp. 172-89). In contrast, I have suggested (following Fine) that the self-refutation passage is directed against PM, and that Plato’s argument only works on this reading of the doctrine. That is to say, PM, cannot be proven inconsistent theoretically, although Plato can (and, I have suggested, does) reject this version of the doctrine for practical reasons. I am not sure that Fine would agree with this latter claim—I suspect she would say it violates her “univocify criterion,” which requires PM to be construed in a univocal way throughout the Theaetetus (Fine, “Protagorean Relativisms,” p. 216). However, in this case we are left with the idea that Plato was either unaware of a relativist version of PM or that he didn’t think there was a way he could reject relativism. On my reading, Plato is absolved of this chairness.

39 I have found Waterlow (1977) helpful here. She claims, for instance, that based on PM, “it becomes impossible to see how Plato can legitimately say that Protagoras agrees with his opponents” (p. 31). Like Burnyeat, Waterlow believes that the entire self-refutation passage should be interpreted as an argument against PM. Unlike Burnyeat, however, she claims that Plato’s arguments do not succeed in refuting PM. The point Plato is stressing at 171A6-C7 on her reading is “[n]ot that Protagoras’ position ought for reasons of logic to be rejected by those who accept it;
it's worth asking whether Protagoras himself, as a relativist, can assert anything meaningful. Plato suggests that he does not, and although PM₁ cannot therefore be refuted on a theoretical basis, it can and should be rejected for practical purposes.

9. Heraclitean Flux

So far, I have argued that Plato's key arguments against Protagoras in the Theaetetus are aimed against an infallibilist version of the Measure Doctrine, which states that the way things appear to be are the way they truly are (period) and that things truly are the way they appear to be. I've argued further that when read in this manner, the self-refutation passage at 170A ff. succeeds in proving that PM, is an inconsistent thesis. This is a theoretical flaw in Protagoras's doctrine: on account of certain premises, the infallibilist must agree that his thesis is false. However, we have also touched on one of the more subtle features of PM₁ in its commitment to Heraclitean ontology of flux.

On these grounds, Protagoras tries to claim that all judgements are absolutely true descriptions of the world—even conflicting judgements—because the world itself is in constant change. The reason the wind appears cold to me and not cold to you is because we are experiencing two different winds. So it's important for us to analyse this "secret doctrine" more closely. In particular, can such an ontology provide the infallibilist with means to save his theory?²⁰

Heraclitus's thesis that everything undergoes change is a claim about the world: it asserts something about experience. Plato invokes the doctrine again at 179D1-4 and analyses it carefully at 181B8-183B5, for Protagoras was imagined earlier in the dialogue as challenging Socrates to reject two separate claims: first, "that all things are in motion" and, second, "that for each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be" (168B4-6).

Having analysed PM in depth, Plato now turns his attention to examining this "first principle" of the Measure Doctrine in greater detail (179E1). And the reason, Socrates suggests, is to prevent Protagoras from taking advantage of a possible escape route for his thesis: "We shall have to consider and test this moving Being, and find whether it rings true or sounds as if it had some flaw in it" (179D2-4). If this flaw in HF can be found, then Plato will presumably have a stronger case against PM₁.

Everything, Heracliteans claim, is in motion (kinēsis, 156A5), and when Plato tackles this principle at 181D5-6 he classifies motion into two specific sorts: alteration (things undergoing change in character) and spatial movement (things undergoing change in place). All things suffer change in both these ways simultaneously (181D9-182A1). Moreover, Heracliteans declare, the experiences we have occur only as a result of such motion—through the association of a passive factor that becomes percipient (in the mind) and an active factor that becomes such-and-such (in the world). For instance, the experience of eating an apple might result in the claim, 'It tastes sweet.'

The percipient or passive factor here would be 'tastes.' The such-and-such or active factor would be 'sweet.' Observe at this point that the passive factor becomes percipient, but is not in itself a perception ('tastes' not the perception 'taste'). Likewise, the active factor becomes such-and-such but is not in itself a quality ('sweet' not the quality 'sweetness'). The theory is subtle, but the gist is that perceptions like 'taste,' 'hearing,' 'touch,' and 'sight' do not exist in isolation of their active factors, just as qualities like 'sweetness,' 'loudness,' 'warmth,' and 'whiteness' do not exist in isolation of their passive factors: "it is by the association of the two with one another that they generate perceptions and the things perceived" (182B4-7). Hence, according to HF, we are caught in a world of flux that is ever-changing, transient, and becoming. There is no world of unchanging being.

How might Protagoras avail himself of this doctrine? Well, he can now boil all experience down to immediate perceptual judgement and invoke HF as an ontology of extreme flux that is not restricted to the perceptual sphere. Socrates had actually anticipated at 179C2-4 that it's harder to refute PM in this case. For now Protagoras can say

but that those who reject it can have no reason even to consider accepting it. Protagoras rejects nothing that they assert in opposition. . . . Thus an opponent confronting Protagoras' position confronts, so to speak, a dialectical nothing, offering no resistance" (pp. 35-6). Although I disagree that Plato's target at 171A6-C7 is relativism, I'm basically in agreement with Waterlow's suggestion here that Plato's rejection of PM, appeals (though she doesn't use this term) to a practical flaw in relativism: to assert a relative truth is to assert nothing. Cf. also Burnyeat (1990), pp. 30-1.

²⁰ We have already seen above (p. 10) why a relativist interpretation of PM cannot draw on an ontology of flux for support. For HF is an objective principle that takes it to be an absolute truth that the world is in constant change, whereas PM, denies the existence of such truths and principles.
that all judgements are true (period) because the judgement 'such-and-such' at one moment is different at another moment. Everything undergoes continual change. In point of fact, as subjects we no longer even possess identity over time. On this view, all judgements are guaranteed to be infallible because the things that we form judgements about are indefinite and unstable.

But if this is truly the case, Socrates contends, then we might as well say that the things we judge and our judgements don't exist at all. For recall that there are two motions in the world occurring together according to HF: alterations in character and changes in place. When I perceive an apple as 'sweet,' then, even this active factor is in a process of alteration, and I cannot as a result ascribe any fixed name to it. The same goes for the passive factor: if nothing abides and everything alters, then even my experience of tasting will be in a state of flux. I might as well claim that I am not-tasting rather than I am tasting.

So consider a question I'm asked with regard to an experience I undergo: "How does it seem to you?" My answer to this question according to HF could be anything at all: both "it is thus" and "it is not-thus" would be equally valid replies and consistent with the doctrine (183A4-7). Or perhaps to be less definite about matters in the Heraclitean spirit we should use 'becomes.' But once we reach this point the purpose of naming things as being of a certain type, quality, value, etc. seems meaningless: "The exponents of this theory need to establish some other language," Socrates concludes, to be consistent with their hypothesis (183B2-4), for language on this view is left devoid of meaning: we are unable to assert anything.

Now, the issue I want to underscore here is that this again indicates a practical flaw in HF. Based on an infallibilist interpretation of PM, then, we come to a conclusion that is remarkably compatible with the one we reached earlier based on a relativist interpretation of the doctrine. Burnyeat's relativist and Fine's infallibilist readings can accordingly be summarised as follows:

(PM) Denies that there's an objective way in which things truly are, and claims that all appearances are merely true for each individual. If Protagoras relies on an ontology of flux to explain this thesis, then his doctrine is inconsistent—for HF is a principle that describes an objective way in which things truly are. He would resort instead to asserting something peculiar about human judgement: all judgements are relatively true because each individual experiences the world in a special way. But to assert a relative truth is to assert nothing. If this is the case, Protagoras must retreat from argument (171C10-D5). Inquiry is on this view pointless. Upshot: PM, is practically flawed.

(PM') Accepts that there's an objective way in which things truly are, and claims that things truly are the way they appear to be. Protagoras's thesis is again inconsistent—for if (PM') all judgements are absolutely true, then the judgement 'not-PM' is absolutely true, which means that PM is false (170A3-171C7). Protagoras's only recourse here is to assert something peculiar about the world: all judgements are absolutely true because (HF) all things are in flux. Each of us experiences different states of affairs. But in this case, the words we use to describe the world are incoherent. Inquiry (and language in general) is on this view impossible. Upshot: PM', is practically flawed.

The fact that the line of reasoning in the first part of the Theaetetus proceeds in accordance with this latter argument is a good indication that Fine's infallibilist reading of PM is correct. Plato can only engage in debate with PM as

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41 This is actually a riposte Socrates imagines Protagoras making at 166B1-C1: "do you expect someone to grant you . . . that the man, who is in process of becoming unlike, is the same as he was before 'he process began? Do you expect him even to speak of 'the man' rather than of 'the men,' indeed of an infinite number of these men coming to be in succession, assuming this process of becoming unlike?"

42 Cf. Theodorus's blistering critique of HF at 179E2-180B3: "these Heraclitean doctrines . . . you can't discuss them in person with any of the people at Ephesus who profess to be adepts, any more than you could with a maniac. . . . As for abiding by what is said, or sticking to a question, or quietly answering and asking questions in turn, there is less than nothing of that in their capacity. . . . You will never reach any conclusion with any of them, ever . . . they are so very careful not to allow anything to be stable, either in any argument or in their own souls."

43 It would, however, be remiss of me not to remark that Fine would disagree with the extra argument I make here against PM. The sticking point is that I see Protagoras drawing on an unrestricted version of HF outside the perceptual sphere (see p. 15) while she sees HF applying only to perceptions, not judgements. Fine considers...
it’s only this reading that, at least on the surface, permits the practice of discussion. That is to say, PM, admits at first of an objective basis on which we can participate with one another in shared analysis, whereas PM, rejects at the outset the possibility of any such basis.

Still, we can see above that there are theoretical flaws in each version of the doctrine, and that when pushed to their limits PM, and PM, must be rejected for practical reasons. Namely, if PM, were correct, we would not have grounds to reach agreements with one another through reasoning. If PM, were correct, on the other hand, we are left with the more devastating conclusion that there would be no agreements possible in judgement, between mind and world. On either view, Protagoras cannot be understood as saying anything meaningful. What’s more, the activities of argument and reflection that are staple features of Plato’s philosophical method are considered by PM, and PM, to be either pointless or impossible.44

10. Making Inquiry Meaningful

At 184B4 we reach a turning point in the *Theaetetus*. Without warning, Socrates commences a second refutation of Theaetetus’s ‘knowledge is perception’ thesis—this time, however, by drawing on the nature of the soul rather than experience.45 But how are PM and HF as we have read these doctrines related to Theaetetus’s initial empiricist thesis (KP)? On this issue, I am essentially in agreement with Burnyeat’s suggestion that a conception of knowledge based solely on experience results for Plato in a *reductio ad absurdum*.46 Two conditions are needed to validate the empiricist’s KP thesis: one must specify something about human judgement; the other must specify something about the world. The first condition is met with Protagoras’s Measure Doctrine; the second condition is met with Heraclitean flux.

But both are deemed inadequate. As we have seen, absurdities and inconsistencies abound between PM and HF. Protagoras, whether he is interpreted as a relativist or as an infallibilist, must resort to either a radical view of human judgement or a radical view of the world. Plato indicates, however, that there’s a deep-seated problem with something like my argument in “Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras” but rejects it because she believes that Plato’s arguments at 181B8-183B5 do not countenance an expanded role for HF. Rather, HF “is still restricted to the perceptual sphere” (p. 222n. 45). But I’m not sure why she thinks this. First, when restating HF Plato is quite clear in saying that all things are in flux (*to pan kinêsis*, 156A5), not that all perceptual things are in flux (see also 168B4-5 and 182A1). Second, the main implication of Plato’s argument at 181B8-183B5 is that based on HF language breaks down. But if Heraclitus’s thesis is restricted exclusively to the perceptual sphere, it’s not clear to me why all our words would be incoherent; at best, the terms we use to describe perceptual experiences would be meaningless. However, this leaves open the possibility of, say, ethical and other non-perceptual discourse. Language as a whole can only break down if HF is taken in an unrestricted sense. There’s more to be said on this point, but at any rate Fine grants that if one assumes (as I do) that Plato does allow Protagoras to use an unrestricted version of HF, then the practical flaw in PM, that I have emphasised above is justifiably obtained. For in this case “Protagoras can’t even articulate, let alone defend, his position” (Fine, “Plato’s Refutation of Protagoras,” p. 222n. 45).

44 Plato’s concern with keeping open the possibility of philosophical-discussion and inquiry crops up throughout the later dialogues. See, e.g., *Sophist* 260A5-7, where the Visitor contends that if we were deprived of *logos* we’d be deprived of “the most important thing” of all, i.e. philosophy; and *Statesman* 299E7-9, where Young Socrates asserts that if inquiry were prohibited in a city, life itself would be stifled.

45 See Burnyeat (1990), p. 53. This is a direct proof proceeding from premises that Plato himself believes to be true, in contrast to the indirect proof that we’ve been examining until now. See also p. 4n. 10, above.

46 Burnyeat (1990) offers this reading as a rival to the usual scholarly interpretation of the *Theaetetus* (“Reading A”) that Plato is endorsing PM and HF as acceptable accounts of *perception*, but denying that they yield *knowledge*. On his interpretation (“Reading B”), Burnyeat believes Plato is making an argument that’s much more anti-empiricist: “Plato does not accept the theories of Protagoras and Heraclitus. Theaetetus is made to accept them because, having defined knowledge as perception, he is faced with the question, What has to be true of perception and of the world for the definition to hold good? The answer suggested is that he will have to adopt a Protagorean epistemology, and that in turn will commit him to a Heraclitean account of the world” (p. 9). Note, though, that Burnyeat takes Plato to be arguing against a relativist thesis here, whereas I take him with Fine to be arguing against an infallibilist thesis.
the picture of knowledge, mind, and world that Protagoras’s view represents. What picture is this? Plato need not be arguing here that experience has no role whatsoever to play in knowledge—all he seems to claim is that perception cannot constitute knowledge of its own accord. The problem here, then, is that based on KP alone we are left with a picture of the human being as a passive consumer, so to speak, of experience: the mind is inert and acted upon by an unstable world that is only ever in a process of change. Knowledge from this vantage point is wholly indeterminate. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly of all for Plato, human inquiry and discussion are emptied of meaning on this empiricist view. The outcome of the reductio, therefore, is that the definition “knowledge is simply perception” (151E1-3) is both impossible and incoherent. There must be something more to this picture of knowledge, mind, and world than perception alone.

So what does Plato’s alternative picture look like? I have suggested in this paper that the principal arguments of the Theaetetus are concerned in large part with challenging a Protagorean epistemology that emphasises the passivity of human judgement, in which the way things are judged to be are the way they really are. I’ve also shown how theoretical issues in the dialogue give way to issues of practice, in which the search for an answer to the question of knowledge quickly provokes the need to make inquiry itself a worthwhile endeavour. Plato tackles both these concerns in the second part of the Theaetetus by shifting his focus to a more anti-empiricist argument. Here, in submitting his own view of judgement, he provides a response to the Protagorean view while at the same time providing a basis on which the understandings we arrive at through rational inquiry are meaningful. If, in spite of all this, the question of knowledge remains unsettled, we can at least say that Plato affords us grounds for further investigation.

The pivotal moment comes at 186d2-3, where Socrates maintains that “knowledge is found not in the experiences (pathêmasin, 186d2) but in the process of reasoning (sullogismoi, 186d3) about them.” Presumably, in focusing on processes of reasoning rather than experiences, Plato believes that agreements are arrived at only on the basis of such processes. But how? Recall that agreements couldn’t be reached on the empiricist view because Protagoras’s thesis provided either an escape from argument (if PMr), was self-refuting (if PMq), or incoherent (if PMl + HF). Hence the advantages of Plato’s anti-empiricist view will be that, on the epistemological side, the mind has an active role to play in its analysis of experience and, on the ontological side, the world has an element of stability existing independently of us rather than an ever-changing nature that depends on our perception of it.47

To justify his practice of dialectic as a meaningful endeavour, it is important to see that both these conditions have to be satisfied for Plato: we must have active minds so as to grasp being and truth and reach agreements with one another (in language); and we must have a stable world so as to have anything to talk about, so that our thought agrees with the way things are (in judgement). Now, disagreements are certain to arise on this view. We might disagree, for example, that the wind is cold or that the earth is round. In matters of ethics, we might disagree that justice is more beneficial than injustice or that stealing is wrong. We might even disagree that 2 + 2 is 4 or that murder is always wicked. It does not strike me that disputes such as these are out of keeping with Plato’s project in the Theaetetus. What is crucial for him is that we have an arena within which to resolve such disagreements, whereas we aren’t provided with this arena in the first part of the dialogue. By appealing to processes of reasoning as the seat of knowledge, then, Plato holds that these processes are capacities we share in common. Mere appearances, by contrast, are variable and indefinite. What you and I experience at a certain time may naturally differ, but our capacities to reflect on these experiences should remain the same. And Plato believes that it is ultimately these common practices of reasoning that enable us to reach agreements with one another, through which inquiry is found to be a valuable enterprise.

This provides a sketch, at least, of what Plato’s alternative picture looks like. A full analysis of the second part of the dialogue must be shelved for another time, but I’ve provided here a few salient features of his method in the Theaetetus. In conclusion, we can say that the dialogue lays down two requirements that any noteworthy theory of knowledge must satisfy: an epistemological one and an ontological one. The epistemological requirement stresses that the mind must be actively engaged in experience in forming judgements and not completely passive. The ontological requirement—barely alluded to in the dialogue, but implicit nonetheless—stresses that there is something objective about the world itself independently of us that makes it correct to judge things to be one way

47 Frede (2000), pp. 381-4 makes this point especially well in his examination of the emphasis that Plato places on the amount of mental activity involved in judgement-formation, as opposed to a very restricted notion of perception (i.e., as a passive affection of the mind).
rather than another. It is on these grounds alone, Plato suggests, that the question of knowledge and the practice of dialectic are meaningful.

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