

Protagoras was not a Relativist to Me

Jerry Green, Texas Tech University [jerry.green@ttu.edu]

Presented to the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy

With the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association

December 27, 2009

Introduction

Scholarship on Protagoras and his notorious Measure Doctrine (MD) has undergone a resurgence in recent years. These works tend to take one of three forms: some scholars have questioned the logical structure of the MD, namely that it is self-refuting;¹ others have discussed the historical and philosophical impact of Protagoras' theory, inquiring into what it can tell us about ancient and contemporary responses to the subject;² and still others have discussed Protagoras' views in commentaries on Plato's dialogues.³ Virtually every work dealing with Protagoras assumes that Plato's interpretation of the MD was accurate and goes on to discuss the ramifications of Protagoras' position.⁴ I want to question that assumption. I argue that the evidence suggests Plato's depiction of Protagoras was not accurate.

The MD as interpreted in the *Theaetetus* has been read to express one of two positions. The first of these is relativism, which can be stated 'For any subject *S* and any belief *p*, if *S* believes *p* then *p* is true for *S*.' The second position is subjectivism or infallibilism, which states 'For any subject *S* and any belief *p*, if *S* believes *p* then *p* is true, *simpliciter*.' I believe that our evidence discounts either of these theories as genuinely Protagorean, as I shall soon argue. But for brevity's sake I shall concentrate on relativism, as it is the more popular interpretation of Protagoras, and because my arguments against relativism will count *a fortiori* against infallibilism.⁵

¹ See Miles Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy", *The Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 44-69, and "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*", *The Philosophical Review* 86 (1976): 172-195; T.D.J. Chappel, "Does Protagoras Refute Himself?", *The Classical Quarterly* 2 (1995): 333-338; Eylólfur Kjalar Emilsson, "Plato's Self-Refutation Argument in *Theaetetus* 171a-c Revisited", *Phronesis* 39 (1994): 136-149; Gail Fine, "Relativism and Self-Refutation: Plato, Protagoras, and Burnyeat", in *Method in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Jyl Gentzler (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 137-164, "Protagorean Relativisms" in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 132-159, "Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*" in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) p. 184-212; Alex Long, "Refutation and Relativism in *Theaetetus* 161-171", *Phronesis* 49 (2004), p. 24-40.

² For example, Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005); Michael Mendelson, *Many Sides: A Protagorean Approach to the Theory, Practice and Pedagogy of Argument* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002); Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); Ugo Zilioli, *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism: Plato's Subtlest Enemy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

³ Most notable are David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); Miles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1990); John McDowell, *Theaetetus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973); David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); C.C.W. Taylor, *Protagoras* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

⁴ Two notable exceptions are S. Moser & G.L. Kustas, "A Comment on the 'Relativism' of the 'Protagoras,'" *Phoenix* 20(1966): 111-115; and Laszlo Versenyi, "Protagoras' Man-Measure Fragment," *The American Journal of Philology* 83 (1962): 178-184.

⁵ Throughout I will discuss only the position of cognitive relativism, *not* the independent thesis of value relativism. The *Protagoras* indicates that Protagoras was in fact a value relativist, though with value relative to the community, not the individual. I know of no evidence to suggest that the attribution of value relativism to Protagoras is unwarranted.

My argument against Protagorean relativism is this: A close reading of Plato's *Theaetetus* reveals that Plato was very careful not to attribute his rendering of the MD to Protagoras himself, repeatedly trying to distance Socrates' interpretation from what Protagoras may have actually thought. Further, in his defense of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates gives an account which would be incoherent if relativism were true. This conclusion is corroborated by examination of Protagoras' few extant fragments and his portrayal in the dialogue *Protagoras*; both sources make claims that are either unintelligible or inconsistent if relativism is assumed. Thus we have no good reason to believe that Protagoras was a relativist.⁶

I. The *Theaetetus*

The *Theaetetus*, like many Platonic dialogues, is an aporetic attempt at conceptual analysis. The target of the inquiry is knowledge, and three definitions are examined and ultimately rejected: knowledge as perception, knowledge as true belief, and knowledge as true belief with a *logos*. When Theaetetus first suggests that knowledge is perception, Socrates equates this position with Protagoras' MD, which reads, "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that exist, that/how they exist; of the things that do not exist, that/how they do not exist."⁷ Socrates then explains the *homo mensura*, asking "Is this not what he means, that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as each thing appears to you, so it is to you?"⁸ Socrates begins by discussing the wind, noting how the same wind can feel hot and cold to different people.⁹ Though he begins with perception, Socrates expands the idea to pleasures and pains, desires and fears, and eventually opinions, judgments and beliefs.¹⁰ Plato goes on to argue that the MD is self-defeating. But rather than get bogged down in the details of how to best reconstruct Protagoras' theory and Plato's critique, I want to ask whether we are meant to believe that the theory Plato evaluates is really Protagoras'.

In bringing Plato's interpretation of the MD into question, the first feature of the dialogue to notice is the narrative distance between Socrates and Protagoras' theory. Socrates repeatedly reminds us that he has no authority to speak on Protagoras' behalf, that Protagoras could do a better job of explaining the theory than Socrates can, and that they are "abusing the orphan" that is Protagoras' view.¹¹ Rather than discuss how Protagoras would answer, Socrates often asks what someone speaking for him would say, even if it is the un-Protagorean Theodorus.¹² The

⁶ Strictly speaking, our options are broader than this. We can continue to believe Protagoras was a relativist despite evidence to the contrary, we can hold that Protagoras was quite philosophically inconsistent, or we can conclude that Protagoras' MD was meant to express a position other than relativism. Given that the first option is epistemically irresponsible and the second flies in the face of Protagoras' reputation as one of the wisest thinkers in Greece (a reputation with which Socrates seems to have agreed), the preferred option is to reject the belief in Protagorean relativism.

⁷ TH 152a. There is some dispute in translation of the fragment. This dispute revolves primarily around the terms *chrēmatōn*, *anthrōpon*, and *hōs*. It would be easy to beg the question about the fragment's meaning by translating these terms in certain ways. I hope my translation is as neutral as possible (translations here are my own unless otherwise noted). It should be noted that the difference between, for example, 'that' and 'how' were likely not clearly delineated in the Greek mind's understanding of 'hōs'. See Versenyi (1962) for a word-by-word analysis of the fragment, and R.F. Holland, "On Making Sense of a Philosophical Fragment" in *The Classical Quarterly* 6 (1956): 215-220 for an argument against this strategy. See also Schiappa (1994).

⁸ TH 152a

⁹ TH 152b

¹⁰ TH 156b; TH 157e; TH 161d; TH 170d

¹¹ E.g., TH 157c8-9, 164e, 168c4-6, 169e, 171d4. The notion of 'abusing the orphan' (164e4) is a reference to Socrates' metaphor of the philosopher as midwife from earlier in the dialogue. For a discussion of the *Theaetetus* centering on this metaphor, see Sedley (2004).

¹² For example, "from the things we said Protagoras says" (*eks hōn ton Prōtagoran phamen legein*) (TH 155d7); "Protagoras, or someone speaking on his behalf, will say" (*erei Prōtagoras ē tis allos huper autou*) (TH 162d6); "Let's ask Protagoras or some other of those who says these things" (*erōtōmen Prōtagoran ē allon tina tōn ekeinōi ta auta legontōn*) (TH 178b2). I say that Theodorus is un-Protagorean because Theodorus studied mathematics, which Protagoras did not take seriously. Theodorus admits to being a friend of Protagoras (TH 162a4), but claims

theory which Socrates discusses is labeled the 'Forbidden' or 'Secret' Doctrine taught to his students in private, and not to the public; the theory is also called 'hidden' (*apokekrummenēn*), 'secret rites' (*ta mustēria*), and a 'myth' (*muthos*).¹³ Furthermore, the very notion that the MD express the theory that knowledge is perception is cast into doubt when Socrates introduces it saying Protagoras "express these matters, but in a different way."¹⁴ This would all be very strange if Plato intended to give an accurate account of Protagoras' theory. It is frequently suggested to the reader that what Plato writes may not be exactly what Protagoras meant.¹⁵

In addition to the narrative distance, Plato makes several puzzling argumentative moves. The first, as just mentioned, is the equation of the MD with Theaetetus' suggestion that knowledge is perception. On the face of it, the words of the MD do not obviously say anything about either knowledge or perception. Though it isn't an impossible reading of the maxim, it doesn't seem to be the only possible reading. But things get less obvious yet. Socrates takes *anthrōpon* to mean 'individual human' and then relativizes appearances to each individual.¹⁶ But *anthrōpon* could just as easily mean 'mankind', and there is nothing in the words of the MD itself to entail relativism to the individual.¹⁷ But by far the most baffling move Socrates makes is to equate the MD with Heraclitean Flux, the theory that everything is always in motion.¹⁸ There is simply nothing in the MD which requires or even suggests a theory of flux, especially not the theories are equivalent, as Socrates seems to think.¹⁹ What we have then, is Plato equating 'knowledge is perception' with the MD, which he then equates with the theory of flux. His final argument against the thesis that knowledge is perception is that whether you following Heraclitus or Parmenides (who thought flux was impossible), knowledge cannot be perception.²⁰ What this has to do with the MD is unclear.²¹

not to be the guardian of Protagoras' works (164e9). (Interestingly, Theodorus says that the real guardian of Protagoras' work is Callias, the host of the gathering of sophists which is the scene for the *Protagoras*, who was said to have spent more money on sophists than anyone (*Apology* 20a)). Theodorus then says that he abandoned discussion (*filōn logōn*) for geometry. But Protagoras seems to have been no fan of mathematics. Though he did have a book titled *Peri tōn Mathēmatōn* (DK 80 A.1) and was reported to have a position regarding the tangent of a circle (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 997b32), he was reported to have claimed of mathematics that it is unknowable and has repugnant terminology (DK 80 B.7). He also dismisses of the study of mathematics in favor of *politikē technē* in the *Protagoras* (PR 318e).

¹³ (*tois de mathētais en aporrētōi tēn alētheian elegen*) TH 152c10; 155e2; 156a2; 164d9, 164e3;

¹⁴ *all' hon elege kai Prōtagoran. Tropon de tina allon eirēke ta auta tauta* (TH 152a2)

¹⁵ This suggestion is strengthened by Socrates' defense of Protagoras from TH 164e-168c. Socrates essentially accuses himself, through Protagoras, of acting like a sophist rather than a true philosopher. He denies that Protagoras has really been refuted simply because Theaetetus was led to answer as he was. If another person's answers are different than what Protagoras would answer, it is the other person, not Protagoras, who is proven wrong (166a) By arguing from common people's confused use of ordinary language (168c) Socrates does not proceed as he should: from principle (*ex archēs*), and with an opposing theory (*antidiexelthōn*), or through questioning (*di' erōtēseōn*) (167d). By implying that a pig or baboon could be the measure of all things (166c), by taking Protagoras too literally (166e), by pandering to the crowd (162e) and by arguing in jest and in competition (*tōi paizēi te kai sphallēi*) rather than in earnest (*tōi spoudazēi*) (167e), Socrates will behave unjustly (167e) and will lead his students to hate philosophy (168a). I take this passage to indicate, among other things, that what preceded was not to be taken seriously, and what follows should not be taken seriously insofar as it commits the wrongs Protagoras has described.

¹⁶ TH 152a7-10

¹⁷ For example, there are no words in the dative case and no relativizing prepositions.

¹⁸ TH 152d-153d

¹⁹ TH 160d5-e4

²⁰ TH 182e-183c, 186d-e

²¹ This suggests that Plato is after something other than simply disproving that knowledge is perception. To refute this theory, he could have argued that it is incompatible with the metaphysical theories of Heraclitus and Parmenides, which Plato seems to regard as jointly exhaustive. Or, he could have quickly supplied counter-examples, which are mentioned in passing. At TH 157e, Socrates argues that some perceptions, namely dreams and illusions, are false. Knowledge cannot be false, ergo knowledge cannot be perception. At 164a, Socrates supplies another counter-example: one can have knowledge while not simultaneously perceiving (e.g., with one's eyes closed). At 165b-e, yet another problem is suggested, that one can perceive in varying degrees, durations, etc., while knowledge is

Given these oddities, we may be inclined to reject anything Plato says about Protagoras. If so, I've made my case, as our strongest evidence that Protagoras was a relativist is thrown out.²² But this may be too hasty, as there does seem to be one part of the *Theaetetus* where Protagoras' position is defended more charitably. If we are to take anything in the dialogue as genuine Protagoras (other than the MD itself, of course), it is this apology given by Socrates at *TH* 166a-168c. But the theory outline here, I argue, cannot be a relativist theory.

There are two relevant claims which Socrates makes on Protagoras' behalf. First, Socrates gives an account of Protagoras' theory of wisdom. A wise man is someone capable of making good things appear to people, rather than bad. Wisdom, he claims, has several domains: doctor cause beneficial change in health with drugs, sophists or educators cause beneficial change in belief with words, farmers cause beneficial change in plants, and so on. This suggests a substantive account of wisdom as beneficial knowledge or skill, but the details need not concern us here. What is relevant is that this Protagorean account of wisdom requires the possibility of mistaken belief, where 'mistaken' means not 'false', but rather 'disadvantageous', 'unhealthy', or simply 'bad'. This account of wisdom is incompatible with relativism. For relativism will say that whatever appears beneficial to you is in fact beneficial for you. This would imply that there is no need to change things from a bad state to a better state, because whatever state you think is good for is already good for you. This entails that there is no wisdom in Protagoras' sense of the term. Thus it follows from relativism a conclusion that Protagoras would explicitly reject.

The second important feature of Socrates' defense of Protagoras is the interesting line "and as for you, whether you like it or not, it is necessary to tolerate being a measure."²³ This is a flat-out rejection of the idea that the MD is relative. One premise in Plato's self-refutation argument is that many people believe that MD is false. But Protagoras seems to think that this simply doesn't matter. However we are to understand the MD, we are not to take it to mean that each is a measure only if the MD is true for that person. Protagoras would claim instead that if you don't think you're a measure, you're simply mistaken; you're a measure regardless. There could be no clearer statement of non-relativist thinking.²⁴ Now, as with the rest of the dialogue, this information comes from Socrates, not Protagoras. But as I mentioned earlier, we have two options: Since this passage may be accurate, it can be cautiously accepted as Protagorean and count against a relativist reading of the MD. Or, we can discount its accuracy along with the rest of the *Theaetetus*, in which case we lose our evidence for a relativist reading altogether. Either way, our main source indicates that Protagoras was not a relativist.

bivalent. Bringing Protagoras into the picture seems superfluous, which indicates that Plato was not discussing Protagoras in order to discuss the thesis that knowledge is perception.

Though mostly speculation, what I believe Plato is up to is a defense of philosophy as a practice from sophistry. The self-refutation argument against the MD claims that absolutely no one believes it, not even Protagoras, which is a rather harsh and bold conclusion. Further, in the long and seemingly out-of-place digression from *TH* 172d-177b, Socrates gives a dramatic exposition of the virtues of philosophy and the vices of sophistry, appearances and common opinion to the contrary. This indicates that Plato may have used the *Theaetetus* as an opportunity or even an excuse to discredit one of the most reputable sophists, who was, in Zioli's words, Socrates' and Plato's "subtlest enemy". In so doing, Plato could simultaneously defend his mentor and his profession against their rivals.

²² To be completely thorough, I would also have to address later writers and doxographers who mention Protagoras. The first step in such a project would be to point out that many later writers were doubtlessly influenced by Plato's depiction of the sophist, and further that not all their writings on Protagoras need be read to entail relativism. Such a project is, I believe, feasible, though outside the scope of the present paper.

²³ *kai soi, ean te boulēi, ean te mē, anektheon onti metrōi* (*TH* 167d2-3)

²⁴ One might defend Plato here by arguing that relativism is in fact a consequence of the MD, and Protagoras was simply mistaken about the commitments of his theory. But to do so would require us to interpret the MD such that relativism follows. Since the very issue at hand is how to interpret the MD (or better, how *not* to interpret it), this response would require outside collaboration to avoid begging the question. But there is very little outside the *Theaetetus*, and as I will argue, what there is does not entail, and in some cases is incompatible with relativism. It is far simpler to conclude that Protagoras understood how the MD ought to be interpreted.

II. The Fragments

Having closely examined the *Theaetetus*, we can see that the relativism which Plato has attributed to Protagoras is unlikely to be Protagoras' actual view. Now we can turn to Protagoras' own words. Though too sparse to reconstruct what Protagoras actually thought, the fragments are clear on what Protagoras did not think. As I shall argue, no relativist would have claimed what Protagoras claimed.

The first set of fragments concerns rhetoric. The first is the "Two *logoi*" fragment, claiming that there are two (opposing) *logoi* for every issue.²⁵ The other is the "Weaker *logos*" fragment, a claim about making the weaker argument the stronger.²⁶ These fragments have been taken to indicate that Protagoras, as a relativist unconcerned with objective truth, would argue for "false" positions as fit the situation. But these two fragments may just as easily express merely the nature of rhetoric. After all, sophists often promised to make his students capable speakers in their cities,²⁷ which meant, for democracies like Athens, swaying opinion in the courts and assembly. Deliberative democracy is premised on two sides bringing claims against each other. But this does not entail that both sides are equally valid, only that both sides can, and will, be argued.²⁸ As for the "Weaker *logos*" fragment, it need not be the nefarious claim of making the false argument seem true.²⁹ The weaker position could simply be counter-intuitive or popularly rejected, as Socrates' ideas often were. Making a position stronger could mean simply developing good arguments for it.³⁰ In training with weaker positions, Protagoras' students would have been better prepared to perform in the public arena, the very reason for which they studied under him.³¹ I do not mean to claim that this is exactly what Protagoras meant, but it is just as plausible a reading as a relativist one. More evidence is needed to convict Protagoras of relativism.

The second set of fragments from Protagoras is about education.³² Like the account of wisdom in Socrates' defense of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, education is based on adding to or changing one's beliefs. If relativism were true, it is not clear what the motive would be for adding or changing beliefs. For relativism states that whatever beliefs seem true (or beneficial, as Protagoras would apparently say) to a person simply are true (or beneficial) to that person, regardless of what the teacher says. So relativism makes it difficult to explain how one's beliefs could be improved through education. As Socrates rightly asks, if each person is the measure of his own wisdom, how can Protagoras be a wise educator who ignorant students are justified in paying for his services?³³

Our last fragment is also the most clearly non-relativistic. It reads "Concerning the gods I am unable to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like. For there are many

²⁵ DK 80 A.1; DK 80 A.20. In this case even the term 'fragment' may be a stretch. What we really have is a key phrase, "dissoi *logoi*."

²⁶ "to ton hētō *logon kreittō poiein tout' estin*." Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a23; Eudoxus *Elements* fr. 4 VI 78.

²⁷ Cf. *PR* 318e-319a

²⁸ Seneca reports Protagoras as saying that both sides of any question can be equally well argued, including the question of whether or not both sides of any question can be equally well argued. (*Letters* 88, 43)

²⁹ This pejorative understanding of the "Weaker *logos*" fragment is likely influenced by the picture presented by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*, where Strepsiades sends his son to Socrates' "Thinkeria" to learn how to win lawsuits by use of unjust, weaker arguments. See especially *Clouds* 112-118

³⁰ It is instructive here to remember that Socrates too was accused of making the weaker argument the stronger. This is not enough for us to conclude that Socrates is either relativist or immoral, as some Athenians apparently did (*Apology* 18b).

³¹ Cf. DK 80 A.20: "Protagoras...created the weaker and stronger arguments and *taught his pupils* to blame and praise the same person." (emphasis added)

³² These are: "Teaching requires natural endowment and practice" and "They must learn starting young" (DK 80 B.3), "Art is nothing without practice and practice nothing without art" (DK 80 B.10), and "Education does not sprout in the soul unless one goes to a great depth" (DK 80 B.11).

³³ *TH* 161d9-e4

hindrances to this knowledge, such as its obscurity and the shortness of human life.”³⁴ Here Protagoras claims that theology is an obscure subject, which humans are unable to discuss with certainty. Given the difficulty, Protagoras is content with agnosticism. Now, one would expect a relativist to say something like ‘I can’t prove the gods exist, but they at least exist for me’, or ‘Since I have no proof of the gods’ existence, they don’t exist for me.’ But Protagoras says instead that he cannot say one way or the other whether the gods exist. In other words, Protagoras refused to use his own knowledge serve as the measure of the gods’ existence. This shows clearly that Protagoras was not a relativist about the existence of the gods, who would clearly fall under the purview of the MD.

By examining Protagoras’ other fragments, we see a far different picture than one which results from taking the MD in isolation. It is difficult to see how one could interpret the MD to express relativism and still include it coherently among Protagoras’ other statements. This may lead us to believe that Protagoras was inconsistent. But I believe that the better interpretation, especially given Protagoras’ reputation for wisdom, is that Protagoras never meant the MD to express relativism.

IV. The Protagoras

So far we’ve looked at reasons not to accept the main source for Protagorean relativism, the *Theaetetus*, and we’ve seen non-relativist claims in Protagoras’ fragments. These two arguments should be jointly sufficient to discredit the thesis that the MD expresses relativism. But to further strengthen the argument against Protagorean relativism, we may look briefly at Protagoras’ eponymous dialogue.

When Protagoras is asked what he specifically teaches, his response is “sound management: in private affairs, how to best manage the household; and in public affairs, how to be the most capable in both speech and action.”³⁵ This statement is difficult to reconcile with relativism. For one, there is a standard of judgment implied in *euboulia*, a right and wrong way to manage one’s affairs. If what counts as sound management is whatever one thinks is sound management, then it is unclear how there could be a standard, not to mention how this standard could be taught. And more importantly, the abilities which Protagoras promises to teach are premised on a non-relativist understanding of political power. Power in a *polis* like Athens, where Protagoras frequently taught, was democratic, grounded primarily in the *ekklēsia* and the courts. To become a power player in Athens required one to rally and maintain support for one’s causes. One individual’s beliefs were insignificant, at least until others could be persuaded to share and act on these beliefs. If Protagoras would teach his students to be successful in the political arena, he would have to stress the importance of the community’s opinion in politics over the individual’s opinion, and thus forego relativism.

Later in the dialogue Socrates tries to prove to Protagoras that cowardice is a kind of ignorance, while courage is a kind of knowledge. As they explore this issue, Socrates reports that many say that people know what is good for them but act otherwise because they are overcome with pleasure or pain.³⁶ To this Protagoras replies, “I think that men say this and many other things that are not correct.”³⁷ Socrates eventually reasons that the measure must be a science of measurement of pleasures and pains.³⁸ Protagoras agrees to this proposition. Of particular interest are two more points to which Protagoras agrees. Socrates identifies the science of measurement

³⁴ *peri men theōn ouk echō eidenai outh’ hōs eidin, outh’ hōs ouk eisin. polla gar ta kōluonta eidenai, hē t’ adēlotēs kai brachus ōn ho bios tou anthrōpou.* (DK 80 A.1) Note his mention of the shortness of human life. It is best to read *anthropos* here as ‘mankind’. This may have some relevance for translating and interpreting the MD.

³⁵ *to de mathēma estin, euboulia peri te tōn oikeiōn hopōs an arista tēn authou oikian dioikoi, kai peri tōn tēs poleōs, hopōs ta tēs poleōs dunatōtatōs an eiē kai pratein kai legein* (PR 318e6-319a2)

³⁶ PR 352d

³⁷ *polla gar oimai... kai alla ouk orthōs legousin hoi anthropoi* (PR 352e)

³⁸ PR 357a

(*hē metrētikē technē*) and appearance (*hē tou phainomenou*), and asks of the two which a) leads us to have mixed-up (*katō*) beliefs, and which b) reveals the truth.³⁹ Protagoras agrees with Socrates that it is appearance that leads us astray, and measurement that shows us the truth.⁴⁰ Later Socrates defines ignorance as “having false opinion and being deceived about important things,”⁴¹ to which Protagoras agrees.

It is clear that Protagoras’ responses are not those of a relativist. By claiming that people often have false beliefs, by defining the ‘measure’ as a science of pleasures and pains, by claiming that appearances lead to false beliefs, and by defining ignorance as false opinion and deception, Protagoras rejects relativism *and* the thesis that knowledge is perception, while sounding very much like Socrates’ apology in the *Theaetetus*. Of course, Protagoras may be serving only as a foil for Socrates’ exposition in this late point in the dialogue. But even so, Plato wrote these responses for Protagoras. This shows at the very least an inconsistency in Plato’s depiction of Protagoras, casting doubt on the veracity of the *Theaetetus*. But if we assume that the representation of Protagoras in the *Protagoras* is even roughly accurate, then we have yet further evidence that Protagoras was not a relativist.

Conclusion

I’d like to conclude by briefly considering why it matters that Protagoras was not a relativist. Many scholars have made at least some mention of the distinction between the historical figure and the character in Plato’s dialogues.⁴² But the distinction, nearly always an afterthought and quite frequently footnoted, is often blurred if not forgotten.⁴³ Moreover, even the character “Protagoras” is not easily read as a relativist, if we assume the “Protagoras” in the *Protagoras* and the “Protagoras” in the *Theaetetus* are the same character. In trying to fill in a picture of who the historical Protagoras was, we use all the evidence we have, chief among which are Plato’s dialogues. But in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, I’ve argued, the picture we’re given is not historically accurate. We may still refer to “Protagoras” the character as a relativist, though I believe even that interpretation is inaccurate. But more caution is needed when discussing Protagoras the man, a thinker whose intellectual reputation in his day was at least as great as Socrates. Protagoras was the most influential of the sophists, held in high esteem by his students, his peers, and his antagonists. As befitting that reputation, we are obliged to be as accurate as possible in our discussion of the sophist. I believe that taking Plato’s relativist interpretation of Protagoras as correct prevents us from accurately understanding the real Protagoras’s positions. The belief ‘Protagoras was not a relativist’ is true to me; if I am right, then Protagoras and I would both assert that it is true for everyone.

³⁹ PR 356d5

⁴⁰ PR 356e5

⁴¹ *to pseudē echein doxan kai epseusthai peri tōn pragmatōn tōn pollou axiōn* (PR 358c6-7)

⁴² For instance, “The question of how far Plato gives a faithful account of the teaching of the historical Protagoras need not concern us.” (Burnyeat (1990), p. 7 n.12); “I shall take no stand here on what position the historical Protagoras held: since his works are not extant, it is difficult to be sure about the matter. (Hence, from now on when I speak of Protagoras, I generally mean Protagoras as he is portrayed in the *Theaetetus*.” (Fine (1998), p.137-38); “I should note that my concern throughout this chapter is primarily with Plato’s portrayal of Protagoras, not with the historical Protagoras. However, since Plato is one of our main sources of information about the historical Protagoras, looking at how he portrays Protagoras presumably gives us some indication of Protagoras’ views: though one of course can’t rule out the possibility that Plato misinterpreted him. (Fine (2003), p. 184)

⁴³ For example, “But the real Protagoras did not hold the subjectivist thesis. As the earlier paper explained, the more authentic interpretation of Protagoras is that given in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, according to which he was a relativist...” (Burnyeat (1976b), p. 172 ; “Plato gives us an eloquent defense of Protagoras, which professes to be authentic, which conforms to every criterion of authenticity we can apply, which makes good sense, and is internally coherent.” (F.C.S. Schiller, “The Humanism of Protagoras”, *Mind* 20, 1911:181-196, p. 184).