



# Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism

Plato's Subtlest Enemy

Ugo Zilioli

ASHGATE e-BOOK

# PROTAGORAS AND THE CHALLENGE OF RELATIVISM

Protagoras was an important Greek thinker of the fifth century BC, the most famous of the so called Sophists, though most of what we know of him and his thought comes to us mainly through the dialogues of his strenuous opponent Plato. In this book, Ugo Zilioli offers a sustained and philosophically sophisticated examination of what is, in philosophical terms, the most interesting feature of Protagoras' thought for modern readers: his role as the first Western thinker to argue for relativism.

Zilioli relates Protagoras' relativism with modern forms of relativism, in particular the 'robust relativism' of Joseph Margolis, gives an integrated account both of the perceptual relativism examined in Plato's *Theaetetus* and the ethical or social relativism presented in the first part of Plato's *Protagoras* and offers an integrated and positive analysis of Protagoras' thought, rather than focusing on ancient criticisms and responses to his thought. This is a deeply scholarly work which brings much argument to bear to the claim that Protagoras was and remains Plato's subtlest philosophical enemy.

*To defend relativism is about as thankless a task as philosophy ever confronted: informed readers typically take it to be a complete waste of time and even a mark of professional incompetence. But then, if you see its genuinely deep challenge, its defense counts as an exceptional kind of courage and amplitude of mind that very little else in philosophy ever equals. Zilioli embodies a candor and honesty and a scholar's thoroughness and scruple that are simply a pleasure to trust in the unraveling of the full import of Plato's treatment of Protagoras's argument in the Theaetetus and Protagoras. I think it's the straightforward clarity and passion of Zilioli's effort that makes it so memorable. Beyond that, it seems to me to have simply outflanked Protagoras's strongest detractors.*

Joseph Margolis, Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy,  
Temple University, USA

## ASHGATE NEW CRITICAL THINKING IN PHILOSOPHY

The *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy* series brings high quality research monograph publishing into focus for authors, the international library market, and student, academic and research readers. Headed by an international editorial advisory board of acclaimed scholars from across the philosophical spectrum, this monograph series presents cutting-edge research from established as well as exciting new authors in the field. Spanning the breadth of philosophy and related disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy* takes contemporary philosophical research into new directions and debate.

### *Series Editorial Board:*

- David Cooper, Durham University, UK  
Sean Sayers, University of Kent, UK  
Simon Critchley, New School for Social Research, USA; University of Essex, UK  
Simon Glendinning, London School of Economics, UK  
Paul Helm, Regent College, Canada  
David Lamb, University of Birmingham, UK  
Peter Lipton, University of Cambridge, UK  
Tim Williamson, University of Oxford, UK  
Martin Davies, Australian National University, Australia  
Stephen Mulhall, University of Oxford, UK  
John Post, Vanderbilt University, UK  
Alan Goldman, College of William and Mary, USA  
Simon Blackburn, University of Cambridge, UK  
Michael Friedman, Stanford University, USA  
Nicholas White, University of California at Irvine, USA  
Michael Walzer, Princeton University, USA  
Joseph Friggieri, University of Malta, Malta  
Graham Priest, University of Melbourne, Australia; University of St Andrews, UK  
Genevieve Lloyd, University of New South Wales, Australia  
Alan Musgrave, University of Otago, New Zealand  
Moira Gatens, University of Sydney, Australia

# Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism

Plato's Subtlest Enemy

UGO ZILIOLI

*Fellow of the University of Parma*

ASHGATE

© Ugo Zilioli 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Ugo Zilioli has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

Published by  
Ashgate Publishing Limited  
Gower House  
Croft Road  
Aldershot  
Hampshire GU11 3HR  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
Suite 420  
101 Cherry Street  
Burlington, VT 05401-4405  
USA

Ashgate website: <http://www.ashgate.com>

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Zilioli, Ugo

Protagoras and the challenge of relativism : Plato's  
subtlest enemy. - (Ashgate new critical thinking in  
philosophy)

1. Protagoras 2. Plato. Protagoras 3. Relativity

I. Title

182.2

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Zilioli, Ugo, 1971-

Protagoras and the challenge of relativism : Plato's subtlest enemy / Ugo Zilioli.  
p. cm. -- (Ashgate new critical thinking in philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-7546-6078-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Protagoras. 2. Relativity. I. Title.

B305.P84Z55 2007

183'.1--dc22

2007003616

ISBN 978-0-7546-6078-1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire.

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<b>Introduction Protagoras, Plato and Relativism</b>	1
Topic and Aims	1
Relativism	8
Approaches to Plato	12
Structure	15
<b>1 Perceptions and Indeterminacy</b>	19
The Historical Protagoras	19
Sophistic Training and Philosophical Education	22
The Digression	25
Reading the <i>Theaetetus</i>	29
Ontological Relativism	31
Ontological Indeterminacy	38
Historical Plausibility Explained Further	42
Differing Dispositions	44
<b>2 Wisdom and Incommensurability</b>	55
Protagoras in the <i>Cratylus</i>	55
The Defence	59
Two Fragments	66
Incommensurability	69
The ‘Objective Standard’ Objection	74
The (Possible) Answer	77
The Scope of Protagoras’ Relativism	82
<b>3 Ethics and Forms of Life</b>	89
Ethical Relativism	89
The Myth	93
Virtue and Technique	98
Subjectivism and Emotivism	103
Forms of Life	105
Radical Use	109

<b>4 Inconsistency, Self-Refutation and the Heart of the Matter</b>	113
Plato's Objections	113
Protagoras and Inconsistency	115
Saying and Showing	116
Health	118
Advantage	124
Democratic Knowledge	129
Illusory Wisdom	131
The Self-Refutation Argument	134
<b>Conclusions The Tools of Relativism</b>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	147
<i>Index</i>	157

# List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Duck/Rabbit head	69
Figure 2.2	Feyerabend's pictures	73

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book offers an unconventional interpretation of the doctrine that Protagoras is made to maintain in two of Plato's dialogues. The interpretation I will give in the following pages, in fact, attempts to provide reasons for claiming that Protagoras' relativism is a serious and powerful philosophical position. The positive approach I will adopt throughout the book towards Protagoras' relativism is what makes the interpretation of the kind of relativism I ascribe to him an unconventional one. As far as Plato's treatment of Protagoras' relativism is concerned, the dominant view, at least among classical scholars (rather than philosophers), is that Protagoras' relativism as described by Plato is a weak philosophical doctrine.

Not only are my views on Protagoras' relativism unconventional in so far as they challenge the dominant interpretation of the role of the philosopher Protagoras for the history of thought, but also such views are defended with 'more passion than most philosophers allow themselves to show'. These last words are used by Ayer in the 1946 Appendix to *Language, Truth and Logic* to explain that his book was in every sense a young man's book. If any comparison can be drawn at all, I believe that this book too is, in some important sense, a young man's book that seeks to combine rigour and passion. I hope that the unconventionality of the views expressed in it about Protagoras' relativism are the results not only of the passion with which I have tried to defend a philosophical position, but also of focused analyses of ancient texts and of rigorous arguments.

The writing of a book is a long matter. The actual process of writing down your ideas on a chosen topic is preceded by a period of time when such ideas are first formulated and then made more defensible and argued for. I thus begin the list of the people I wish to thank with C.J. Rowe, with whom I first discussed the core idea of this book back in 1999–2001, during my wonderful years spent studying for a doctorate at the Department of Classics of the University of Durham. I owe to Christopher many things: here, I would like to thank him publicly for the constant support he has provided to me and to my philosophical development ever since. He also read a first complete draft of the book and offered most helpful suggestions for improving it, both at the level of the presentation of arguments and linguistically.

This book would have had much fewer chances to see the light if I had not had the luck to replace Christopher Gill at the Department of Classics at the University of Exeter. Throughout its early stages and until the very final stages of the writing process, Chris has been an invaluable help. He encouraged the project when I myself was unsure how to proceed, read earlier and final drafts and provided vital suggestions for the shaping of the book. He also helped me to improve my English when needed. I cannot think of a more generous help an established scholar may offer to a younger one. I record this debt with much gratitude.

Two other scholars have offered their invaluable help. One is Michel Narcy (CNRS, Paris), who read earlier drafts of the book and provided important suggestions; the other is Joseph Margolis (Temple University), who welcomed the project from its earliest formulation and read an almost final version of the book, offering his kind encouragement.

The list of people I wish to thank is long and in the space of this Preface I am sorry to be unable to specify the different reasons for which I am grateful to each of them. I hope such an omission does not prevent them from being aware of my deep gratitude. The list of people I wish to thank include: Heather and Nigel Speight, Heather Rowe, Beverlin M. Hammett, Fabiano Straffi, Maria Angelica Fierro, Anna Chahoud, George Boys-Stones, Samantha J. Newington (in Durham); John and Patricia Paynter (in London); Lena Isayev, Peter O'Neill, Tim Whitmarsh; Jonathan Humprey, Jemma and Philip Denning, Joyce and John Burgess (in Exeter); Eulalia Gentili, Assunta Buccolini, Alessandro Attene (in Colmurano and Macerata); Annalisa Zilioli, Tina Corbellini, Stefano Battilocchi, Elisabetta Cattel (in Fidenza), Marco Rosi and Parmacotto (in Parma). Special thanks are due to Michele Zamboni and my parents, who also offered financial support at a crucial stage of this project. People at Ashgate, Kate Brown and especially Emily Jarvis, deserve special thanks for their constant support and expertise.

A particular comment is needed at this point for Cristiana and our two children, Zoe and Delio, and for the place where I wrote most of the final draft of this book, namely our house in Colmurano. Here, I had the luck to be able to write in my study-room, at the top floor of a seventeenth-century house, with beams and walls so thick to protect me from outside noises as well as the summer heat. The landscape I am able to contemplate from there completes the perfection of the place: the back windows overlook the differently coloured hills around Macerata. In such an ideal setting, to write is a real pleasure and I believe that this book sees the light also because I was able to live in this house for a reasonable amount of time.

I began working on what became the final version of this book in the early months of 2005, when Zoe, our first daughter, was three months old. I write this Preface in September 2006, when Delio, our second son, is six months old. One may well imagine how full life can be with two little children around. I warmly thank them because their presence at home has been constantly teaching me to place the things in my life in the correct perspective that each of them differently deserves.

Finally, Cristiana. In the course of the book, I will argue that one of the possible upshots of Protagorean relativism is the awareness that truth, knowledge and so on are not, in the life of human beings, more important than the other elements that such a life can contain. Knowledge is important for human beings but so are some of the persons with whom one happens to be related. If love is what relates two persons, and if one of these two persons is Cristiana, one can rapidly see how still important, but less essential all the rest may become. In our love and in her, I find all that life at its best can offer, not only at an emotional level but also from an intellectual point of view (also in this I am anti-Platonic, in so far as I deny Plato's *ordo amoris* in the *Symposium*). The kind of reserve I feel when faced with something so precious that words cannot express it adequately does not allow me to go further. Suffice it to say that this book is dedicated to Cristiana, with much love.

*Phusis kruptesthai philei* (Heraclitus).

Casa di Margherita, Colmurano, September 2006.

# List of Abbreviations

A	Testimonium in Diels-Kranz
B	Fragment in Diels-Kranz
DK	Diels-Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i>
LS	Long and Sedley, <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i>
<i>Prt.</i>	Plato, <i>Protagoras</i>
<i>Tht.</i>	Plato, <i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Cra.</i>	Plato, <i>Cratylus</i>
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th edition with a supplement

Full references for the above titles can be found in the Bibliography. For the Greek texts, I use the John Burnet edition for both the *Theaetetus* (and *Cratylus*) and the *Protagoras* (Oxford: OCT, 1900 and 1905). I have also consulted the new OCT edition of the first two *tetralogiae* of Plato's dialogues by W.F. Hicken *et alii* (Oxford 1995), which does not improve significantly the Burnet edition, at least as far as the *Theaetetus* is concerned. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the Levett/Burnyeat translation for Plato's *Theaetetus* (Hackett, 1990). For the *Protagoras*, I use the translation of C.C.W. Taylor (OUP 1991); for the *Cratylus*, I use the translation by C.D.C. Reeve, in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato. Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997). I make use of the now standard Cooper's *Plato* also for all other dialogues of Plato that I quote or briefly refer to in the book. For Protagoras' fragments and sources, I mainly follow R.K. Sprague's translation (University of South Carolina Press, 1972, based on DK); for Sextus, I use the translation by R.G. Bury (Harvard University Press 1933–35, based on the Greek text by I. Bekker, Berlin 1842). *The Revised Oxford Translation* has been used for Aristotle (J. Barnes ed., Princeton University Press, 1984, based on the Greek text by W.D. Ross, Oxford 1924).

Throughout the book, terms such as 'himself' and 'he' should be taken as abbreviations for 'himself or herself', 'he or she', and so on.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Introduction

# Protagoras, Plato and Relativism

### Topic and Aims

This book aims primarily to reconstruct the philosophy of the sophist Protagoras through a reading of some dialogues of Plato, more precisely of some sections of the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*. It is a book that intends to define, understand and assess critically the philosophical positions that Plato attributes to Protagoras in his (Plato's) dialogues in the light of the philosophical dichotomy between relativism and objectivism. The reasons for writing such a book are two. One reason is relevant for the history of ancient thought. To use F.M. Cornford's term, Protagoras was Plato's 'archenemy':<sup>1</sup> I believe that the sophist and his relativism were for Plato (and his objectivism) the 'subtlest' enemy (at least as far as some central epistemological and ethical issues were concerned and, to some extent, educational and methodological issues too). The second reason has to do with current philosophical debates. The dispute between Protagoras and Plato initiated, I claim, the contrast between relativism and objectivism in philosophy. Such a contrast, which has thus characterized Western philosophy from its very birth, has pervaded a great part of Anglo-American philosophy in the last forty years, especially in the USA, and has become one of the most fundamental issues of debate in philosophical speculation.

The expression 'subtlest' (or 'most exquisite', *kompsoiton*) appears with reference to a logical consequence of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine (the doctrine centred on Protagoras' maxim that Man is the Measure of All Things) in one of the most studied and controversial passages of the whole Platonic corpus, namely *Theaetetus* 171a. This is the section of the *Theaetetus* where Plato's Socrates tries to refute Protagoras' Measure Doctrine by way of a self-refutation argument, which is labelled by Socrates himself as, precisely, 'most exquisite' (171a6). Another famous reference to '*oi kompsoi*' (the subtle thinkers) is to be found in the *Philebus*, at 53c6, where we encounter some philosophers who claim, in Socrates' words, that 'pleasure is always a process of becoming and that there is no being at all of pleasure'. The identity of these subtle thinkers is still disputed but what they claim about pleasure reminds me of what those subtlest thinkers, whom Plato discusses at *Theaetetus* 156a, claim about the nature and content of our perceptions.<sup>2</sup> According to the latter thinkers, each perception is generated by the casual encounter of some perceived objects and some perceiving subjects, which are both in perennial process of becoming 'something' or 'somebody' and never being 'something' or 'somebody'. Pleasure is one perception of this type, at least if we follow the categorization of

---

1 See Cornford (1935: p. 87).

2 On these subtle thinkers, see below, p. 47, n. 86.

*Theaetetus* 156b, where Socrates says: ‘we have names for the perceptions, of the following sort: seeings, hearings, smellings, feelings of cold, feelings of heat; also what are called pleasures, pains, desires, fears, and others’. There might be room for saying that the subtle people of the *Philebus* might have close connections with the subtlest thinkers of the *Theaetetus*, and thus with Protagoras, who, in some sense, is linked to the group of subtler thinkers of *Theaetetus* 156a.

Protagoras is, in Plato’s eyes, a *komposos* philosopher and one whose philosophical arguments are able to produce very subtle consequences. Protagoras’ views may seriously challenge Plato’s own philosophical doctrines, as much as relativism may nowadays reveal itself as the most subtly challenging position for objectivism. Objectivism can be defined broadly as ‘the conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical, matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness’.<sup>3</sup> Protagoras’ subtlety (and, more generally speaking, the philosophical subtlety of relativism) does not prevent Plato from identifying logical inconsistencies or weaknesses in Protagoras’ positions; nonetheless, Protagoras is, in Plato’s opinion, a quite serious thinker who deserves close and thoughtful attention. One might argue that there are other thinkers whom Plato considers as very subtle philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides being two good examples (the case of Pythagoras is less evident). Plato often dealt, in some details, with Heraclitus or his less talented followers, the Heracliteans, in key philosophical sections of some of his dialogues. But Plato did not think Heraclitus to be worthy of a treatment at dialogue length, not least because Heraclitus’ main ideas were hard to grasp, both because the historical remoteness of his speculation and the obscurity of his pronouncements. As closer interlocutors in time, Plato had Heraclitus’ followers to talk to, but, alas, they seemed to be unable to go further than repeating uncritically Heraclitus’ idea that everything is in flux, or than taking Heraclitus’ idea to extreme and untenable positions, as Plato’s *Cratylus* demonstrates.<sup>4</sup> With the Heraclitean idea of flux, Plato dealt rather extensively, in the *Theaetetus*, *Cratylus* and *Philebus* for instance. I am of course ready to recognize the importance that Heraclitus’ idea of flux had for Plato, especially as far as the sensible world is concerned. It is now common to speak of Plato’s Heracliteanism, meaning that Plato viewed the perceptible world as something that was in perennial

---

3 See Bernstein (1983: p. 8). See also Margolis (2003: p. 49) on Cartesianism, that is, ‘any realism [...] that holds that the world has a determinate structure apart from all constraints of human inquiry and that our cognizing faculties are nevertheless able to discern those independent structures reliably’. On Plato’s objectivism, see White (2003: 100).

4 On *Cratylus*’ extremism, see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5.1010a10–15. On Heraclitus’ followers, see what Theodorus says in the *Theaetetus*: ‘You know, Socrates, these Heraclitean doctrines [...] – you can’t discuss them in person with any of these people at Ephesus who profess to be adepts, any more than you could with a maniac. They are just like the things they say in their books – always on the move. As for abiding by what is said, or sticking to a question, or quietly answering and asking question in turn, there is less than nothing of that in their capacity [...]. If you ask any one of them a question, he will put out some little enigmatic phrase from his quiver and shoot it off at you; and if you try to make him give an account of what he has said, you will get hit by another, full of strange turns of language’ (179e–180a).

flux, as indeed a kind of Heraclitean world.<sup>5</sup> But, again, despite the influence that this idea had on Plato, it was just one powerful idea, with which Plato was confronted; Heraclitus' ideas challenged Plato's views in just this one (important) respect, leaving the rest of Plato's philosophical thought virtually unchallenged.

Parmenides received an extensive treatment by Plato in his *Parmenides*, where Parmenides is depicted as a very noble figure. He is the wise old man who, in place of Socrates, is in charge of leading the discussion in the dialogue that bears his name, from Stephanus page 137a to the end of the dialogue. He had great influence on Plato, especially on his metaphysics of Forms.<sup>6</sup> More than an enemy, Parmenides is a noble philosophical predecessor for Plato, someone from whom Plato had to learn something important.<sup>7</sup> For him, Parmenides was a philosopher whose ideas needed to be corrected or further developed, but he was someone who, in modern parlance, made good philosophical points. So, on the one hand, Heraclitus' speculation was somehow so far away in time that it could not represent a real philosophical threat or challenge for Plato; on the other, Parmenides was more a noble father than a real enemy for him. Pythagoras is a minor case and again not at all a case of philosophical rivalry but of someone whom Plato viewed as another possible philosophical ancestor. It is certain that in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere Plato borrowed from Pythagoras the idea of the soul transmigrating from one body to another. The awareness that mathematics could help in addressing some key philosophical issues is borrowed from Pythagoras as well, but it would be very hard for us to go beyond this generalized influence, if we wanted to define the extent of Plato's engagement with Pythagoras more fully.

Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus: for Plato, they were either ancient and estimable predecessors or thinkers whose influence on him is hard to grasp. Plato's intellectual milieu being such, the main thinkers so far left out of the list of Plato's influential predecessors are the Sophists, to whom Plato devoted so many of his dialogues. In particular, Protagoras is the main thinker who would have been the most dangerous enemy for Plato and also for his master and philosophical model, Socrates.<sup>8</sup> Leader of the Sophistic movement, Protagoras was seen by the young belonging to the cultural elite of Athens, in the middle of the fifth century BC, as the man able to teach them *euboulia*, namely 'sound deliberation', 'both in domestic matters – how best to manage one's household, and in public affairs – how to realize one's maximum potential for success in political debate and action' (*Prt.* 318e5–319a). Protagoras was competing with Socrates as far as the education of young people was concerned, but the two men had very different educational aims. Broadly speaking, Protagoras' educational target was the one described just above, while Socrates, again to speak broadly, wanted

---

5 On Plato's Heracliteanism, see Reed (1972); Irwin (1977); Declava Caizzi (1988).

6 See Palmer (1999) and McCabe (2000).

7 On Parmenides, see what Plato makes Socrates say in the *Theaetetus*: 'Parmenides seems to me, in the words of Homer, to be reverend and awful. I met him when I was very young and he was a very old man: and he seemed to me to have a wholly noble depth' (183e).

8 On Plato's consideration for Protagoras, see Lee (2005: pp. 4–5): '[Plato] devotes the principal parts of two dialogues to exploring his [Protagoras'] views – perhaps the most extended and careful treatment of any intellectual figure in his philosophical work'; Broadie (2003: 76).

the young to pursue the truth by means both of a dialogical conversation with him and of a process of self-discovery, which could make incontrovertibly explicit the contradictions and vacuousness of their own beliefs. (This point will become clearer once we read the first part of the *Theaetetus*.) Protagoras and Socrates were, quite simply, rivals in education; this rivalry was later taken up by Plato, who widened the range over which the protagonists contended by amplifying it so as to include more substantial philosophical issues, epistemology and ethics.

In the dialogues of Plato where he is present or his ideas are discussed, Protagoras has always something to say about philosophical issues that were recognized as the most important in Plato's times and that nowadays are possibly even more essential for contemporary philosophical speculation. The discussion of Protagoras' ideas occupies half of the *Theaetetus* (151e–186e), where Plato investigates what knowledge is. Some reference to Protagoras' maxim that Man is the Measure of All Things opens the discussion in the *Cratylus* (383a–387c) about the criterion for the correctness of names (be it convention or nature). Another reference to Protagoras or to his followers is to be found in the *Euthydemus* (286a–288a), where we find a discussion of the two related and broadly Protagorean theses that falsehood is impossible and that it is impossible to make contradictory statements. Then there is the dialogue that bears his name, the *Protagoras*, which contains the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras about *aretê*, 'excellence' or 'virtue', as the term is commonly translated into English. The *Protagoras* contains references to many other key ethical as well as epistemological issues, such as the origin and nature of human society (*Prt.* 320c–328d) and the relationship between knowledge and the pursuit of pleasure (*Prt.* 352a–357d). As suggested earlier in connection with the *Philebus*, there are passages in other Platonic dialogues that may contain indirect references to Protagoras, Protagorean ideas, or ideas that could be developed out of some Protagorean doctrines.

Epistemology, Language, Logic, Ethics: these seem to be the philosophical interests of Protagoras. They represent a quite complete and varied spectrum of inquiries, roughly the same as Socrates' and Plato's, but with very different and conflicting outcomes, as we will see at a later stage. No wonder that Protagoras attracted Plato's attention. They seemed to have opposite positions on many important philosophical issues. On how to reach the truth, and on the nature of truth, Plato and Protagoras held opposite beliefs, the former conceiving it as the mental grasping or possession of eternal ideas (hence, objectively determinable), the latter making it relative to individuals and to their modifiable perspectives. On ethical matters, the contrast was equally strong: for Plato, fully ethical was every kind of behaviour connected to the truth, for Protagoras ethical is what the society decides it to be. The depth of the contrast between objectivistic and relativistic issues in ancient philosophy (and, by implication, in contemporary philosophical debates), together with the reason why, (and the extent to which) Protagoras was a subtle philosophical enemy for Plato, is what this book primarily aims to understand, and establish, in the following chapters.<sup>9</sup>

---

9 On Plato as mainly opposing Protagoras' relativistic views in epistemology, see White (2003: 104–110).

This study has also a secondary aim, no less interesting, at least for someone curious about the figure of the historical Protagoras, though this is much harder to identify. In reconstructing the philosophy of Protagoras in the context, mostly, of Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, I shall try to comprehend whether there is some historical plausibility in Plato's picture of Protagoras. I shall explain better what I mean by 'historical plausibility'. The attempt to find a historical plausibility in Plato's reconstruction of Protagoras' doctrines is in a way hopeless, given the tiny proportion of Protagoras' writings still available. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Protagoras wrote twelve books or treatises, whose titles are the following: *The Art of Controversy*, *On Wrestling*, *On Mathematics*, *On the State*, *On Ambition*, *On Virtues*, *On the Original State of Things*, *On What is in Hades*, *On The Misdeeds of Men*, *Instruction Book*, *Law-suit about a Fee*, *Opposing Arguments* (in two books). He wrote even more than Diogenes reports, and his unlisted writings were the most influential: the two famous treatises *On the Gods* (whose opening sentence about the impossibility of knowing the existence of the gods seems to have caused Protagoras to be exiled and his books burnt) and *Truth* or *The Overthrowers*, which began with Protagoras' maxim that Man is the Measure, do not appear in Diogenes' list.<sup>10</sup> Further and important omissions are Protagoras' *On Being*, a work in which he seems to have proposed some arguments for refuting Parmenides' doctrine that Being is one,<sup>11</sup> and his *Great Speech*, of which we now know nothing (the same title is used, in modern scholarship, for the first section of Plato's *Protagoras*, namely *Prt.* 320c–328d).

But, of this great amount of written material, only a very limited number of short fragments is available to us. Since they are so few and short, it will be useful to give the most meaningful fragments of Protagoras below, following the standard numeration of the Diels-Kranz edition of the Pre-Socratics (hereafter DK, which, despite some recent improvements for individual cases made by other editions or translations,<sup>12</sup> remains by far the most complete source for all the thinkers before Socrates) and their related sources.<sup>13</sup> Protagoras' most significant fragments are the following:

[Protagoras says:] Of all things (*chrêmaton*) the measure (*metron*) is man (*anthrôpon*), of things which are, that they are, of things which are not, that they are not (*tôn men ontôn hôs esti, tôn de mê ontôn hôs ouk estin*).<sup>14</sup> (80DK B1)

---

10 *Truth* (*Aletheia*) is the title that Plato gives to Protagoras' book in the *Theaetetus* (161c4), while Sextus (*Adversus Mathematicos* 7.60) says that the title of the same book is *The Overthrowers* (*Kataballontes Logoi*). Unterstenier (1996: pp. 17–23) argues that the title of Diogenes' catalogue could be subsections of just one book, 'Opposing Arguments' (*Antilogíai*); Lee (Lee 2005: pp. 25–27) offers further arguments for identifying 'Opposing Arguments' with 'Truth'.

11 For this work, see Porphyry, *apud* Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 10.3.25=DK 80B2.

12 In the English language, see Dillon and Gergel (2003) and Waterfield (2000).

13 I am following the sixth edition of DK (Zürich and Hildesheim 1951): the testimonies on him being listed under heading A, his fragments under heading B.

14 Plato's *Theaetetus* 152a2–4. See also Sextus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, 7.60 and *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.216; Diogenes Laertius 9.51.

Concerning the gods I cannot know (*eidenai*) either that they exist or that they do not exist, [or what form (*idean*) they might have], for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity (*adêlotês*) of the subject and the shortness of man's life (*brachus ên ho bios tou anthrôpou*).<sup>15</sup> (B4)

[Protagoras] was the first to say that on everything (*pragmatos*) there are two accounts (*logous*) opposed each other.<sup>16</sup> (B6a)

[This is what one means] by making the weaker (*hettô*) account (*logon*) the stronger (*kreittô*).<sup>17</sup> (B6b)

It is impossible to contradict (*antilegein*).<sup>18</sup> (A1, 19)

[In the work *Great Speech* Protagoras said that] 'teaching (*didaskalia*) requires natural endowment (*phuseôs*) and practice (*askêseôs*)' and 'they must learn starting young'.<sup>19</sup>

[Protagoras] said that art (*technên*) was nothing without practice and practice nothing without art.<sup>20</sup> (B10)

Education does not sprout in the soul unless one goes to a great depth.<sup>21</sup> (B11)

Sensible lines are not like those of which the geometrician speaks (since there is nothing sensible which is straight or curved in that sense; the circle touches the measuring-rod not at a point, but along a line, as Protagoras used to say in refuting the geometricians).<sup>22</sup> (B7)

Protagoras was also given the paternity of a 'new' fragment in 1969, but the question of its authenticity is far from being resolved beyond doubt. The alleged new fragment runs: '[Protagoras says that being (*einai*), for things that are, consists in their being perceived (*phainestai*). He says:] It is clear to you, as being present, that I am sitting;

15 Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 14.3.7; Diogenes Laertius 9.51.

16 Diogenes Laertius 9.51. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.65: 'Every argument has an opposite argument, say the Greeks, following Protagoras'. Seneca (*Epistulae* 88.43) points out: 'Protagoras declares that one can take either side on any question and debate it with equal success, including the question itself whether both sides of any question can be debated' (both sources quoted in 80DK A20).

17 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.24.1402a23.

18 Plato, *Euthydemus*, 286c; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.1007b18–23; there is an echo of the dictum in Isocrates, *Helen* 1. This was a slogan shared also by other thinkers, as Plato testifies in the *Euthydemus*, 285d–286d, but much used by Protagoras and his followers.

19 *Anecdota Parisiensa*, I 171, 31.

20 Stobaeus, *Florilegium*, 3.29, 80.

21 The original Greek is lost, only a Syriac translation is available; the English translation given above is based on the German version of the passage, by J. Gildemeister and F. Bucheler (for all this, see DK, *ad locum*). There is another educational passage of/on Protagoras (80DKB12), but it is considered spurious (see Untersteiner 1996: p. 123). It is again a Greek-Syriac text and goes: 'Protagoras has said: "Toil and work and instruction and education and wisdom are the crown of glory which is woven from the flowers of an eloquent tongue and placed on the heads of those who love it. The tongue's use is not effortless, to be sure, yet its blossoms are abundant and ever fresh, and the onlookers and those who applaud and the teachers rejoice, and the students make progress and the fools are annoyed – or perhaps they are not even annoyed, since they are not intelligent enough."'

22 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* B 2.997b34–998a5.

to one who is not present, however, it is not clear that I am sitting; [therefore] it is unclear (*adêlon*) whether I am sitting or not sitting' (Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on the Psalms* 3).<sup>23</sup>

It is obviously difficult to form a coherent and accurate picture of Protagoras' doctrine or to say anything plausible about the historical Protagoras by relying on these few testimonies. So, I will not claim that I am able to do that. What I think can be done is to explain some arguments that Plato attributes to Protagoras in his dialogues (or, more importantly, some other arguments that can be attributed to Protagoras on the basis of what Plato himself says, mainly in the *Theaetetus*) in the light of Protagoras' extant fragments. This will help to make the general approach that I will use in the course of the book more comprehensible for the reader. In the attempt to reconstruct Protagoras' philosophy in the context of Plato's dialogues, close analysis of the arguments that Plato's Socrates ascribes to Protagoras will be attempted and a careful scrutiny of such arguments will be provided. But, since Protagoras is, on my account, Plato's philosophical enemy, and since Plato opposes Protagoras' philosophical ideas, from the positions that he attributes to Protagoras in his dialogues he tends to draw some philosophical consequences that need not be drawn. Plato wants to show Protagoras' positions untenable because, on Plato's account, they eventually lead to absurdities or falsities. But, on the basis of what Plato himself says, one might identify philosophical consequences, alternative to those drawn by Plato, and less straightforwardly untenable. Let us call such alternatives (to Plato's) arguments 'anti-Platonic', in so far as they provide philosophical positions that Plato would never have held.

So, as far as Protagoras' doctrines are concerned, in my analysis of the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, genuinely Platonic arguments will alternate with other philosophical arguments, quite independent of Plato's own arguments; as well as a reconstruction of some Platonic arguments, this book will provide a critique of such arguments. What I want to ask is whether the defence that a modern reader might present of Protagoras' positions might also have been the kind of defence that the historical Protagoras could have offered. In order to answer this question, I will make comparisons between the arguments that I will provide to defend Protagoras from Plato's attacks on the one hand, and, on the other, Protagoras' extant fragments, with the hope of finding some points of contact between the former and the latter. In attempting to do so, I will make some limited recourse to some sources other than Plato, for instance Sextus Empiricus or Aristotle, to corroborate the plausibility of such consonance.

This is what I have in mind when I speak of the historical plausibility of the picture of Protagoras' doctrine within the framework of Plato's dialogues. As can be seen, it is a very weak sense of historical plausibility, but it is nonetheless one that has its own merits and will hopefully become clearer once I introduce the third and last scholarly aim of this study. If reconstructing Protagoras' doctrines in Plato's dialogues is the more important target of this book, and providing a kind of weak historical plausibility for such a reconstruction is a less important, and derivative, objective, the third target that I aim to reach by writing this book is the

---

23 See Gronewald (1969: p. 380), and Woodruff (1985: 484–485).

following important one. What I aim to understand is the extent to which Protagoras' doctrines, as depicted in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, can be seen as a form of philosophical relativism. To quote Matthen's eloquent expression, I wish to 'treat Protagoreanism *sub specie aeternitatis*'.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars regard Protagoras as the first relativist in the history of western thought, but it is not at all clear what this means. What kind of relativist was Protagoras? After all, what is relativism? Protagoras is usually taken as holding a form of perceptual relativism that quite naively leads to a rather weak, and self-refuting, form of cognitive relativism. This claim usually originates from references to Plato's *Theaetetus*, in particular to the self-refutation section that has attracted so much attention. But Plato's treatment of Protagoras' alleged relativistic positions in the *Theaetetus* is much more detailed than that, indeed much more wide-ranging and, I suggest, much more respectful. The form of relativism that Plato ascribes to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is, I claim, complex and it involves both a form of perceptual relativism (of a very sophisticated kind, with subtle ontological consequences) and of ethical relativism. The comprehension of Protagoras' doctrines will become even clearer if one reads the *Theaetetus* in conjunction with the *Protagoras*.<sup>25</sup> But this, to my knowledge, has never been fully attempted. My claim is that, if Protagoras is a relativist, he is one of a more serious kind than generally thought of. But, again, scholars tend to focus on one, or more sections of Plato's *Theaetetus*, missing the whole picture and thus ascribing to Protagoras quite marginal, or at least contradictory, relativistic positions.

## Relativism

The situation is made even more problematic by the fact that it is not wholly clear what is meant by relativism. As Paul Feyerabend has noticed in his *Farewell to Reason* (London 1987), 'occasionally there is not even a version [of relativism]; there is just a word – "relativism" – and a (loving, or angry, but at any rate longwinded) reaction to it' (p. 20). Relativism seems to be a very slippery concept and one that attracts the suspicion and the hostility of most philosophers (whereas, by contrast, those who hold various degrees of relativistic positions do not always like being labelled 'relativists', as Kuhn's case famously exemplifies).<sup>26</sup> Hostility to relativism is also common in some religious quarters, mainly Catholic. Pope Benedict XVI, who is very versed in philosophy among other things, has in fact recently stigmatized relativism as the cultural disease of our century, especially as far as ethical issues are concerned. (By contrast, this kind of suspicious reaction, or even open condemnation, is very different from the enthusiastic acceptance that relativistic theories such as that of Albert Einstein have met in science.)

There are so many forms of relativism, that is, epistemological, ethical, aesthetical, perceptual, and so forth, that it is hard to find a common feature to them all. Since it is such a slippery concept, many thinkers hostile to relativism have claimed to have refuted it: in some cases, they have refuted a version of it, but

---

24 Matthen (1985: 33).

25 On this, see below, pp. 92–3.

26 See the Postscript of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in Kuhn (1970).

whether they have been successful in refuting all its forms is still disputable.<sup>27</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre once wrote, ‘relativism, like scepticism, is one of those doctrines that have by now been refuted a number of times too often. Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once’.<sup>28</sup> So, as far as relativism is concerned, the situation is very far from being clear. If one wanted to formulate a very general definition of relativism, designed to capture the common feature to all the kinds of relativism available to us, the following ones might be of some use: ‘relativism is not a single doctrine but a family of views whose common theme is that some central aspect of experience, thought, evaluation, or even reality is somehow relative to something else’.<sup>29</sup> Relativism can also be defined as the following broad thesis: ‘Statements in a certain domain can be deemed correct or incorrect only relative to some framework.’<sup>30</sup>

These are the most general definitions of what we may call ‘philosophical relativism’. Although it has always been of perennial appeal and great interest throughout the whole history of philosophy, relativism has become a very much-debated issue in the last forty years, especially in the USA, where Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago 1962; second edition enlarged, Chicago 1970) and its thesis about incommensurability renewed discussion on relativism in the philosophy of science at the end of the Sixties. In *Against Method* (second edition enlarged, London 1975),<sup>31</sup> Paul Feyerabend widened the meaning of incommensurability so as to include not only scientific thought but also the philosophy of perception and anthropology. Anthropology has contributed to the discussion of relativism since the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Race et Histoire* (Paris 1952). There the founder of Structuralism theorizes the impossibility of a real confrontation between different cultures and thus the impossibility of finding rational grounds for asserting that one society is culturally superior or more advanced than another. This debate in anthropology was introduced into the Anglophone world by the publication of Peter Winch’s *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London 1958), where the author, by developing further Wittgenstein’s concept of forms of life, ends by postulating a kind of incommensurability between different types of societies.<sup>32</sup> Most eminent American philosophers, for instance Rorty, Nagel and lastly Nozick, have been led to take part in the debate;<sup>33</sup> Richard

---

27 Nagel (1996) offers a powerful critique of many of the principal forms of relativism; more recently, see Boghossian (2006).

28 MacIntyre (1989: 182).

29 Swoyer (2003).

30 Bett (1989: 141).

31 Original edition in the *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Minneapolis 1970, 17–130.

32 See Winch (1958, especially pp. 81–113), and Winch (1972: pp. 8–49). To see the development of the debate began by Winch, see the articles grouped in Hollis and Lukes (1982).

33 See Rorty (1979, especially pp. 306–93); Nagel (1996); Nozick (2001, especially part I, pp. 15–67). There are two valuable collections of essays that attempt to catch the variety

Bernstein has also shown convincingly that the contrast between relativism and objectivism can be seen as the crucial question for philosophical speculation since the times of Descartes.<sup>34</sup>

The main philosophical advantage of this fresher discussion about relativism is that it has produced original insights into the topic; different and more fascinating formulations of relativism (although not all of them necessarily stronger than the more traditional ones) have been circulated. In particular, there is one definition of relativism that seems to be more powerful and intriguing than others, at least for the purpose of this book, and one that has been formulated by Joseph Margolis in his *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford 1991). Here he offers a history of philosophical relativism (from ancient Greek philosophy, from the figure of Protagoras, up to the present day) reinforced by a revisionary assessment of its power from a theoretical point of view. Margolis's main point is that philosophical relativism, of the kind generally known to us as 'cognitive relativism', is not only a doctrine about (the conditions of) truth, that is, an epistemological doctrine, but is a more complex philosophical thesis, more exactly a threefold one. Philosophical relativism is an *alethic* thesis (that is, a thesis that says something about the *nature* of truth), an *epistemological* thesis (which says something about the *conditions* of truth and knowledge) and an *ontological* thesis (which, by relating truth, knowledge and reality, says something about the *structure* of the world). He claims that relativism, if taken in such a fashion, is a much stronger philosophical position than its commonest formulations, namely those exemplified by the definition of relativism given above by Swoyer and Bett, would suggest. Margolis calls his formulation of relativism 'robust relativism', where the robustness lies principally in the fact that such a formulation would make relativism free from the charge of being self-refuting, the commonest charge brought against relativism since the time of Plato's *Theaetetus*.<sup>35</sup>

Margolis's book is a very passionate defence of relativistic positions and the formulation of relativism that he offers seems a pretty good one and one that suits rather nicely the concept of relativism that Ancient Greeks had, or so I claim. Specifically it suits the type of relativism that in his dialogues Plato attaches to Protagoras. This point is also recognized by Margolis, who makes Protagoras 'the patron saint of relativism' (*Foreword*, p. xii). But, given the nature of Margolis's study, the point is not pressed further so as to include a general assessment of Protagoras' positions, let alone the Platonic Protagoras. The kernel of Protagoras' doctrine, historically and also in Plato's *Theaetetus*, is his famous pronouncement: 'Of all things, the measure is man, of things which are, that they are, of things which are not, that they are not.' At first sight, Protagoras' maxim sounds like an epistemological maxim that says something about the conditions of truth and knowledge, but it also makes open reference to the ontology of the world and it can also be read as a maxim that says something about the nature of truth. Keeping in mind the threefold definition of relativism provided by Margolis, I will try to understand the extent to which

---

of positions that characterizes what is still a heated debate: Krausz and Meiland (1982) and Krausz (1989). See also Unger (1984), Kölbel (2003), Baghramian (2004).

34 See Bernstein (1983: pp. 8–48).

35 For all this, see Margolis (1991: pp. 1–23).

Protagoras can be regarded as the first ‘robust relativist’ in the history of western thought. If we took Protagoras as the first relativist in the sense given to the term by, for instance, Swoyer and Bett, few arguments could be put forward to defend him (or the ideas that Plato ascribes to him) from Plato’s own criticism. Relativism would become once again (or indeed from its very birth) a rather weak philosophical position.

Plato’s extensive treatment of Protagoras, at least in the *Theaetetus*, will also make better sense if we interpret Protagoras’ maxim as a threefold thesis. After having interpreted Protagoras’ pronouncement in the *Theaetetus* as a theory of truth (according to which knowledge is perception, *Tht.* 151e), Plato himself immediately subdivides it into two main secondary theses, an epistemological one, which is about the conditions of knowledge, relativistically understood (*Tht.* 152a–c), and an ontological one, which is about the structure of the world (*Tht.* 152d–154b, and 156bff, where Plato mixes up what he thinks is a Secret Doctrine of Protagoras with some Heraclitean elements). Margolis’ robust relativism provides not only a way to assess the quality of Protagoras’ relativism and (possibly) to defend it from Plato’s attacks, but also, and more importantly, a way to make Plato’s arguments clearer. Robust relativism seems to be the most congenial theoretical approach to adopt if one wants to make good sense of Plato’s treatment of Protagoras. If one aims to reconstruct the philosophy of Protagoras in the context of the dialogues of Plato (the most important aim of this book), the framework provided by Margolis’s robust relativism will appear to be the most capable of explaining, first, Plato’s moves both in the *Theaetetus* and in *Protagoras* (as far as Protagoras’ doctrines are concerned) and, secondly, the philosophical quality of the relativistic positions that Plato ascribes to Protagoras (the second main aim of this study).<sup>36</sup>

As I said earlier, Protagoras can be taken as Plato’s subtlest enemy; at least this is what I claim, and what I wish to do here is not only to reconstruct the philosophical positions that Plato attributes to Protagoras, but also to provide a possible defence of Protagoras’ positions (which Plato intends to refute) by offering some counter-arguments, which I have termed above as anti-Platonic. The full meaning of my attempt to find a weak historical plausibility of Protagoras’ picture in the context of the dialogues of Plato is now, I hope, clearer. By presenting some anti-Platonic counter-arguments in the course of the reconstruction of Protagoras’ doctrines in Plato’s *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, I will try not only to put forward some suggestions (suggested by an interpretation of Protagoras’ extant fragments) that would make such counter-arguments closer to the ones that the historical Protagoras could have presented on his own (had he been able to defend himself from Plato’s objections), but I will also attempt to make Protagoras’ relativistic positions philosophically stronger than Plato had thought them to be, or at least to make them less straightforwardly refutable. The purpose of providing anti-Platonic arguments is thus not only, broadly speaking, historical but, more importantly, philosophical, namely to make Protagoras’ relativism a more coherent position than Plato suggests that it is.

---

<sup>36</sup> For an important attempt to illuminate ancient ideas by means of contemporary philosophical speculation, see Rhees (2004).

A final clarification is needed, as far as relativism is concerned. In the course of the book I will adopt what may be called a ‘defensive’ approach toward relativism. I do not assume that relativism, whatever it is, is a true doctrine; but what I want to suggest is that, when we talk about relativism, we need first to be as careful and precise as we can, to avoid adding confusion to a philosophical doctrine that is difficult to define clearly. Secondly, once we get clearer about the meaning, content and consequences of relativism, we might be more inclined to take relativism as a less trivial position than it is often supposed to be. These thoughts will make relativism more worth looking at; they could also make some people suspect that there is something true in it. If relativism can be thus regarded as a serious philosophical position, the attempt to understand the first detailed and wide-ranging exposition of relativistic issues in the history of thought, that is, Plato’s description of Protagoras’ doctrines in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, will make good sense.

### **Approaches to Plato**

Before offering a more detailed account of the structure of the book that may give the reader a general view of the path that I intend to follow, it is useful to make my approach to Plato more explicit. Plato is a brilliant writer (indeed one of the finest of all times) and a fascinating philosopher whose admirably constructed arguments have often brought his interpreters to despair. He writes dialogues that are articulated by different characters who advance philosophical theses that very often express conflict. The dialogue form thus represents Plato’s attempt to assess the philosophical strength and weakness of such alternative theses and to formulate his own answers for the debated question (although, again, Plato’s answer is, in many cases, not wholly clear).<sup>37</sup> So, how should one read Plato’s dialogues? Is one to read them in order to look at the philosophical arguments contained there and to understand their logical relations, or to try to grasp Plato’s own positions among all those debated? Is one to read Plato’s dialogues to analyse the logical relations and mutual implications between the arguments put forward in one dialogue and others argued for in another dialogue? Or should one read Plato so as to be able to relate the philosophical positions he presents in one dialogue with the positions he appears to maintain in other dialogues so to be able, first, to capture Plato’s key ideas on ethical, epistemological, political issues and so forth and then to offer a systematic understanding of his thought?

Speaking very broadly, in reading Plato two exegetical approaches are predominant nowadays: the analytical approach, more commonly adopted in English-speaking countries, and what might be termed as the continental approach, more frequently diffused in continental Europe (France, Italy, Germany and so forth).<sup>38</sup> Philosophical arguments (and their validity or logical fragility) are what matters

---

37 This will be the case, at least if the dialogue is not an aporetic one. On the philosophical significance of the dialogue form in Plato, see Gill (2002), Rowe (2007).

38 On exegetical approaches to Plato, see Rowe (2003: especially 116–22), where he briefly scrutinizes all the fundamental readings of Plato from antiquity to our time (dogmatic, sceptic, Unitarian and developmental, esoteric, Straussian). For the analytic approach, see

most when reading Plato for analytical scholars; the system of Plato's thought is what counts most for continental scholars. Of course, both approaches offer more than my schematic description suggests; one approach is not (wholly) alternative to the other. One can be sensitive to the logic of Plato's arguments while also being receptive to the understanding of Plato's set of central ideas and vice versa.

In reading Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, the approach I intend to follow is the analytical one, not only because I believe it to be the most fruitful for a clear comprehension of Plato's dialogues, but also because it is the most profitable for the purposes of this book. The ultimate aim of this study is a philosophical understanding of the doctrines that Plato ascribes to Protagoras in his dialogues. In dealing with Protagoras, Plato advances some sophisticated arguments, mainly in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, which first aim at establishing some Protagorean positions and then at refuting such positions. Arguments are first offered for formulating and maintaining Protagoras' doctrines; counter-arguments are then developed for showing the inconsistency of Protagoras' positions. The logic of these Platonic arguments, and their mutual, logical relations, is what matters most for someone who is keen on grasping the content of the philosophical doctrines of the Platonic Protagoras. This is the reason why the analytical approach seems to me the most congenial for this type of study; most recent developments of this approach might also offer further help for a wider comprehension of Plato's dialogues. Some analytical scholars in fact are now interested not only in the arguments of Platonic dialogues, but also in the form through which those arguments are expressed.<sup>39</sup> Most Platonic dialogues are not only philosophical masterpieces but also complex works of literary craft, where the dialogical form that Plato chose for presenting his philosophical arguments is an important element for a fuller understanding of his philosophy. To understand the subtle game of dialectical moves and countermoves between diverse characters and arguments that occurs in Plato's dialogues contributes to a more complete understanding of Plato's works.

My reading of Plato will therefore attempt to combine a careful scrutiny of the philosophical arguments that he advances in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* with a sensitive understanding of the literary form that he chooses for presenting such arguments. Again, this attempt will help us to comprehend in a more exhaustive way not only Plato's thought but also, I believe, the figure of Protagoras that we find portrayed in Plato's dialogues. After examining Plato's arguments in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* and also taking into account the form through which these arguments are presented, I will try to offer an integrated account of Protagoras' doctrines in the context of these dialogues (and of one brief section of the *Cratylus*). In short, arguments taken from dialogues written in different periods of Plato's life contribute in different ways to the formation of one, single picture of Protagoras (and of his philosophy). Some might object that there could be a problem of chronology here. How will it be legitimate in scholarly terms to derive a single account of the philosophy

---

Gill and McCabe (1996); for the continental one, see, above all, Szlezàk (1993) and Brisson (1994).

39 For the development of this new exegetical approach to Plato's later dialogues, see the papers grouped in Gill and McCabe (1996) and Klagge and Smith (1992).

of Protagoras, if the information for obtaining the account is derived from dialogues written over a period probably not less than twenty years? The *Protagoras* is a Socratic, early, dialogue, while the *Theaetetus* is a middle-late one. If this is the case, how will it be possible to speak of one, single Platonic Protagoras? The objection falls for the following reasons. First, there is no certainty as far as Platonic chronology is concerned. Stylometry and lexicographical inquiries have made significant progress in the dating of groups of Plato's dialogues, but no certainty has been reached as far as the chronological order of dialogues within groups is concerned. Recently, in an article whose views have been widely adopted by scholars, Charles Kahn has suggested that stylometry allows us to recognize three broad groups in Plato's dialogues: late (*Timeaus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Laws*), middle (*Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*) and early (the rest), but not to track any linear order within groups. He thus advocates the view that the importance of chronology for understanding Plato's dialogues has been overestimated.<sup>40</sup>

The account of Protagoras' doctrines that this study aims at offering is certainly an integrated one, that is, based on, mainly, two dialogues of Plato, apparently written in periods perhaps separated by some lapse of time. Such an integrated account of Protagoras' doctrines is derived from a close analysis of the arguments that constitute the logical backbone of the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*. What I will attempt in the course of this book is an interpretation of the logic of one argument, say, in the *Theaetetus* and of the role that such an argument plays in the economy of the whole dialogue. Once I have explored one argument, I will pass on to another one, which again will be analysed in the same manner as the previous one, and so forth. At the end, I will have a chain of arguments, each of them understood in their own terms and in their different dialogical contexts. Once this exegetical autonomy is granted to any of these arguments, they may be put together in such a way that a single, unique picture of Plato's understanding of Protagoras emerges. This seems to me a perfectly legitimate approach, which is able to combine profitably close exegesis of the texts with an analysis of a more synoptic kind.

Finally, in this book the overall topic is Plato's understanding of Protagoras in the context of his (Plato's) dialogues. The chosen topic does not fall foul of the problem of chronology, since the single account of Protagorean doctrines obtained at the end of the process reflects Plato's understanding of Protagoras over time. What strikes us is, however, that Plato always understood Protagoras in the same manner and always took Protagoras' doctrines in the same way. There is no contradiction, or logical inconsistency, between Plato's understanding of Protagoras in the 'Socratic' *Protagoras*, and in the later *Theaetetus*. In both cases, Protagoras is for Plato a dangerous relativist and Plato's understanding of Protagoras is one of those topics where Plato shows no fluctuation. I like to think that such stability in Plato's judgement about Protagoras reflects his awareness that the sophist and his relativism were indeed the most dangerous enemy for him and for the kind of objectivistic doctrines he maintained.

---

40 See Kahn (2002). On Plato's chronology, see also Sedley (2004: pp. 1–4).

## Structure

Now that the exegetical approach to Plato adopted in this book has been made explicit, we can revert to the book's structure. The nature of Protagoras' relativism is complex: it first implies a kind of perceptual relativism that mostly affects the individual as such in his epistemological autonomy; second, it suggests a form of ethical relativism that concerns society, taken as the space where individuals, by making their specific *ethos* explicit, act (rightly or wrongly). The main part of this book is about Protagoras' perceptual relativism, which is a theory that deals with the perceptions (broadly understood) of the individual and which will be analysed as an epistemological position with original ontological consequences. Protagoras' perceptual relativism is first defined in the *Theaetetus*. Plato's treatment of it there is so detailed that it is essential for us to understand it fully, in order to appreciate not only its subtlety, but also the meaning of Protagoras' ethical relativism.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book will therefore constitute a detailed analysis of the first part of the Protagorean section of Plato's *Theaetetus* (*Th.* 152a–186e), an analysis that aims at establishing the philosophical content of Protagoras' perceptual relativism, both from an epistemological and ontological point of view. The reading of the *Theaetetus* offered will be reinforced by an interpretation of one brief section of the *Cratylus* that will corroborate the reading of the *Theaetetus* (as far as Protagoras' perceptual relativism is concerned). Thus, in more detail: Chapter 1 will begin by giving some information on the historical figure of Protagoras and will focus on those parts of the *Theaetetus* where the educational rivalry between Protagoras and Socrates is described or referred to; it will continue by providing an interpretation of *Theaetetus* 152a–166e. In this part of the dialogue, Protagoras' perceptual relativism is shown to be an epistemological doctrine that entails a kind of ontological indeterminacy, according to which nothing is if not in relation to somebody. In this context, reasons will be provided to show that Protagoras is not committed to holding any (Heraclitean) doctrine of flux. Chapter 2 will provide an analysis of a brief part of the *Cratylus* and (mainly) of the Defence of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* (167a–168c). In this part of the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras is made to explain his own conception of wisdom and to argue for its legitimacy. Reference to the contemporary debate about incommensurability will help to make Protagoras' conception of wisdom more coherent, as well as revealing the scope of his relativism.

The philosophical treatment of Protagoras' perceptual relativism will be understood properly only if Plato's hostility to it is taken into account; the opposition between Protagoras' perceptual relativism and Plato's epistemological/ontological objectivism will provide the exegetical dichotomy that is intended to shed light on the intricate arguments of Plato's *Theaetetus*: the result will be a quite unusual reading of Plato's moves against Protagoras in that dialogue. The main point is that Protagoras' robust perceptual relativism, with its ontological consequences, is less straightforwardly refutable than Plato wants to suggest; Plato's arguments are not as powerful as some scholars are normally inclined to think. Since in Chapters 1 and 2 a philosophical interpretation of an important part of the *Theaetetus* is provided, the exegesis that I offer of Plato's arguments in that dialogue challenges some important

readings of the *Theaetetus*, such as that of McDowell, Burnyeat, Chappell and Sedley.<sup>41</sup>

Once the philosophical assessment of Protagoras' perceptual relativism has been made, we will be in a better position to comprehend Protagoras' ethical relativism, which will be explored in Chapter 3. The understanding of Protagoras' ethical relativism will be obtained through a reading of some passages of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* (167c-d, 172a-b and 177c-d), and of the first part of the *Protagoras*, mainly the *Mtyh* (320c–324d). If Protagorean individuals are able to enjoy a kind of epistemological infallibility (as far as their perceptions are concerned), Protagorean societies will be in a position to formulate their own ethical rules in such a way that they alone can decide what is right or wrong for them to do. Reference to Wittgenstein's notion of 'form of life' will help to get a more profound understanding of Protagoras' ethical relativism and of his relativism *tout court* (this will be done by linking, in the context of Protagoras' relativism, the notion of 'form of life' with that of 'incommensurability'). As in the case of Protagoras' perceptual relativism, what I suggest is that Plato's treatment of Protagoras' ethical relativism understates the philosophical potential of this position, which is less weak than Plato insinuates.

Chapter 4 deals with Plato's objections to Protagoras' relativism (those advanced at *Theaetetus*, 171a-c; 178b–179c). A detailed analysis of Plato's arguments against Protagoras' relativism will constitute the backbone of the chapter, which will make clear that Plato's real objections to Protagoras' relativism are those based on the objectivity of the healthy and of the advantageous. Reasons will be provided to show that the self-refutation argument is not an appropriate objection to be raised against Protagoras' relativism, since it treats it as a merely epistemological doctrine (whereas it is a doctrine combining alethic, epistemological and ontological aspects). Reference to the difference between 'showing' and 'saying' (as codified in contemporary philosophy) will help Protagoras to make his relativism (and, possibly, any relativism) less self-inconsistent than one may be inclined to believe.

As regarding other recent books on this topic, there are three books that have same similarities with this study, although they diverge from it in their scholarly aims. These books are: Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras. Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* (Oxford 2005); Michael Mendelson, *Many Sides. A Protagorean Approach to the Theory, Practice and Pedagogy of Argument* (Dordrecht 2002); Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos. A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia, South Carolina 2003; first edition, Austin 1991). Although often relying on what Plato says of Protagoras, Mendelson's and Schiappa's books do not offer an integrated account of the relativism of Protagoras in the context of Plato's dialogues. Both books focus on the figure of the historical Protagoras by attempting to provide a plausible interpretation of his extant fragments;<sup>42</sup> the result, in both cases, constitutes an overestimate of the

---

41 See Burnyeat (1991: especially pp. 7–65); McDowell (1973: especially pp. 117–92); Chappell (2005: pp. 15–132); Sedley (2004: pp. 38–53).

42 This is the case especially for Schiappa's book: see his detailed analysis of Protagoras' major fragments in Schiappa (1991: Part II, pp. 87–154).

retorical side of Protagoras' thought and teaching and a correlated underestimate of the philosophical importance of Protagoras and of his relativism (which my book stresses).<sup>43</sup>

Lee's book successfully shows how philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Democritus reacted to the challenge of Protagoras' relativism and, by doing so, the book brings about the importance of relativism in Greek philosophy. But, as Lee makes clear from the beginning, her goal is 'to explore and arrive at a better understanding of the impact of Protagoras' relativist arguments, together with Plato's, Aristotle's, and Democritus' responses to those arguments, on the development of classical Greek epistemology' (*Preface*). By focusing on the reconstruction of the philosophical background in which Plato, Aristotle and Democritus elaborated some of their ideas in response to the challenge posed by Protagoras' relativism, Lee's ultimate aim in her study is thus rather different from my targets in this study, namely a reconstruction of Protagoras' relativism in the context of Plato's dialogues and a defence of the philosophical plausibility of that relativism. Lee's book is, in fact, more concerned to show the weaknesses of Protagorean relativism than its strength (whereas the consistency of Protagorean relativism is defended from Plato's objections throughout my book).<sup>44</sup> Throughout this book, I refer many times to Lee's study to signal points of divergence or of convergence in the interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine in the context of the *Theaetetus*. In particular, in Chapter 2, pp. 85–7, I spell out what I believe are the main differences between the philosophical reconstruction and assessment of Protagoras' relativism that Lee offers and the one I provide in the course of this study.

Lastly, there is a book that, although not strictly centred on Protagoras, yet provides a sensitive account of Protagoras' doctrines and philosophy. The book is C. Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking. The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 1988).<sup>45</sup> As the title itself makes evident, in her study Farrar is concerned with the invention of politics in Classical Athens and, thus, explores the thought and ideas of three different thinkers who are, on her account, relevant for her topic. The thinkers are Protagoras, Democritus and Thucydides. In so doing, she also offers an interpretation of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* that is, to some extent, similar to the one I will provide in this book.<sup>46</sup> Farrar's study is the only scholarly attempt I am aware of in which, in spite of Plato's distortion, Protagoras' doctrine is shown to be coherently tenable. Farrar's book can thus be regarded as a previous attempt to make Protagoras an important figure in Greek philosophy. What

---

43 It is worth noting that in the short part of his book that he devotes to the analysis of the philosophical importance of Protagoras (pp. 3–41), Mendelson offers a reading of Protagoras' doctrine that is rather sympathetic with the one I shall provide in this book.

44 Lee's interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine, together with the philosophical assessment of Protagorean relativism, is to be found in Lee (2005: pp. 8–180): Plato's dealing with Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is the core of Lee's interpretation (see pp. 12–21; 30–57; 77–117). Aristotle is the other main source that Lee uses in her study for the reconstruction and philosophical assessment of Protagoras' doctrine: see pp. 57–64; 117–180.

45 On Protagoras, see especially pp. 44–125.

46 See Farrar (1988: pp. 44–98).

Farrar does at the level of history of political ideas, I will try to do by focusing on the epistemological and ontological content of Protagoras' doctrine.

In short, a book where Protagoras is consistently depicted as the first relativist (in the context of Plato's dialogues) and where good reasons are given for maintaining that Protagorean relativism is a serious and challenging philosophical doctrine needed to be written and this is the project attempted here.

## Chapter 1

# Perceptions and Indeterminacy

### The Historical Protagoras

Before we enter into the details of Protagoras' philosophical doctrines or of the kind of doctrines Plato attributes to him in his dialogues, I give some biographical information on the historical Protagoras. In Diogenes' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Protagoras is said to have been born in Abdera (although Eupolis makes him a native of Teos, whose Abdera was a colony)<sup>1</sup> and to have been the lawgiver of Thurii, a city in the south of Italy founded by the Athenians during the golden age of Pericles. Protagoras' agnosticism caused him to be exiled from Athens and his books to be burned.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear if it was the exile itself that caused his emigration to Sicily: Diogenes does not explicitly correlate the condemnation of Protagoras with his travel to Sicily, but Philostratus does.<sup>3</sup> As for his death, Diogenes (following Philochorus)<sup>4</sup> says that, while Protagoras was travelling to Sicily, his ship sank and he drowned, aged ninety; on the other hand, Apollodorus<sup>5</sup> (Diogenes adds) reports that Protagoras died at seventy, after teaching successfully for forty years.<sup>6</sup> Except for a little other information (for instance he was the first to exact fees for teaching), this is all that we know about Protagoras' life. Relying upon Diogenes' account, Morrison gives the following outline:<sup>7</sup>

<b>Born at Abdera</b>	not before 490 or later than 484.
<b>Set up as public teacher at Athens</b>	not before 460 or later than 454.
<b>Left Athens for Thurii</b>	444, his <i>acme</i> : Protagoras is 40–46.

---

1 See 80DK A11. In his *Vitae Sophistarum* 1.10.1 (=80DK A2), Philostratus confirms Abdera as Protagoras' birth place.

2 See 80DK B4. Philostratus (*Vitae Sophistarum* 1.10.2) claims that Protagoras had been taught by the Persian Magi and that such teaching was behind his agnostic view on the gods' existence.

3 See Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 1.10.3; see also Sextus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.55–56; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.23.63. On the problem of the burning of the books and Protagoras' subsequent exile, see Piccirilli (1997: 17–23).

4 See Müller (1841: 328 F 217); Philostratus (*ibidem*) agrees with Philochorus.

5 See Müller (1841: 244 F 71).

6 See also Plato, *Meno* 91e.

7 See Morrison (1941: 7); for a different outline of Protagoras' life, see Davison (1953: 33–45).

(From Thurii to Sicily?)

Returned to Athens (dramatic date of *Protagoras*) 433 (Protagoras is 51–57).

**Left Athens** (decree of Diopieithes) 430 (Protagoras is 54–60).

(Sicily again?)

**Returned to Athens** 422 (Protagoras is 62–68).

**Died on the way to Sicily** not before 421 or later than 415.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of what is said in the *Protagoras* (317c),<sup>9</sup> Protagoras should have been around fifty in 433, the most probable dramatic date in which the Platonic dialogue is thought to be temporally set; in the *Meno*, Plato says that Protagoras' teaching lasted for forty years and that he lived for seventy years (the tradition of a life of ninety years reported by Diogenes seeming to be false).<sup>10</sup> On this basis, Protagoras should have been nearly thirty in 460–454, and this may have been a good age for him to go to Athens for the first time and start teaching there. Were this dating right, he would have had enough time to build up a reputation sufficiently strong for him to be asked to be the lawgiver of Thurii (around 444). The relationship between Pericles, the man who led Athens in its most powerful days, and Protagoras is well established. There are hints of it in the *Protagoras*<sup>11</sup> and in Plutarch, who speaks of a day-long conversation between the two as well as reporting Protagoras' comment about Pericles' attitude toward the death of his sons.<sup>12</sup> If Pericles and Protagoras were actually close, it would be quite likely that Pericles should have asked Protagoras, in many respects the leader of the emerging movement of the Sophists, to write the laws of the new and most important colony of Athens, a symbol of the immense power gained by Athens in the Greece of the fifth century BC.<sup>13</sup>

After Thurii and in the light of some allusions in the *Greater Hippias* (281a-b and 282d-e), Protagoras is likely to have spent time in Sicily before his attested visit to Athens in 433 BC, the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*. Because of the bad fortune of his friend Pericles just after the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, it is likely that Protagoras left Athens again;<sup>14</sup> such a decision may have been hastened by the plague, which devastated the city around 430/429 and which caused Pericles' death. We do not know where Protagoras went after this second departure and before his third visit to Athens but Morrison is probably right in thinking that he returned

8 Morrison's hypotheses are in bold; my suggestions are between brackets.

9 Protagoras speaking: 'And yet I have been practising the craft for many years, and indeed I am a good age now and I am old enough to be the father of any of you' (*Prt.* 317c1–3).

10 See Morrison (1941: 4).

11 See *Prt.* 315a, 320a, 329a for instance.

12 See Plutarch, *Pericles* 36.5 (=80DK A10) and 80DK B9; on the relationship between Pericles and Protagoras, see O'Sullivan (1995: 45–50); Schiappa (1991: pp. 177–80).

13 On the foundation of Thurii, see Diodorus Siculus 12.10 and again Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 11.

14 On the decree of Diopieithes, which proposed to impeach those who did not believe in the gods and was probably taken against Pericles' *entourage*, see Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 32.1, (see Dover 1976).

to Sicily, where he had stayed before 433 and where he went once he had to leave Athens for the third time.<sup>15</sup> As for this third visit of Protagoras to Athens, there is a passage of Athenaeus that reports that Protagoras arrived in Athens not before 423 and not later than 421;<sup>16</sup> Alcibiades had recently returned to the political stage and Protagoras may have gone back to Athens to help him and influence his strategy. While accusing Alcibiades of the mutilation of the Herms (415), the peace party may have attempted to get rid of Protagoras himself by accusing him of *asebeia* (impiety) and forcing him to escape again to Sicily (at that time he might have been around seventy). Diogenes reports (9.54) that Pythodorus, one of the Four Hundred, accused Protagoras of impiety but this does not mean that the sophist was under accusation during the time of the Four Hundred (that is, in 411). The most probable date of his last departure from Athens thus remains 415, such dating being consistent with what was said above about the duration of Protagoras' life. Both Philochorus and Philostratus speak of Protagoras' drowning and it is quite likely that he died that way.

From this historical picture it is evident that Protagoras was at the centre of the political and intellectual life of Athens in the crucial years of its splendour. Protagoras' main activity during that period was to teach the young, those rich young who belonged to the elite of the polis. As Protagoras affirms in the *Protagoras*, 'what I teach is sound deliberation (*euboulia*), both in domestic affairs – how best to manage one's household, and in public affairs – how to realize one's maximum potential for success in political debate and action' (*Prt.* 318e5–319a2). But Protagoras was not alone in claiming to educate the young; there was another younger figure emerging on the intellectual scene of Athens in the last decades of the fifth century BC, namely Socrates. Like Protagoras, Socrates wanted to teach the young, but they fulfilled their pedagogic mission in quite different ways. Ordinary Athenians, those selling and buying in the streets and even those leading the city, did not grasp the difference between Socrates on the one hand, and Protagoras and the Sophists on the other, as the *Apology of Socrates* witnesses;<sup>17</sup> in this latter dialogue in fact one of the charges brought against Socrates was to make the weaker into the stronger argument, indeed one of the slogans Aristotle attributed to Protagoras.<sup>18</sup> But Plato was a much more perceptive mind than his fellow-citizens, a man 'at the top' (as Socrates would say)<sup>19</sup> and he was well aware of the difference existing in many respects between his master and the Sophists. As is widely known, many Platonic dialogues represent a kind of philosophical dispute between Socrates and the Sophists. One of Plato's historical purposes when he wrote some of his dialogues (mainly the Socratic ones, but also some of his later ones: see, significantly, the *Theaetetus*) was to make clear how different Socrates and the Sophists were, not only in the dissimilar scope of their philosophical speculations, but also in the diverse methods and aims of their educational activities. Plato wanted to make clear that Socrates taught philosophy to

---

15 Morrison (1941: 6).

16 See 80DK A11.

17 On this point, see Lee (2005: p. 3, with further reference).

18 See *Apology* 19c and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a23(=80DK B6b).

19 For the expression, see *Tht.* 148c5.

the young, the Sophists something else. This concern on Plato's side is evident in one of the two dialogues that are centred on Protagoras, namely the *Theaetetus*.

### Sophistic Training and Philosophical Education

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato attempts to answer the question what knowledge (*epistêmê*) is. The dialogue is 69 pages long, if we follow the standard Stephanus' pagination, and it is divided as follows: there is a long introductory section, from p. 142 up to p. 151, where, among other things, an attempt to define knowledge by enumeration of its possible species is deemed as pointlessly unhelpful and improper.<sup>20</sup> A lengthy section on the definition of knowledge as perception (*aisthêsis*) follows, from p. 152 to p. 186. This section may be labelled the Protagorean section of the dialogue, since it is in this part of the dialogue where Protagoras' Measure Doctrine is put under severe scrutiny. Once they have rejected the thesis that knowledge is perception, Socrates and Theaetetus are faced, in the third section from p. 187 to p. 200, with the problem whether true judgement (*alethês doxa*) can be knowledge. But this definition of knowledge too is found to be faulty and thus a last section follows, from p. 201 to p. 210, where they evaluate the validity of their third and last definition of knowledge, namely 'true judgement with an account' (*alethês doxa* with *logos*). This definition is itself eventually rejected and the dialogue ends aporetically, without any answer to the question of what knowledge is, the three attempts on the part of Socrates and Theaetetus to define knowledge having provided an extraordinary amount of fascinating philosophical arguments that still nowadays trouble the reader with their complexity. But what concerns us at this point is the introductory section, where Socrates gives some details about his own peculiar method of teaching the young and about the way in which truth can be pursued.<sup>21</sup>

In this introductory section Socrates says that in teaching the young his art is the same one that his mother practised, namely the art of midwifery. What his mother did with the bodies of expecting women, Socrates does with the pregnant souls of those young who want to learn and acquire the truth (*Tht.* 150b). He says that one of the features of the art of midwifery is not only to help women to give birth to their offspring but also to help those women to choose their partners first. In similar guise, Socrates chooses first those young whom he thinks are able to reach the truth; once he has chosen his students, he tries to help them to give birth to such truth. The most characteristic ability that is required from someone practising this intellectual

---

20 Formally speaking, the *Theaetetus* has two prologues and is quite an exception in the Platonic corpus. The first, external, prologue is the conversation between Euclides and Terpsion (142a–143c); the second, internal, prologue is the preliminary conversation between Socrates and Theodorus (143d–144d). On the duplex prologue, see Alline (1915); Sedley (2004): pp. 15–17).

21 On the *Theaetetus*, there are four detailed commentaries in English: McDowell's (1973); Burnyeat (1990) (translated into French by M. Narcy, *Introduction au Théétète de Platon*, Paris: PUF, 1998); Polansky (1992) and Chappell (2005). See also Bostock (1988) and Sedley (2004). Very useful are also Narcy 1995 (French) and Nannini (forthcoming, in Italian).

midwifery is, according to Socrates, the capacity to ‘test whether it is an imitation and a falsehood that the young man’s intellect is giving birth to, or something genuine and true’ (*Th.* 150c1–2). In the educational process that Socrates is proposing, it is the (learning) young person who has to give birth to something, be it true or false. Once the birth has taken place, Socrates has to test its quality. If we want to think of the process of Socratic midwifery in modern terms, we shall say that Socrates is able to help the learner to reach the truth by making him assess the coherence or incoherence of his own beliefs and check the correspondence of such beliefs with the reality the learner is faced with (however difficult to define such a reality may be).<sup>22</sup> As is remarked in the *Theaetetus* (150c, 189e, 206d, 210c), Socrates does not possess any wisdom to impart; he is not, by his own admission, a wise man (*sophos*). The learner is the one who, strictly speaking, is able to discover the truth through the process of internal self-discovery and self-assessment that Socrates somehow leads from the external.<sup>23</sup> In an etymological sense, Socrates is indeed a philosopher, *philo-sophos*, someone aspiring to reach the possession of a wisdom that he does not yet possess; this deficiency is exactly what makes him continue searching for the truth all his life, so that the latter becomes the kind of examined life of which he talks in the *Apology*.<sup>24</sup> The same deficiency is what makes the whole educational process called ‘Socratic midwifery’ a shared search by both Socrates and the learner for the same objective, that is, the truth. It is exactly a shared search (although it does not openly lead anywhere in this particular case) that Socrates and Theaetetus take forward in the *Theaetetus*, which thus becomes a written document of the way in which the process of Socratic midwifery is carried out.<sup>25</sup>

But other people wanted to teach the young in fifth-century Athens; unlike Socrates, these people professed to be wise and made professional use of their alleged wisdom. Rather naturally, the Sophists were Socrates’ competitors in the market for the education of the young; the excitement of Hippocrates at the presence of Protagoras at the discussion on virtue described in the *Protagoras* is a clear signal

---

22 On these features of Socratic midwifery, see two consecutive passages. The first is 154e3–5, Socrates talking to Theaetetus: ‘Our first aim will be to look at our thoughts themselves in relation to themselves, and see what they are (*prôton boulêsometha theasasthai hauta pros auta ti pot’estin ha dianoometha*) – whether, in our opinion, they agree with one another or are entirely at variance (*poteron hêmîn allêlois sunphônei e oud’ hopôstioum*).’ The second one is at 154a7–155a2, again Socrates talking to Theaetetus: ‘As we are not in any way pressed for time, don’t you think the thing to do is to reconsider this matter quietly and patiently, in all seriousness analyzing ourselves (*hêmas autous exetazontes*), and asking what are these apparitions (*ta phasmata*) within us?’ See also Burnyeat (1977: 7–16); Rowe (2003: 113–119); Sedley (2004: pp. 28–37, where it is denied that Socrates’ midwifery can be understood as a process of recollection).

23 See 150d5–9: ‘It is clear that this [*sc.* the progress in the acquisition of knowledge] is not due to anything they have learned from me; it is that they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into light. But it is I, with God’s help, who deliver them of this offspring.’

24 See *Apology* 38a. On Socrates’ wisdom, see Sedley (2004: pp. 31–34).

25 For a sensitive attempt to make midwifery the key methodological concept of the dialogue, see Sedley (2004).

of how successful they were in this respect.<sup>26</sup> Socrates himself refers polemically to this educational rivalry in the *Theaetetus*, when he says that he is happy to assign those young who do not possess any philosophical attitude (or, in Socrates' terms, who are not pregnant) to the care of the sophist Prodicus (*Tht.* 151b). In another passage, Socrates says that some young, whom he had helped to give birth to the truth, 'have miscarried the rest of their offspring because of the bad company they kept; and they have lost the ones which had been delivered by me, through rearing them badly, having set more store by falsehoods (*pseudê*) and imitations (*eidôla*) than by what's true' (*Tht.* 150e5–9). There is no explicit reference in this passage to the Sophists but the allusion to 'falsehoods' and 'imitations' is a clear reference to what Plato thought was Protagoras' deceptive wisdom, as we will see shortly.

The *Theaetetus* in fact, or at least its first half, up to the end of the Protagorean section, might be read as an attempt on Plato's part to make evident how ungrounded Protagoras' wisdom is and how unhelpful his teaching is. We do not have any historical evidence of the educational method that Protagoras employed (except for some reference, in two of his extant fragments, to the fact that 'teaching requires natural endowment and practice' and 'they must learn starting young' – 80BDK3, and that 'art was nothing without practice and practice nothing without art' – 80BDK10); little is also known about the type of education that the Sophists imparted.<sup>27</sup> But one of the results that Plato wants to obtain in the *Theaetetus* is to set out the educational problems (and even the nonsense) Protagoras would have been faced with had he held his Measure Doctrine consistently. Plato interpreted Protagoras' maxim that Man is the Measure of All Things as implying that each perception and even each belief is true for the one who has it (a detailed explanation of this point will be found in the following pages). Were this true, Plato asks through Socrates, what sense is to be made of Protagoras' teaching? What would he be able to teach if each of us were the sole judge of his own private and unerring perceptions (or of the thoughts that we have by means of perception, as is said at *Theaetetus* 161d2–3)? Socrates polemically asks: 'How on earth can it be the case that Protagoras is wise, so that he can justly think himself fit to be a teacher of others at high fees, whereas we are more ignorant, and have to go to his lessons, though each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom?' (*Tht.* 161d9–e3). The point made here constitutes a powerful objection to Protagoras' legitimacy as a teacher: from the point of view of someone practising Socratic midwifery, how might it be possible to test and inspect another's perceptions and beliefs (an activity that Socrates takes to be central for his art of midwifery and, I believe, for every educational process) if they all are correct and unerring?<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the *Theaetetus*, Socrates' objections to Protagoras are formulated so as to uncover not only the logical inconsistency of his doctrines but also his illegitimacy as a teacher. Protagoras will not teach anybody anything if he wants to be coherent with his Measure Doctrine; he will not be able to make his pupils

---

26 See *Prt.* 310d and *Republic* 10.600c4.

27 See Grote (1888: pp. 43–46, 52–54 and 73–80). See also Muir (1982); Schiappa (1991: pp. 157–174).

28 On this point, see *Tht.* 162a.

give birth to the truth because he holds that each of them is self-sufficient in his knowledge.<sup>29</sup> But Protagoras openly professed to be wise and to have wisdom; indeed he was someone who made of his wisdom a profession, an art. Socrates defines Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* as ‘the wisest man alive’ (*Tht.* 160d6; *Prt.* 309d1), while, conversely, in the *Theaetetus* he says of himself: ‘I don’t make any pronouncements about anything myself, because I have no wisdom in me’ (*Tht.* 150c6–7). The latter sentence, the Anonymous Commentator refers, should be taken to mean that Socrates is not wise of the same wisdom ‘that he attributes to god, or of that that others attribute to the Sophists’:<sup>30</sup> for Socrates only the gods are wise, while he is someone aspiring to be wise but who has no actual wisdom. On the other hand, others, including the young Hippocrates present at the discussion in the *Protagoras*, believe that the Sophists are wise and that the wisest of them is their leader, Protagoras. But Protagoras is not wise at all, Socrates warns, and his wisdom is only apparent, Protagoras’ doctrines being false and his teaching pointless, indeed harmful for the young. What Plato’s Socrates wants to do in the *Theaetetus* is, among other things, to reveal the risk that some young people run when they associate themselves with Protagoras: they wrongly believe he is a wise man and a teacher worthy of the highest praise, while he is only a sophist and not a real philosopher. A dichotomy between the sophist and his apparent wisdom on the one hand and the philosopher and his search for truth on the other is thus lurking behind the first pages of the *Theaetetus*; the same dichotomy is openly stated and fully dealt with in another important section of the *Theaetetus*, the Digression (172c–177c).

### The Digression

After having summed up his elaborated interpretation of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine, Socrates once again connects the discussion of the doctrine of Protagoras with the question of wisdom and warns Theodorus: ‘we are becoming involved in a greater discussion from a lesser one’ (*logos de hēmas ek logou meizēn ex elattonos katalambanei*) (*Tht.* 172b8–9). The lesser discussion is the one preceding the Digression, when the definition of knowledge as perception and Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine are discussed. The greater discussion is the Digression itself, which says something about wisdom more essential than the preceding discussion of Protagoras’ doctrine is able to do, in so far as it treats the question of wisdom in a more timeless way by portraying two alternative paradigms of the intellectual. The term ‘digression’ is somehow misleading in so far as it suggests that we are faced with a kind of abrupt interruption from the main theme of the discussion; some authoritative voices, for instance Gilbert Ryle, have seen in the Digression no more than that.<sup>31</sup> At any rate,

29 On the epistemological self-sufficiency of the knower, see *Tht.* 169a5 and d5.

30 See Bastianini and Sedley (1995: LIV 31–38).

31 See Ryle (1966, p. 158); see also McDowell (1973: p. 174); Burnyeat (1990: p. 34). By contrast, Sedley (2004: pp. 63–88) offers an original explanation of the role and function of the Digression in the economy of the dialogue as a whole by appealing to the distinction between Socrates, the character speaking, and Plato, the authorial voice. Plato himself uses the word ‘digression’ at 177b when he remarks: ‘we had better leave it there, all this is really a

the content of the Digression is a treatment of a wider breadth about the question of wisdom, which in the *Theaetetus* up to the Digression was deliberately confined to the single case of Protagoras' pretentious wisdom. The Digression instead offers a characterization of the nature and role of the philosopher, the real wise man, which has become paradigmatic from antiquity to modern times.<sup>32</sup>

In the Digression, the philosopher is portrayed as a free man who has plenty of time to talk, in peace and quietly, so that he can 'hit upon that which is' (*Tht.* 172d9). The philosopher is someone who does not know 'the way to the market-place, or the whereabouts of the law-courts or the council-chambers or any other place of public assembly' (*Tht.* 173d1–3), since only his body lives in the city, as a foreigner. His mind 'pursues its winged way, as Pindar says, throughout the universe, "in the deeps below the earth" and "in the heights above the heaven" [...] tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, and never condescending to what lies near at hand' (*Tht.* 173e–174a). Since he is that way, the philosopher is often laughed at by the common herd when he has to deal with the things that lie at his feet and before his eyes, as the case of Thales and the Thracian servant-girl witnesses.<sup>33</sup> But the philosopher wants to leave this world behind and 'become as like god as possible' (*homoiôsis theô(i) kata to dunaton*, 176b1–2), since it is God who is the Measure of All Things, as Plato says in the *Laws*.<sup>34</sup> Such assimilation of the philosopher to god can be obtained by becoming 'just and pure, with understanding' (*dikaion kai hosion meta phronêseôs*, 176b2), since God is supremely just. To know this means to possess 'genuine wisdom and goodness', the failure to realize this being 'manifest folly and wickedness' (*Tht.* 176c5–6).<sup>35</sup>

The philosopher is contrasted with another paradigmatic figure who is his opposite, in the way that the night displays all the opposite features of the day. Socrates does not use a word to label exactly the figure in question, referring initially to the man 'who has been knocking about in law courts and such places ever since he was a boy' (*Tht.* 172c8). This man, call him a rhetorician or a politician or something

digression (*parerga*); and if we go on, a flood of new subjects will pour in and overwhelm our original argument'. Although the use of the word 'digression' may suggest the little importance of the passage in question, I do not believe that is a correct understanding of this passage.

32 For the impact that the Digression had in antiquity, see Jaeger (1948). The most striking judgement on the appeal of the Digression remains, I believe, that of Karl Popper, who deeply appreciates its humanitarian aspect, in contrast with what he thought was the anti-humanitarian attitude of the *Republic*: see Popper (1963).

33 See *Tht.* 174a: 'Thales was studying the stars [...] and gazing aloft, when he fell into a well; and a witty and amusing Thracian servant-girl made fun of him because, she said, he was wild to know about what was up in the sky but failed to see what was in front of him and under his feet.'

34 *Laws* 716c, the Athenian speaking: 'In our view, it is God who is preeminently the "measure of all things," much more so than any "man", as they say.'

35 The philosopher is said to become as like God as possible also in the *Republic* (500b–d) and in the *Timaeus* (90d). Arius Didymus (in Stobaeus, *Eclogae* II, 49.18–22) says that the idea of becoming like God is the same one in the three dialogues (although the context in which the idea is discussed is different: ethical in the *Republic*, logical in the *Theaetetus* and physical in the *Timaeus*). On all this, see Sedley (1999); Annas (1999: 52–71).

between the two, as Protagoras and those educated by him probably could have been in Plato's eyes, always has little time, since in the law-courts he has to speak with an eye on the clock and without the necessary peace of mind (the success or failure of his talk concerning himself directly or even his or somebody else's life). Acting in this way and with such restrictions of time and scope, his soul becomes small and warped and thus he grows up in a servitude that makes him constantly bent and distorted, with the result that his mind 'has no health in it' (*Tht.* 173b2). Such a man is unable 'through lack of [philosophical] education to take a steady view of the whole' (*Tht.* 175a2), since what concerns him is what lies at his feet and before his eyes. If the real philosopher asks him to go beyond the limits of a particular case (for instance, 'what injustice am I doing to you, or you to me': see *Tht.* 175c2) to investigate a more universal question (for instance, 'what justice and injustice are in themselves or what is the essence, *ousia*, of human happiness or unhappiness': see *Tht.* 175c3–4), it will be then that 'his head [will] swim as, suspended at such a height, he gazes down from his place among the clouds' (*Tht.* 175d2). Finally, Socrates remarks, this man does not know how 'to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of the gods and of the happy among men' (*Tht.* 175e7–176a2). Unlike the philosopher, this man does not want to leave behind this world with all its deficiencies and become as like God as possible; he does not even know how to praise the divine life with his speeches. By acting in this way, since he is so linked with the worldly world, he is a worldly man uninterested in the divine.

In their being so paradigmatic, the opposite and alternative characterizations of the philosopher and of the worldly thinker do not aim to represent historical figures, such as Socrates or Protagoras, but, more universally (that is, in the philosophical sense established by Socrates in the Digression), they try to define two models, ideal-types, of intellectuals.<sup>36</sup> Focusing on the relationship between divine, just and happy, the Digression also prepares the last crucial argument of the Protagorean section, the 'advantageous/useful in the future' (*Tht.* 177–179). But one of its functions in the economy of the whole dialogue is for certain that of distancing the real philosopher from the worldly thinker, that is, the sophist, at a further and more essential level than the preceding part of the Protagorean section is able to do and also to show the young in search of their masters what were the risks they would have run had they been taught by a sophist. Incidentally, the same objective of unmasking the incapacities of the Sophists and their inability as philosophers and teachers is what is under focus in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates and Protagoras meet up in the house of Callias, a prominent political figure in Athens.<sup>37</sup> Among other things, Protagoras claims to be able to teach *aretê*, 'virtue' (*Prt.* 319a-b). But in the course of the dialogue Socrates aims to show that Protagoras has no real understanding of what virtue is and thus he cannot teach the young something about which he has no clue at all.<sup>38</sup>

---

36 On this point, see Sedley (2004: pp. 65–84). Rue (1993) insists on the grotesque aspect of the characterization of the philosopher in the Digression. See also Barker (1976); Bradshaw (1998); Declava Caizzi (2002).

37 In the *Theaetetus*, Callias is said to be 'the guardian of Protagoras' relicts' (165 a2).

38 On this point, see the conclusion of the *Protagoras*: *Prt.* 361a-e.

The Digression therefore provides us with a picture of the sharp contrast between the ideal philosopher and the ideal sophist (ideal in so far as he is the paradigmatic figure to be avoided by someone who wants to be a philosopher). At one end of the spectrum, there is the philosopher who is in search of the truth and aims at it by distancing himself from the worldly world and by assimilating himself as much as he can to the world of the gods; on the other extreme of the spectrum, there is the worldly sophist, who is incapable of considering things *sub specie aeternitatis* and is happy to deal with the particular. By being so experienced of the world as it appears to be, the sophist pretends to be the wisest of all human beings and thus fails to realize that real wisdom is that of the gods. (As noted earlier, in one of his most famous fragments Protagoras even professes not to be interested in the existence of the gods, since this is a matter that he cannot ascertain.)<sup>39</sup> Because of this attitude, he is the antithesis of the real philosopher, who, in his search for the truth, has his mind directed towards the divine world and not to the worldly one.<sup>40</sup>

To focus first on the issues of education and wisdom that Socrates raises with Theaetetus as soon as their dialogue begins (issues that the Digression treats in a more comprehensive way) might help the reader to set the cultural background in which the discussion (from p. 152 to p. 186 of the *Theaetetus*) that they have on Protagoras' doctrine is set. The importance of the contrast that Plato sets forth in the *Theaetetus* between philosophy and a philosophical education on the one side and sophistry and a sophistic education on the other is often neglected. But I believe that it is through a correct understanding of the force of this contrast that all the talk about Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* becomes more understandable. All the arguments about Protagoras' position and the relativistic positions that Plato ascribes to him in the *Theaetetus* becomes clearer once we have realized that, among other things, what is under consideration in the *Theaetetus* are two competing models of wisdom (and thus of the type of education that derives from these models). Plato aims to show that his model of wisdom, be it entirely his own or partly that of Socrates, is the only credible model of philosophical wisdom and that Protagoras', or the model he attaches to Protagoras, is a deceitful and apparent one.<sup>41</sup> The deceitfulness of Protagoras' wisdom becomes evident once its grounds are properly assessed and shown to be internally incoherent. As we shall see, other arguments may be advanced to show that Protagoras' wisdom can be less weak than Plato suggests; conclusions can thus be drawn to hold that Protagoras' wisdom was indeed an alternative and appealing model of wisdom and education. Plato just needed to look at the success that the Sophists had with those rich young who could afford their teaching, and at the kind of death that Socrates was given to, to reach such a desolate conclusion.

---

39 On Protagoras' alleged agnosticism, see 80DK B4 and *Theaetetus* 162e, where Socrates makes Protagoras say: 'My good people, young and old [referring to Socrates and Theaetetus] you sit here orating; you drag in gods, whose existence or non-existence I exclude from all discussion, written and spoken.'

40 On the contrast between the two figures, see Hadot (2002: pp. 68–69).

41 As far as the educational difference between Socrates and Plato is concerned, it is worth noting that ancient sources, i.e. the Anonymus commentator of the *Theaetetus* (see Bastianini-Sedley 1995: LV 26–33), take midwifery to be both Socrates' and Plato's method of teaching. On the point, see also Sedley (2002a: 37–57, especially 46–47).

### Reading the *Theaetetus*

Let us now go into the details of Protagoras' doctrine by examining the treatment that Plato devotes to it in the *Theaetetus* and by assessing its philosophical importance. As briefly summed up above, after the introduction, a long section follows, from p. 152 to p. 186, which starts off with the definition that knowledge is perception. At this stage, it might be useful to give a brief account of the argumentative structure of the section in question. The Protagorean section begins with the thesis that knowledge is perception (151e); Socrates equates this thesis to Protagoras' Measure Doctrine (152a) and gives reasons for saying that the two philosophical positions are equivalent (152a-c). Socrates next illustrates what he calls Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, held by many other thinkers and chiefly by Heraclitus, according to which nothing is in itself just one thing and that nothing ever is but everything is coming to be (153–160). After having expounded it, Socrates reveals the link between the Secret Doctrine and the Measure Doctrine, so that the real meaning of the latter may become evident, with all its dangerous philosophical consequences (156a–160d). Given the Socratic reading of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine, the crucial objection against the legitimacy of Protagoras' wisdom is raised at 161e–162a (other intermediate arguments for showing the weaknesses of Protagoras' doctrine and of the identification of knowledge with perception are put forward from p. 163 to p. 166, to prepare the field for the forthcoming critique of Protagoras). Socrates expounds a defence, on Protagoras' behalf, from the charge he has brought against the sophist's wisdom (166a–168c5), a section known in the literature as 'Defence (or Apology) of Protagoras'.

It is in this section that Protagoras is made to widen the meaning of his maxim by applying it not only to perceptions of the individual but also to the ethical judgements of the polis. Socrates' critique of Protagoras' doctrines is raised from p. 170a to p. 171d, and it is here that we find the self-refutation argument levelled against Protagoras. The Digression follows, from p. 172 to p. 177; an intricate argument about the 'advantageous/useful in the future' is constructed from p. 178 to p. 179, in which Socrates purports to show the inconsistencies of Protagoras' doctrine as far as the case of the ethical judgements of the polis is concerned. The core of Plato's treatment of Protagoras' doctrine finishes, strictly speaking, at this point of the section, which goes on up to p. 186. The two theses related to Protagoras' Measure Doctrine, namely the kind of Heraclitean theory of flux that Socrates believes to be a part of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine and the thesis that knowledge is perception, are dealt with by Socrates in these final pages of the Protagorean section. Socrates expounds his critique of the former from p. 180a to p. 183c and of the latter from p. 184b to p. 186e.<sup>42</sup>

Plato is well aware of the complexity of the arguments he has formulated in dealing with Protagoras and of the multiplicity of the logical relations one can establish between these arguments. Almost at the end of the Protagorean section,

---

42 On Plato's critique of Heraclitus' theory of flux (which, on his account, would make language impossible), see Sedley (2002b). On Plato's critique of the equation of perception with knowledge, see Cooper (1970) and Holland (1973).

Socrates remarks: 'I am very afraid that the object of our discussion, the nature of knowledge, might be left unexamined amid the crowd of theories that will rush in upon us if we admit them' (184a). Part of the task for someone who wishes to offer an interpretation of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* is to give a coherent explanation of the logical connections between one argument and the other. But since the arguments in question are so philosophically deep, it is almost impossible to offer one single reading of the Protagorean section (and part of the philosophical appeal that the *Theaetetus* has had since Plato's time is due to the fact that it seems impossible to understand it, once for all, in a definitive and satisfactory manner).

In his detailed *Introduction* of Jane Levett's revised translation of the *Theaetetus*, Myles Burnyeat identifies two standard readings of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*. The first interpretation argues that, as far as sensible things are concerned, Plato accepts the theories of Protagoras and Heraclitus, which state that sensible things are in perpetual flux and that in the perceptual act each of us is (a diverse) measure of those sensible things, since each of us is incorrigibly aware of those sensible qualities that belong to them. But Plato believes that this perceptual awareness cannot be knowledge because its objects are in perennial flux, that is, they belong to the realm of becoming and not to that of being. Real knowledge is, on Plato's account, that of those changeless beings, the Forms, whose realm is completely non-sensible. As Burnyeat sums up this reading (which he calls Reading A): 'perception is something of which Protagoras and Heraclitus give a true account. But nothing of which these theories are true can yield knowledge. Therefore knowledge is not perception' (Burnyeat 1990, p. 8). The second interpretation, which Burnyeat adopts and which he says was first proposed by Bernard Williams some forty years ago, argues that Plato does not accept the theories of Protagoras and Heraclitus but he must confront them, once he has made Theaetetus define knowledge as perception. On this interpretation (Reading B), Plato wishes to show that if someone accepts that knowledge is perception, a Protagorean epistemology and a Heraclitean ontology should be adopted, the three positions representing a logically indiscernible three-in-one theory that leads to the absurd consequence of the impossibility of language. Thus, 'the structure of the argument is that of a *reductio ad absurdum*: Theaetetus Protagoras Heraclitus the impossibility of language. Hence Theaetetus' definition is impossible' (Burnyeat 1990, p. 9).<sup>43</sup>

These are nowadays the two commonest readings of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, and they are useful in so far as they provide hermeneutic paradigms capable of explaining (differently) key passages of the text, as well as providing a general strategy for the interpretation of the whole dialogue.<sup>44</sup> But, as Burnyeat

---

43 Chappell divides the many readings of the *Theaetetus* available to us into Unitarian and Revisionist: see Chappell (2005: pp. 16–21).

44 For an analysis of the three main readings of the *Theaetetus* that Ancient commentators developed, see Sedley (1996). Ancient commentators believed the Protagorean section to be the most philosophically interesting of the whole dialogue, while most modern interpreters tend to focus their attention on the issues raised by the other two main sections, i.e. 187–200 ('Knowledge is true judgement') and 201–210 ('Knowledge is true judgement with an account'), with the recent exception of Sedley (2004) and Chappell (2005).

remarks, Reading A and B do not exhaust the exegetical spectrum of the possible interpretations of Plato's moves in the Protagorean section.<sup>45</sup> They are not, I add, rival readings as they could seem to be at a first sight. One may argue that Plato sees a logical interdependence between Theaetetus', Heraclitus' and Protagoras' positions and that on this interdependence he builds up the argumentative backbone of the Protagorean section (Reading B). But it can also be added that Plato is, in some parts of the Protagorean section, deliberately unclear how to connect logically the arguments he is advancing. This ambiguity not only invites the interpreter to dig further into Plato's arguments, whose logical relations with one another are thus not as straightforward as Reading B asserts, but it also allows the suggestion that Plato may share some of the views he is attacking (chiefly that on perceptions, which is the main concern of Reading A, but also some other views related to this).

In the following sections my main exegetical concern is to argue against Reading B. I do not believe, in fact, that in the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* Plato maintains that Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception, Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the Measure and Heraclitus' theory of flux stand or fall together. In particular, I will argue that Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the Measure does not imply any Heraclitean theory of flux.<sup>46</sup>

### Ontological Relativism

At 151e3 Theaetetus defines knowledge as perception; Socrates is happy to employ his Socratic midwifery to examine this definition, that is, Theaetetus' first-born child, to see if it is 'really fertile or a mere wind-egg' (*Tht.* 151e6). Theaetetus' definition that knowledge is perception is the second given by him in the dialogue, since his first attempt to say what knowledge is can be found at 146d. Here Theaetetus affirms: 'I think that the things that Theodorus teaches are knowledge (*epistêmai*) – I mean geometry and the subjects you enumerated just now (that is, astronomy and all the subjects included in an ordinary educational curriculum). Then again there are the crafts such as cobbling, whether you take them together or separately. They must be knowledge, surely' (*Tht.* 146c7–d1). Theaetetus attempts to define knowledge by enumerating its forms and in fact the plural 'epistêmai' should be correctly translated as 'forms of knowledge'. Socrates rejects Theaetetus' definition by replying that he wanted 'one thing', something simple, while Theaetetus' answer provides a variety of things. Socrates stresses the point further when he says that he wants to know 'what knowledge itself is' (*epistêmen auto hoti pot' estin*, 146e9–10). After what Wittgenstein has taught us in his late philosophical speculation, it is perfectly legitimate, when we look for a definition of X, to look for the numerous uses that the word that stands for X has in our language.<sup>47</sup> But such a procedure is dismissed

45 See Burnyeat (1990 p. 9); Chappell (2005: pp. 22–24); Brown (1993: 210).

46 On this point, see below, pp. 53–4 and Lee (2005: p. 88, n. 24).

47 See Wittgenstein (1958: p. 20): 'The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand

by Socrates as not the right kind of answer for someone who wants to know what knowledge itself is.

Historical distance is not enough to explain such different epistemological approaches, since Plato, curiously, adopted the enumeration-by-species approach in another dialogue, the *Philebus*, where he tries to define pleasure. Responding to Protarchus, his interlocutor in the latter dialogue, Socrates affirms: ‘as to pleasure, I know that it is complex and, just as I said, we must make it our starting point and consider carefully what sort of nature it has. If one just goes by the name it is one single thing, but in fact it comes in many forms that are in some way even quite unlike each other’ (*Philebus* 12c4–8). Incapable of defining pleasure in itself by formulating one definition of it, Socrates enumerates a list of cases of pleasure, which at the end constitute his definition of pleasure in the dialogue.<sup>48</sup>

One of the possible explanations for Plato’s rejection in the *Theaetetus* of the epistemological approach (to knowledge) that he adopted in the *Philebus* (on pleasure) is to be found, I claim, in the contrast between philosophy and sophistry that we have seen prepared for in the initial prologue and later so vividly explained in the Digression. What concerns the philosopher (Plato) is the essence (*ousia*) of the things, what things are in themselves, and this is why in the *Theaetetus* Socrates is made to search for what knowledge in itself is. On the other hand, the sophist is interested in the particular, more than in the universal, and he is thus concerned with particular applications of one concept, more than with the concept itself; this is why an investigation of the various forms of *epistêmê* looks a quite sophistic approach (exactly in the sense that the adjective has in the *Theaetetus*) to the question of knowledge.<sup>49</sup> By contrast from what he does in the *Philebus* when he investigates pleasure, Plato does not believe that the enumeration-by-species approach typical of sophistry can provide satisfactory answers to the question of what knowledge is in the *Theaetetus*. In the latter dialogue, Plato wants to uncover the false grounds on which Protagoras’ wisdom is based by suggesting that the sophist is not wise because he is not even able to tackle the question of knowledge from the correct angle.

Plato may be right in thinking that Protagoras’ wisdom is just an apparent one. His choice, however, to dismiss the particularistic approach in investigating the nature of knowledge at the very beginning of the dialogue, without giving strong arguments for doing so is highly disputable. This is more even so since the universalistic approach he adopts leads nowhere: the dialogue ends with no answer to the question of what knowledge is. Since he is the author of the dialogue, Plato, inevitably, sets the path we have to follow in the *Theaetetus* if we want to discover what knowledge is. We are now about to follow this path but while doing so, it is

---

the usage of the general term. When Socrates asks the question, “What is knowledge?”, he does not regard it even as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.’ *Contra* see Chappell (2005: pp. 35–38) and Sedley (2004: pp. 23–27).

48 For a list of virtues that fails as a definition of virtue, see *Meno* 71e1–73c5.

49 It is worth noting that Plato uses for the second time the plural *epistêmai* (forms of knowledge) again in connection with Protagoras’ doctrine. See *Tht.* 179c7–9, Socrates speaking: ‘perhaps those who profess that they [i.e. perceptions and perceptual judgements] are perfectly evident and are always knowledge (*epistêmai*) may be saying what really is’.

important to keep in mind that an alternative path might have been available, which would have considered particular cases (of the concept) of knowledge and which, by examining those cases, might have advanced a more successful definition of knowledge than Plato's aporetic ones. As Richard Rorty comments on the difference of approaches, 'we shall, in short, be [if we are not imprisoned in the grip of the Platonic mind] where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking": we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation'.<sup>50</sup> In any case, the discussion between Theaetetus and Socrates on knowledge starts off at p. 152 with the rejection of the particularistic approach and the adoption of the universal one, which aims at the identification of what knowledge itself is.

Asked again by Socrates to give a second definition of knowledge, Theaetetus says: 'it seems to me that a man who knows something (*epistamēnos ti*) perceives (*aisthanesthai*) what he knows (*ho epistatai*), and the way it appears at present, at any rate, is that knowledge (*epistēmē*) is simply perception (*aisthēsis*)' (*Th.* 151e1–3). Socrates comments on Theaetetus' answer by saying that this is what Protagoras used to maintain, although he expressed the same idea in a different way when he proclaimed his maxim: 'Man (*anthrōpon*) is the measure (*metron*) of all things (*chrēmātōn*), of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not (*tōn men ontōn hos esti, ton de mē ontōn hos ouk estin*)' (*Th.* 152a2–3). Socrates goes on by explaining the different way in which Protagoras and Theaetetus expressed 'the very same thing'. He says: '[Protagoras] puts it something like this (*houtō pōs legei*), that as each thing appears to me (*hōs hoia men hekasta emoi phainetai*), so it is for me (*toiauta men estin emoi*), and as it appears to you, so it is for you (*hoia de soi, toiauta de au soi*) – you and I each being a man (*anthrōpos*)' (152a6–8).

An example follows, to illustrate the meaning of Protagoras' maxim further. Socrates asks whether it happens that 'when the same wind is blowing (*pneontos anemou tou autou*), one of us feels cold and the other not (*ho men hemōn rhigō(i), ho d'ou*)? Or that one of us feels rather cold and the other very cold (*kai ho men êrema, ho' de sphodra*)?' (152b2–3). Theaetetus confirms this plain fact of our everyday life; Socrates replies with an ontological question by asking in return: 'Are we going to say that the wind itself, by itself (*auto eph' heautou to pneuma*), is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold?' (152b6–7). Theaetetus answers by saying that we must accept Protagoras' option; Socrates thus concludes the whole argument by stating the following:

The appearing of things, then, is the same as perception, in the case of hot and things like that (*phantasia ara kai aisthēsis tauton en te thermois kai pasi tois toioutois*). So it results, apparently, that things are for the individual such as he perceives them (*hoia gar aisthanetai hekastos, toiauta hekastō(i) kai kinduneuei einai*) (152c1–3); perception is always of what is, and unerring – as befits knowledge (*aisthēsis ara tou ontos aei estin kai apseudes hōs epistēmē ousa*) (152c5–6).

50 Rorty (1979: p. 157).

Let us try to put together in a coherent picture all the parts of Socrates' argument about Protagoras' maxim. An initial remark to make is the following one. Man is the Measure of All Things is an original pronouncement of Protagoras, which Plato says began Protagoras' *Truth*.<sup>51</sup> Sextus confirms that Protagoras opened his book by stating his maxim but he adds that the book in question was entitled 'The Overthrowers'.<sup>52</sup> It has been argued that Protagoras' book had a double title, a thing not uncommon for Greek philosophers, especially for Presocratic philosophers.<sup>53</sup> In any case, there is no doubt that Protagoras began his book with his enigmatic words: 'Of all things the measure is man, of things which are, that they are, of things which are not, that they are not'. The words sound like a gnomic sentence, a bold statement of someone who has discovered the truth, who believes himself to be wise and thus warns his readers to keep his precious words in mind. We may guess that the rest of Protagoras' book tried to give hints on the reasons why man is the measure of all things, but the words themselves sound just perfect in their oracular ambiguity; they seem to be the captivating opening of a great book. The difficulty of finding a clear meaning for these initial words was part of what most probably attracted the attention of other philosophers, Plato included.<sup>54</sup>

Plato deplores the oracular ambiguity of Protagoras' words just after having given an explanation of the maxim.<sup>55</sup> We do not know if Plato's explanation is a correct one and indeed there are signs that Plato is using Protagoras' doctrine for his own purposes. One sign of this Platonic (mis-)use is Socrates' equation between the thesis that knowledge is perception and Protagoras' Measure Doctrine. Protagoras' maxim does not contain any reference to 'perception' or 'to perceive'; Plato's explanation of it makes plain that the maxim is not simply a theory of perceptual truth.<sup>56</sup> The thesis that knowledge is perception and the Measure Doctrine are not logically equivalent, although the latter alludes to a Protagorean theory of truth that may contain a theory of perceptual truth, namely the one we are faced with in the section of the *Theaetetus* now under scrutiny. According to Socrates' explanation, if interpreted as equivalent to Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception, the Measure Doctrine means that as 'each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you'. The example of the wind clarifies the point further. If you and I feel the same wind and you feel it as cold and I as hot, what we take to be the same wind will be cold for you and hot for me. In our everyday life it usually happens that people perceive things differently. Nobody finds this fact problematic and it might sound trivial to insist on it and to make it a philosophical position worth looking at. But, if we provide this fact with an ontological assumption, things will rapidly change. This

---

51 See *Tht.* 161c5.

52 See *Adversus Mathematicos* 7.60 and above, p. 5, no. 10.

53 See Nannini (forthcoming: p. 48, note to 161c4).

54 This point about the oracular style of Protagoras' opening sentence will reveal its full importance at a later stage: see p. 115 below.

55 See *Tht.* 152c9–10: 'Was Protagoras one of those omniscient people? Did he perhaps put this [sc. the maxim and its meaning] out as a riddle for the common crowd of us, while he revealed the *Truth* as a secret doctrine to his own pupils?'

56 See *Tht.* 167c and 172a-b and below, pp. 60–6 ff; see also Chappell (2005: pp. 58–59); Lee (2005: pp. 15–17).

is what Socrates does when he asks Theaetetus to follow Protagoras and say that ‘the wind itself, by itself [...] is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold’ (152b8–9).

The qualitative status of the perceived object is thus seen as depending upon the perceiver, it is relative to him: what we take to be (perceived as) the same object might be cold for someone and hot for someone else. We may call this position ‘perceptual relativism’: perceptions are always relative to the perceiver. According to perceptual relativism, each perceiver is unmistakably aware of the perceptual qualities that belong, for him, to the perceived object (its coldness, hotness, and so on). The being or not being cold or not cold of the object is relative to the perceiver so that we may assume that the ontological status of the perceived object is relative to the perceiver as well (we may call this position ‘ontological relativism’). Socrates hints at this position, when he says: ‘things are for the individual such as he perceives them’ (152c2–3); or when he affirms: ‘perception is always of what is’ (152c5).<sup>57</sup> Since every perception is relative to the perceiver, it follows that also ‘what is’ is relative to him. During the perceptual act the perceiver (privately) establishes the ontological condition of the perceived object, its perceptual essence, so that the perceived object becomes unerringly known (by him) precisely because of the way in which such an essence is determined. (This point about the strict interrelation between ontological and perceptual relativism that follows from Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine will become clearer once we proceed further with the analysis of the doctrines that Plato attributes to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, and also in the *Cratylus*.)

Taken as a theory of perceptual truth, the Measure Doctrine is a doctrine that implies perceptual relativism, for which each perception is knowledge and is relative to the perceiver. But the key feature of the Measure Doctrine, interpreted as a theory of perceptual truth, is, I believe, ontological relativism, for which the ontological status of the perceived object is relative to the perceiver. It is the perceiver who, during the perceptual act, in some way defines the ontological status of the object so that its being cold or not depends upon him. Plato consciously restricts the field of this ontological indeterminacy to the ‘case of hot and things like that’ (152c2). Nonetheless, it is ontological relativism (or the strict and, on Protagorean grounds, unavoidable combination of perceptual and ontological relativism) that makes the perceptual relativism derived from Protagoras’ maxim an interesting doctrine, for which his author (were he to be the historical Protagoras) deserves to be famous and on whose basis Plato grounds his philosophical hostility to the sophist. It is at an ontological level in fact that Plato and Protagoras could register their most drastic diversity in points of view. In the Digression, we have seen the philosopher concerned about the essence of things and inquiring what things are in themselves; on the other hand, the sophist is there pictured as very much concerned about a particular application of one concept and unable to consider its universality. For

---

57 See also 160c7–9: ‘My perception is true for me – because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not’; see also 161d6–7: ‘Only the individual himself can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct.’

Plato, it can be said summarily that things have a determinate and immutable essence; to have a proper knowledge of things amounts to knowing their changeless essence, the Forms, which are what is supremely real for Plato.<sup>58</sup> Whatever ontology one might attribute to Plato, it must be a determinate and objectivist one: nothing is more distant from his position than the kind of ontological relativism that he ascribes to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*.

When he reports the case of the wind that is felt as cold in one case and as hot in the other, Plato makes Socrates say that it is the ‘same wind’ in both cases. In the light of Plato’s objectivist ontology (and by ‘objectivist ontology’ I mean that the essence of the object does not depend upon any particular point of view), a problem is thus posed about how ‘the wind itself, by itself is’, since it must be or cold or not cold: it cannot be truly both for Plato, although he is often unsure about how to cope with perceptions and perceptual objects.<sup>59</sup> If the wind is both hot and cold, serious concern about the principle of non-contradiction is raised, for two opposite qualities cannot be predicated of the same object at the same time and on the same respect (that is, its temperature).<sup>60</sup> Instead of adopting an objectivistic ontology and in order to give legitimacy to Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine that states that the wind is cold for me and not for you, Plato makes Socrates offer the alternative of another type of ontology for which ‘it [that is, the wind, but the specification “itself, by itself” is not added this time] is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold’ (152b6–7). This position suggests a kind of relativistic ontology, for which the essence of the perceived object is relative to the single perceiver and thus fully depends upon him. For this type of ontology, there is no wind itself, by itself, but there are as many kinds of wind as the number of people perceiving it. There is no universal wind to be individuated ontologically, but a plurality of them to be determined and perceived ontologically.<sup>61</sup>

This point about the ontological plurality which objects are capable of displaying is suggested by Sextus in his brief analysis of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.216–219. After having reported Protagoras’ maxim, Sextus provides an explanation of it by commenting: ‘by “measure” he [Protagoras] means the criterion, and by “things” the objects, so that what he is really claiming is that “Man is the criterion of all objects, of those which are, that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not”’. In the light of this, Sextus adds, Protagoras

---

58 On Plato’s Forms, see McCabe (1994: pp. 53–96, especially pp. 90–96 on Forms as the Objects of Knowledge); Fine (2006: chapters 11–15).

59 Such uncertainty is the reason that makes Plato fluctuate about Protagoras’ perceptual relativism (this is the main point raised by Reading A). See *Theaetetus* 179c3–8 (where he says: ‘As long as we keep within the limits of that immediate present experience of the individual which give rise to perceptions and to perceptual judgements, it is more difficult to convict these latter of being untrue – but perhaps I am talking nonsense [...]; perhaps those who profess that they are perfectly evident and are always knowledge may be saying what really is’). See also *Republic* 523b ff (where he seems to accept the view that two opposite qualities may belong to the same perceptual object). I owe this reference to Michel Narcy.

60 On this point, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 4.1006a–1011b24.

61 On the contrast between these two ontology, see Margolis (1991: pp. 88 ff) and Mendelson (2002: p. 15).

‘postulates only what appears (*ta phainomena*) to each individual, and thus he introduces relativity (*to pros ti*)’ (1.216). Sextus thus confirms that Protagoras is a (perceptual) relativist,<sup>62</sup> and also adds further information on Protagoras’ relativism by remarking: ‘he [Protagoras] says also that the *logoi* of all appearances subsist in matter (*hulê*), so that matter, so far as depends on itself, is able to be all things that appear to all. And men, he says, apprehend different things at different times in accordance with their differing dispositions’ (1.217–218). Matter is able to be all the things that appear to all since there is no unique matter to be perceived but there are as many aspects of matter to be apprehended as perceivers able to apprehend them.

Although ‘matter’, *hulê*, is used in Greek philosophy only after Aristotle and Protagoras could never have used it in the philosophical sense specified by Sextus, the latter nonetheless confirms ontological relativism as a key feature of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine (the passage in question could be seen as rephrasing Protagoras’ original doctrine through the use of the philosophical lexicon adopted by Hellenistic philosophy). Since Sextus reports information on Protagoras’ doctrine that is not reported by Plato in his lengthy analysis of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus* (nowhere in the dialogue is it openly said that for Protagoras the *logoi* of all perceptual appearances subsist in those objects or events we happen to be faced with), it has been argued, correctly I believe, that in his brief treatment of Protagoras’ relativism Sextus is, to some extent, independent of Plato.<sup>63</sup> If this is the case, Sextus will be essential reading if we want to pursue further the issue of the historical plausibility of the picture of Protagoras Plato provides us with in his dialogues.

I insist on this point about ontological relativism since it is this aspect of Protagoras’ doctrine that is most disturbing for Plato, who will shortly complete the doctrine of ontological relativism by advancing a more general version of it. Other reasons require me to insist on ontological relativism. The first is that the importance of ontological relativism is often neglected in the analysis of the first part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, some interpreters preferring to focus on the doctrine of perceptual relativism, which happens to be formulated for the first time in the history of philosophy in these first lines of the *Theaetetus*.<sup>64</sup> But interpreting the Protagorean form of perceptual relativism without putting its connections with the doctrine of ontological relativism in the light that they deserve amounts, I claim, to missing the fundamental point of Socrates’ argument. A second reason to insist on ontological relativism has to do with my secondary concern in the book with historical plausibility. In his initial understanding of Protagoras’

62 This point is denied by Burnyeat in Burnyeat (1976a: 45).

63 See Untersteiner (1996: pp. 50 ff and p. 73, n. 5); Decleva-Caizzi (1988: 470), where she suggests that there was an Epicurean source on which Sextus constructs his own understanding of Protagoras’ relativism; see also Mejer (1968: 58–59), where further reasons are given to suggest that Sextus did not copy his account of Protagoras’ relativism from Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

64 See for example, Kerferd (1949) and all the major commentators of the *Theaetetus* such as Burnyeat, Chappell and Sedley. On the contrary, see Kethcum (1992: 76): ‘The usual statement of [Protagoras’] doctrine is simply in terms of being’; Waterlow (1977: 32): ‘Protagoras’ relativism as Plato presents it is a relativism not of truth but of fact. What is relative to the believer is the reality that makes the belief true.’ See also Lee (2005: pp. 45 ff).

maxim, Plato (incorrectly) takes the Measure Doctrine to be logically equivalent to Theaetetus' definition that knowledge is perception but then he offers an explanation of the Measure Doctrine that is centred on ontological relativism, a doctrine that is very disturbing for Plato. Might this be a good reason for holding that ontological relativism is a doctrine that Protagoras historically maintained and that it is the fact that Protagoras really maintained ontological relativism that made Plato choose him as an opponent? At the moment there are no sure grounds for asserting this, apart from the reasons I have just given. But my hypothesis here will be reinforced if the next parts of Plato's treatment of Protagoras turn out to show a clear concern for the ontological aspect of Protagoras' doctrine. Whether this is the case can be gauged, once we read Protagoras' Secret Doctrine.

### Ontological Indeterminacy

After having expounded the reasons for which Protagoras' Measure Doctrine may be taken as a theory of perceptual truth of a particular ontological kind, Socrates asks Theaetetus whether Protagoras 'put this [*sc.* the theory of perceptual truth endorsed by the Measure Doctrine] out as a riddle for the common crowd of us, while he revealed the Truth as a secret doctrine (*en aporrêtô(i)*) to his own pupils' (152c9–10). Socrates successively explains to his interlocutor what Protagoras taught in secret to his pupils. This is a 'no ordinary theory' (*ou phaulon logon*: 152d2), and 'no ordinary account' was the account of knowledge Protagoras used to maintain, Socrates says, when he stated his Measure Doctrine.<sup>65</sup> Since Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is so exceptional, I will quote it in its entirety. Socrates says:

I mean the theory that there is nothing which in itself is just one thing (*hen men auto kath' hauto*): nothing which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing. If you call a thing large, it will reveal itself as small, and if you call it heavy, it is liable to appear as light, and so on with everything, because nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing (*hôs mêdenos ontos henos mête tinos mête hoiououn*). 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 (*phoras te kai kinêseôs kai kraseôs pros allela*). We are wrong when we say they 'are', since nothing is, but everything is coming to be (152d2–e1).

Socrates also adds that all the wise men of the past, Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Epicharmus and even Homer, with the exception of Parmenides, agreed on this theory and on the fact that everything is in perpetual change.<sup>66</sup> Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is a complex doctrine to be determined; there are in fact two doctrines being discussed

<sup>65</sup> See 151e8: 'But look here, this is no ordinary account (*ou phaulon logon*) of knowledge you have come out with: it is what Protagoras used to maintain' (Socrates talking to Theaetetus and referring to the thesis that knowledge is perception).

<sup>66</sup> The position of Parmenides on being is rapidly dealt with by Socrates later in the *Theaetetus*, at 183e. The comic playwright Epicharmus is today given importance because he was the first in the history of philosophy to formulate the problem of persistence of individuals over time (see Sedley 1982).

in the passage above.<sup>67</sup> The main one is the ontological thesis that ‘nothing in itself is just one thing’, stated for the first time at the very beginning of the passage and restated after a few lines when Socrates says: ‘nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing’.<sup>68</sup> We may call this doctrine ‘ontological indeterminacy’: the object in the world does not possess any ontological fixed structure and its essence, *ousia*, is thus indeterminate. But besides ontological indeterminacy, there is another doctrine in Protagoras’ Secret Doctrine; this is another ontological thesis that states that ‘nothing is, but everything is coming to be’. Since everything is ‘the result of movement and change and blending with one another’, ‘the things of which we naturally say that they “are”, are in process of coming to be’. We may call this second doctrine ‘doctrine of flux’, which states that everything is in the process of coming to be; thus everything is never one stable thing. The doctrine of flux works as an explanation for the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy: nothing is one determinate thing because everything is in perennial movement and undergoes inescapable changes. (There is a third, ephemeral element in Protagoras’ Secret Doctrine and this is the reference to the use of the verb ‘to say’. Since everything is in perennial movement, we are wrong when we say that things ‘are’; we should say instead that they ‘are coming to be’.)

The concern for the use of language and the doctrine of flux are two easily recognizable Heraclitean themes and Plato will deal with them fully in the final part of the Protagorean section, where the impossibility of using our language to name things or describe what happens in the world will be seen as an extreme consequence of the radicalism of Heraclitus’ doctrine or, as Burnyeat’s Reading B suggests, of the theses of Theaetetus, Protagoras and Heraclitus.<sup>69</sup> The doctrine of ontological indeterminacy is, instead, a reformulation, in more general terms, of the kind of ontological position, of a relativistic sort, that we have seen ascribed to Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine in conjunction with perceptual relativism. According to ontological relativism, there is no single object to be perceived but rather many, whose essence is established by the perceiver (during the perceptual act). Such an ontological position can be restated by saying that ‘there is nothing in itself [according to Plato’s objectivistic ontology] is just one thing [according to Protagoras’ relativistic ontology]’. The (perceived) object has no proper, determinate essence, but it is, ontologically speaking, indeterminate. I use the expression ‘indeterminate’, or ‘indeterminacy’, in the light of the kind of ontological position that in book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle attributes to those philosophers who deny the principle of non-contradiction (in Aristotle’s opinion, Protagoras is among them).<sup>70</sup> Aristotle rightly believes that the principle of non-contradiction can be denied only if things

---

67 Three according to Lee (2005: pp. 86–88 and pp. 95–111, where Lee identifies the four stages through which, on her view, the Secret Doctrine is constructed).

68 See also 156e7–157b1 and Lee (2005: p. 77): ‘The Secret Doctrine is not simply a doctrine of flux, but a collection of metaphysical theses that includes the relativist principle that nothing is anything in itself, but is whatever it is relative to something else.’ On the other possible ways in which the formula ‘nothing is one thing in itself’ can be read, see McDowell (1973: p. 122); Bostock (1988: p. 51).

69 See above, p. 30.

70 Another ancient philosopher who is committed to holding an indeterminacy thesis is Pyrrho, test. 53 Declava Caizzi=Long and Sedley 1F.

are thought to be ontologically *aorista* (indeterminate), while he takes the principle of non-contradiction to be true (indeed a fundamental logical and metaphysical principle) precisely because it maintains that things have an essence, that is, are ontologically determinate (*hōrismena*).<sup>71</sup> Aristotle stresses that the relativist holds that things are ontologically indeterminate because he believes that things are not themselves in themselves (*auta kath'hauta*) but only relative to something else (*pros ti*).<sup>72</sup> It is the fact that each thing is something only in relation to something else that makes all things ontologically indeterminate.

At 152d-e Plato thus reformulates Protagoras' ontological relativism by identifying an ontological thesis, namely ontological indeterminacy, which states that (perceptual) things do not have one, unique, determinate essence (since their indeterminate essence is variably determined by different perceivers in the perceptual act). Plato also adds that the doctrine of flux is the ontological theory that lies behind ontological indeterminacy.<sup>73</sup> But if one finds it appropriate to restate the doctrine of ontological relativism in term of ontological indeterminacy, it will be more difficult to maintain that the doctrine of flux is the logical ground for the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy. There is in fact no logical necessity to hold the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy in conjunction with that of flux.<sup>74</sup> One might well maintain that objects in the world are indeterminate in their ontological structures not because they constantly undergo changes that make their ontological structure in perennial modification, but that objects in the world are indeterminate in their ontological structures because they are so by nature. By nature, the object is so vague that its ontological structure becomes evanescent; it is thus impossible to describe the latter with precision so that it might be postulated that there is nothing to be described except for the particular ontological structure that the given object shows itself to have in one given and particular circumstance. If we wanted to restrict ourselves to the case of perceptions, one might maintain that the object is indeterminate because its ontological structure becomes defined only in the perceptual act, when it comes into contact with the perceiver who, on the given occasion, perceives it in a particularly private way.

The ontological view I ascribe to Protagoras here is what some philosophers nowadays call the 'Cosmic Porridge' view. Robert Kirk describes this view as follows:

---

71 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 4.1006a11–b34, summarized at a11–28. On the point, see also Lee (2005: p. 119).

72 That is, to our senses, and in general to our mind: see 6.1011a25–b1 and 6.1010b30–1011a2. On relativism as denying the Principle of Non-Contradiction (hence the bipolar truth-values), see Margolis (1991: pp. 40–54); Lee (2005: pp. 65–76).

73 On the possible reasons for Plato to add the theory of flux as the metaphysical background for ontological indeterminacy, see Lee (2005: pp. 114–117).

74 See Lee (2005: p. 85): 'The Secret Doctrine seems to be a mix of metaphysical doctrines, including a Heraclitean thesis of total flux, telling us that everything is always changing in every respect. Anyone familiar with more modern varieties of relativism (such as relativism about truth) will wonder how a flux doctrine is relevant.'

All that really exists [...] is an indeterminate something, and – the key component of the idea – this something has no features of its own: the porridge is undifferentiated. Instead, we somehow impose features on it [...]. On the one hand, something really exists ‘out there’, but on the other hand nothing else can be said about it which is objectively true [...]. Sticks and stones, atoms and electrons, stars and clouds are our constructions in the strong sense that there is no more to their existence than the fact that we have imposed those particular concepts on the otherwise indeterminate stuff, the cosmic porridge itself.<sup>75</sup>

On similar grounds, other thinkers such as the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann speak of a ‘social construction of reality’: ‘what is real to a Tibetan monk may not be real to an American businessman’. They remark: ‘The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these.’<sup>76</sup>

Despite the logical autonomy of the one from the other, Plato mixes up the doctrine of flux and ontological indeterminacy and makes the former the cause of the latter. What Plato does here, I believe, is what he did at the beginning of the Protagorean section, when he made Socrates say that the Measure Doctrine and the Theaetetus’ thesis that knowledge is perception are logically equivalent (when it is clear that they are not). The Measure Doctrine may be taken as a theory of perceptual truth but it implies something more than Theaetetus’ thesis that knowledge is perception (as we will later see, when Plato makes Protagoras expand his Measure Doctrine so as to include the ethical judgements of the polis). Ontological indeterminacy is an original ontological thesis that may be profitably connected to the Measure Doctrine but not necessarily by linking the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy with that of flux, as Plato does.<sup>77</sup>

---

75 Kirk (1999: p. 52). On ontological indeterminacy, see also the example that Politis offers in Politis (2004: p. 114): ‘Suppose that all things are so radically indeterminate that it is not possible to distinguish a particular respect in which a thing may be either F or not-F but not both F and not-F. To illustrate this, we may think of, for example, clouds. For a cloud may at the same time look both round and not round, and it may not be possible to distinguish a particular respect in which it is round and a different particular respect in which it is not round.’ On the confusion that seems to surround the notion of objecthood in philosophy at the moment, see the discussion online on ‘Referring to Objects’ at <http://www.interdisciplines.org>; on vagueness in entities (as opposed to language), see the project ‘Vagueness: its logic and nature’ of the *Arché* Centre of the University of St. Andrews (at <http://www.st-andrews-ac.uk/~arche/pages/vaguenessproject.html>).

76 See Berger and Luckmann (1967: pp. 15 and 33 respectively). On the indeterminacy of reality, see also Kuhn (1970: chapter 10, on reality as something ‘fluid’, not objectively determinable) and Hoyningen-Huene (1993) for an interesting Kantian reading of Kuhn’s ontology.

77 For a modern counterpart of a theory of ontological relativity with no concern whatsoever for the fluidity of the matter, see Quine (1969).

**Historical Plausibility Explained Further**

As he says at 160d5, Socrates wants to show that ‘the various theories have converged to the same thing [that is, Theaetetus’ first-born child]: that of Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe, that all things flow like streams; of Protagoras, wisest of man, that man is the measure of all things; and of Theaetetus that, these things being so, knowledge proves to be perception’. On the one hand, reasons can be given for maintaining that the three theses, that of Theaetetus (knowledge is perception), that of Protagoras (the Measure Doctrine), and that of Heraclitus (the doctrine of flux), stand or fall together, each of them being part of an indistinguishable whole.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, as I have said, one may try to identify, in the context of Plato’s argumentative strategy in the Protagorean section, not only the arguments that are put forward and their mutual connections, but also some logical incongruence between these arguments or some alternative way to link them. What is identified in this way is hard to specify. When I say that holding the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy does not inevitably require holding the doctrine of flux, I mean that ontological indeterminacy can be taken just as an ontological position derived from a reformulation of the doctrine of ontological relativism endorsed by Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine. In doing so, I identify a philosophical position, ontological indeterminacy, through a particular reading of the arguments that Plato sets forth in the very section that is under scrutiny. But the philosophical position so identified is neither a Platonic argument (since Plato explicitly links the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy with another doctrine, namely with the doctrine of flux), nor a Protagorean doctrine (since there are no conclusive grounds, so far, for ascribing the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy to the historical Protagoras).

What is the purpose of this, one might legitimately ask? My reply is that the operation of isolating philosophical positions in the *Theaetetus* that are neither fully Platonic (that is, that do not completely belong to the chain of arguments that Plato sets forth in the Protagorean section), nor historically attributable to Protagoras, will make sense, if we think of the kind of historical plausibility I have mentioned in the ‘Introduction’. Since one of the three purposes of this book is to offer a picture of Protagoras and of his doctrines that might be historically plausible (in the weak sense specified above),<sup>79</sup> it is, I believe, reasonable to isolate philosophical positions that are not immediately attributable to Protagoras but that at a later stage may reconstruct a picture of his philosophy that is, in some sense, historically plausible. More specifically, when I show the logical autonomy of the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy from that of flux, I do so because I believe that there are sections or passages of other Platonic dialogues in which Plato mentions Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine without any reference to the doctrine of flux; I do so because, as we will see at a later stage, I also believe that other philosophers such as Sextus and Aristotle explain (Protagorean) relativism with no reference to the doctrine of flux.<sup>80</sup> One might

---

78 As said, the logical connectedness between the three theses is the central point of Burnyeat’s Reading B.

79 See above, pp. 5–8

80 See pp. 50–2 below.

thus argue not only for the logical independence of ontological indeterminacy from the doctrine of flux but also maintain that Protagoras never actually held a doctrine of flux. It is within the context of Plato's dialogues that the doctrine of flux turns out to be a probably spurious addition of Plato to the doctrines of Protagoras.<sup>81</sup>

Through a comparison between the different treatments of Protagoras' doctrine that Plato offers in his dialogues, an overall picture of such a doctrine is obtained; one might then speculate about its historical plausibility. By comparing the partial picture of Protagoras that one dialogue offers (such as the *Theaetetus*) with the information that other dialogues add (for instance the *Protagoras* and *Cratylus*), one may clarify elements that are due more to the literary economy of the Platonic text under scrutiny than to their historical genuineness. Again, I take the doctrine of flux to be a doctrine that Protagoras never held; but it was useful for what Plato wanted to say in the *Theaetetus* to link the Measure Doctrine (through the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy) with the doctrine of flux. The insertion of the doctrine of flux into the logical backbone of the Protagorean section is congenial for the purposes of the kind of dialogue that Plato wanted to write when he wrote the *Theaetetus*. But on the basis of a careful reading of the *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus* (and also thanks to Sextus and Aristotle), there are grounds for arguing that the doctrine of flux is a Platonic addition and that only the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy is likely to be genuinely Protagorean. The *Cratylus*, for instance, will confirm the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy (together with ontological relativism) as a central aspect of Protagoras' doctrine. Through this process, we gain an overall picture of Protagoras and his doctrines in the context of Plato's dialogues that is deprived of what are clearly Platonic intrusions. Is this picture historically plausible? It can be so, I believe, only in a weak sense. There are no solid arguments for arguing that the picture so obtained is historically accurate, because there is almost nothing with which we can compare the figure of the Platonic Protagoras, to test its historical plausibility.

One might take the whole question the other way around and ask: why should Plato have been unfaithful in reporting Protagoras' doctrine? Why should he have chosen to devote so much space to the treatment of Protagoras' doctrine, if all or most of the philosophical positions he attaches to Protagoras in his dialogues were not his? As said in the 'Introduction', Protagoras is, among all the philosophical predecessors of Socrates, the one who received the most lengthy and careful treatment from Plato. This fact alone suggests that Protagoras was an important philosopher for Plato (I add, his subtlest enemy); his philosophical doctrines needed to be seriously considered before being strenuously opposed. It is rather typical of Plato to put the historical accuracy with which he reports other philosophers' doctrines second to his literary and argumentative needs. Plato is, I propose, nonetheless largely correct in identifying at least the core of the doctrines he wants to attack. This is so because, like other (great) philosophers, Plato needs to discuss his opponents' doctrines to define his own (this is even more so for Greek philosophers). Secondly, the attribution, by Plato, of some false doctrines to a well-known philosopher, as Protagoras still was

---

81 On the historical distinction between the doctrine of flux and Protagoras' doctrine, see McDowell (1973: pp. 120–121); Burnyeat (1990: p. 12).

in Plato's time, would have raised serious concern in those who might have read and discussed the *Theaetetus* and the other Platonic dialogues that have to do with Protagoras. As far as Protagoras' doctrines are concerned, it might also be argued that Plato, at least in the *Theaetetus*, is very careful when he deals with the sophist and the choice of his interlocutors is particularly significant on this respect.

In the first part of the Protagorean section where Socrates expounds the core of Protagoras' doctrine (from p. 152 to p. 169), Theaetetus is Socrates' main interlocutor. Through his art of midwifery, Socrates wants Theaetetus to discover how philosophically faulty Protagoras' Measure Doctrine is. But when the process of elucidation of Protagoras' theories is completed and it is time to show their philosophical weaknesses or inconsistencies, Socrates changes interlocutors by asking Theodorus to take an active part in the dialogue. Theodorus is a friend of Protagoras and Socrates invites him, p. 169a, to defend Protagoras from his own criticism, which becomes intense exactly from p. 170 onwards (while until this point, it has been Socrates who has strained 'every nerve to defend' Protagoras, as is said at 168e7). It looks as though, after having reported Protagoras' doctrine in the fairest possible way, Plato wants to warn his readers that now Socrates is no longer playing the part of someone who is sympathetic with Protagoras but of someone who is going to criticize him. This change of interlocutors and of Socrates' role may suggest that in the former part of the Protagorean section Plato has done his best to identify the core of Protagoras' doctrine before strongly censuring it in the latter. In short, the logical distinction between the various arguments that Plato attributes to Protagoras is to be read in the light of the attempt to reach an identification of the figure and doctrine of Protagoras that may be historically plausible in a weak sense.

### **Differing Dispositions**

In the part of the *Theaetetus* under scrutiny, namely 152d-e,<sup>82</sup> Protagoras' relativism is treated by Plato as a form of perceptual relativism, with particularly significant ontological consequences. Once he has scrutinized further the kind of relativism endorsed by Protagoras' Measure Doctrine, Plato connects such relativism with two doctrines, namely a Heraclitean theory of flux and a theory of ontological indeterminacy, which are, in his opinion, its metaphysical backbone. For reasons that have to do with the economy of the dialogue and not with historical accuracy and logical consistency, Plato leaves the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy in the background of the discussion of Protagoras' relativism and chooses to spell out further, in a lengthy section (153d–160d), the logical connections between the doctrine of flux, Protagoras' Measure Doctrine and the form of perceptual relativism endorsed by the latter. This happens in two stages: first, Socrates expounds a theory of (visual) perception that he believes shows the logical connection between the three philosophical positions just mentioned (153d–154b); secondly, he reviews the theory of visual perception by radicalizing its content and by demonstrating how problematic its consequences are (156a–160d). Let us see what kind of perceptual

---

82 See above, pp. 39 ff (analysing *Tht.* 152d2–e1).

theory Socrates initially puts forward, after he has warned Theaetetus that ‘you must understand our theory (that is, the Measure Doctrine and its relativistic explanation) in this way’ (153d6) and has gone on by saying:

[SOC.]: In the case of eyes, first, you mustn’t think of what you call white colour as being some distinct thing outside your eyes or in your eyes either (*kata ta ommata prôton, ho dê kaleis chrôma leukon, mê einai auto heteron ti exô tôn sôn ommatôn med’ en tois ommasi*)—in fact you mustn’t assign any place to it; because in that case it would, surely, be at its assigned place and in a state of rest, rather than coming to be.

[THEAT.]: Well, how can I think of it?

[SOC.]: Let’s follow what we said just now, and lay it down that nothing is one thing just by itself (*mêden auto kath’ hauto hen on*). On those lines, we will find that black, white, or any other colour will turn out to have come into being, from the collision of eyes with the appropriate motion. What we say a given colour is will be neither the thing which collides, nor the thing it collides with, but something which has come into being between them (*ho dê hekaston einai phamen chrôma oute to prosballon oute to prosballomenon estai*); something peculiar to each one (*alla metaxu ti hekastô(i) idion gegonos*). Or would you be prepared to insist that every colour appears to a dog, or any other living thing, just the way it appears to you?

[THEAT.]: Certainly not.

[SOC.]: And what about another man? Is the way anything appears to him like the way it appears to you? Can you insist on that? Or wouldn’t you much rather say that it doesn’t appear the same even to yourself, because you’re never in a similar condition to yourself (*e polu mallon hoti oude soi auto(i) tauton dia to mêdepote homoiôs auton seautô(i) echein*)?

[THEAT.]: Yes, I think that’s nearer the truth than the first alternative

(*Tht.* 153d8–154 a8). Translation of J. McDowell

The theory of visual perception expounded by Socrates is of distinct appeal, but what is its real philosophical meaning? How are we to explain the visual process and its epistemological content in the relativistic framework of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine, which states that knowledge is perception and that each perception is true for the person who has it? Socrates argues that Protagoras’ doctrine will hold good if it is linked with the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy and its stronger twin, the doctrine of flux, which both contribute to make the perceptual act, in this case the visual act, a private (‘peculiar’, *idion*) matter between the perceiving subject and the perceived object.<sup>83</sup>

---

83 In my own understanding of the theory of visual perception that Socrates ascribes to Protagoras in these pages of the *Theaetetus*, I will often speak of the perceiving ‘subject’. Since there has recently been an intense debate between Myles Burnyeat and Gail Fine on whether Greek philosophy has ever had the notion of subjectivity, it is worth noting that here I use the expression ‘the subject’ with reference to Protagoras without implying that he (or Socrates) had any notion of what we call ‘the subject’ in a Cartesian sense. Protagoras’ relativism in fact, as I understand it, cannot be taken to imply any notion of subjectivity (in a modern sense), but only of relativity (*pros ti*: see Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.216). On all this, see Gill (2006: 6.6, with reference to the Burnyeat-Fine debate).

The doctrine of ontological indeterminacy is briefly restated in the passage just now quoted, when Socrates says that ‘nothing is one thing just by itself’, but the doctrine of flux is what here provides the reasons for that of ontological indeterminacy to be maintained. The situation thus could be the following: a person sees an object; the person sees the object as white. The object is not, properly speaking, white but white is the result of the ‘collision of eyes (of the person) with the appropriate motion (of the perceptual act)’; white is the result of the visual interaction between the person perceiving the object and the object itself. Such a result (the colour white) is private to the person and the object. This means that the object is effectively white for the person in question and, speaking from a Protagorean point of view, the perceiving subject has thus gained a perceptual knowledge of the object. If what is taken as being the same object appears as grey to a second person, this is because the result of the collision of the eyes of the latter perceiver with the appropriate motion of his visual act is, in this case, the colour grey. Again, the perceived object is indeed grey for the second person, who, like the first person, has gained an effective perceptual knowledge of the object in question. If the second person looks again at the object in question ten minutes later, nothing will prevent us from saying that the object will now appear as pale yellow to him: an effective perceptual knowledge of the perceived object will be gained, if we follow Protagoras.

Is this theory of (visual) perception that Socrates attaches to Protagoras (and Heraclitus) a good one? The theory shows that a peculiar link between the perceiver and the perceived object is established in the course of the perceptual (visual) act. But how are we to deal with the problematic presence of Conflicting Appearances, that is, the common phenomenon for which different perceivers see the given object in so many different ways that its appearances are somehow conflicting?<sup>84</sup> How is it possible for Protagoras to claim that each appearance, when it is the private result of the visual act between the perceiving subject and the perceived object, is actual knowledge of the object? Modern philosophers belonging to the empiricist tradition claim that only one appearance of the object is correct and this is the one obtained under normal perceptual conditions; only the correct appearance is able to provide actual knowledge of the object, all the other appearances being illusory and knowledge of nothing.<sup>85</sup> Speaking also from a more commonsensical point of view, it may be disputable to hold that each of our conflicting appearances of one object can be real knowledge and thus say that if the object is white for me and grey for you, we are both right. The most natural question would be: but what is the object like? Is it white or grey? As the previous example of the wind shows, for Socrates, it would be difficult to maintain that the wind is both cold or not cold at the same time, in the same respect. Nor would he be happy to add the qualifier ‘for’ and thus maintain, as Protagoras does, that the wind is cold for someone and not for someone else.

---

84 On the problem of Conflicting Appearances in Greek philosophy (with reference to the contemporary debate on the problem, which has been differently termed as ‘Argument from Illusion’), see Burnyeat (1979); *contra* Fine (1996).

85 See Ayer (1956: pp. 20–27); more cautious on the philosophical grounds for asserting that what is taken to be the correct perception is indeed knowledge of the object in question is Russell (1912: p. 9).

Socrates wishes to show how untenable this theory of (visual) perception is by making its philosophical weaknesses more explicit. This is attempted in the second section indicated above, that is, from 156a to 160d, where Socrates advances a more radical version of this theory of perception that ends up by admitting the dissolution of both physical objects into perceived ideas and of the perceiving self into the series of its momentary perceptions. Such a radicalization, from Socrates' part, of the theory of perception ascribed to Protagoras makes the latter even less tenable and thus seriously jeopardizes the philosophical legitimacy of the Measure Doctrine and of its relativistic reading.<sup>86</sup> By starting from the general sketch of the initial and milder version of the theory of visual perception, Socrates introduces further elements into it, namely the active-passive and the quickness-slowness oppositions.<sup>87</sup> This is done after he has restated the doctrine of flux by saying that 'the universe is in change and nothing else'.<sup>88</sup> According to the new version of the theory, there are two kinds of change, each unlimited in number, the one passive and the other active. Each factor in the perceptual act,<sup>89</sup> the perceiving subject and the perceived object, becomes capable of acting as the active or passive factor in the perceptual process. But the nature of the change can be doublesided in another respect, the change being itself slow or quick. A further element makes the whole picture even more complicated; this is when Socrates says that the active factor can become the passive one in another perceptual process: 'What acts when it comes into contact with one thing can turn out to be a thing which is acted on when it bumps into something else' (157a8–9).

The problematic outcome of this radical version of the theory of perception is that, everything being in such perennial and rapid change, we could not properly speak of the object as such or as the subject as such but only, and more correctly, of collections of parts that we, rather incorrectly, call 'stone' or 'man' (this section of the *Theaetetus* thus anticipates modern philosophical concerns).<sup>90</sup> Were this the case, there is no real object to be perceived; and even if there were one, there would be, strictly speaking, no subject able to perceive it. The perceiving subject would be atomized in the series of his unconnected inner states, with no unitary centre. The preferential link between perception and knowledge that is apparently taken to be in full force in the first version of the theory of visual perception earlier illustrated is, in its more radical and philosophically revealing version, seriously compromised. It

---

86 There has been a scholarly debate about the paternity of this new, radical version of the theory of perception. Scholars tend to divide between those who think that those subtler thinkers (*oi kompsoteroi*: see 156a3) to whom Plato ascribes the radical theory are Aristippus and the Cyrenaics and those who argue that there is no sure ground for attributing its paternity. For a critical review of this debate (with reference to German, British, French and Italian approaches to the problem), see Giannantoni (1997). See also Lee (2005: pp. 104–109).

87 156a6–7 and c7–8, respectively.

88 156a5.

89 Socrates offers another visual example but the theory is quickly extended to all senses: see *Tht.* 156b5.

90 See 157c. In modern philosophy, on the dissolution of the self into a series of momentary perceptions, see Hume (1978: book 1, part 4, section 6; also in Perry 1975: p. 161). On the dissolution of the object into perceived ideas see what Berkeley says in the Second and the Third dialogue (in Luce and Jessop 1949: vol. II).

cannot be held that perceiving one object somehow amounts to knowing it for the person who perceives it because there is, strictly speaking, neither a perceived object nor a perceiving subject anymore.

By taking the doctrine of flux to its extreme consequences through the denial of any material persistence of both objects and observers, the radical version of the theory of perception that Socrates expounds has to be read in connection with the other part of the Protagorean section (that is, 180a–183c) where Socrates demonstrates how equally untenable an Heraclitean conception of the world is by showing that, since everything undergoes a similarly continuous modification, nothing could be stably named. The subtle argumentative game through which Plato constructs the whole structure of the *Theaetetus*, and on whose basis an argument is often prepared by a preceding section that focuses on some key elements fully developed at a later stage, is once again confirmed by Plato's treatment of Heraclitus' doctrine of flux: Plato first illustrates it in its philosophical content (156a–160d) and later severely censures it (in 180a–183c).

It may be argued, however, that the milder theory of perception has another essential philosophical feature that has nothing to do with the assumption that everything is in flux. The feature in question concerns the privacy that is established between the perceived object and the perceiving subject during the perceptual act. In the context of the milder theory of perception, Socrates in fact says that 'what we say a given colour is will be neither the thing which collides, nor the thing it collides with, but something which has come into being between them; something peculiar to each one' (154a1–3).<sup>91</sup> In this passage, what is in focus is mainly the singularity of the perceptual act, which creates a peculiar link between the perceiving subject and the perceived object such that the ontological structure of the latter is determined by the former. It may also be noted that the privacy that is established between object and subject in the perceptual process is the reason for the perceptual variability that Protagoras' relativism entails: the wind is cold for one perceiver and hot for another one because they both have established their own particular perceptual link with their winds. The perceptual privacy that is here considered is also fully consistent with the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy that I believe can arguably be ascribed to Protagoras' relativism. In the framework of the milder theory of perception that Socrates claims to be part of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, a single object can be considered to come out from its ontological indeterminacy exactly when the two elements of the perceptual process, the object to be perceived and the perceiving subject, come across each other so that the latter determines the perceptual essence of the former. If this is the case, when it is deprived of the doctrine of flux and due consideration is given to the element of perceptual privacy that is so essential an element to it, the milder theory of perception is, in some sense, interpretable in terms that are philosophically consistent with the kind of picture of Protagoras' relativism sketched so far.

---

<sup>91</sup> 'private to the individual percipient', as there is in the Levett/Burnyeat translation, which does not translate appropriately the '*idion ekastô(i)*' of the Greek text: '*ekastô(i)*' refers to both the perceiving individual and the perceived object.

In his description of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, Plato believes, then, that the privacy that is established between one object and the corresponding subject in the perceptual act can be explained by noting that such privacy is the result of the process of perennial flux in which both the perceived object and the perceiving subject are involved. But, as I have just now argued, the privacy established between the perceiver and the perceived object can be explained by reference to grounds that have little to do with the doctrine of flux. One might well argue that such privacy does not depend upon the fact that both the elements of the perceptual process are in perennial change so that the privacy of the perceptual act is due to a casual and brief encounter between them. It might well be maintained that the privacy of the perceptual act depends upon the particular condition, attitude or disposition in which the perceiving subject finds himself to be when he perceives the object. Since the perceiving subject perceives objects from his own particular perspective, variably determined by factors such as sensibility, culture, inclination, each perception is private in so far as it is the result of the particular condition under which the perceiving subject carries out the perceptual act.<sup>92</sup> In the Defence of Protagoras, to be considered shortly, Socrates himself will in fact make Protagoras emphasize the role of the particular conditions (*hexeis*) in which the individual happens to find himself to be during the perceptual act, by remarking that it is the business of the wise man to transform someone's pernicious state (*hexis*) of mind into a sound one so that he can have good perceptions in place of bad ones.<sup>93</sup> On another occasion, Socrates stresses again the importance of the perceptual conditions under which the perceptual act is carried out, when he criticizes Protagoras' perceptual relativism by noting that, according to the Measure Doctrine, also the perceptions of those who are mad, asleep, ill or experiencing hallucinations are true perceptual knowledge for them, as is the case for those who have perceptions under normal perceptual conditions.<sup>94</sup>

As Sarah Broadie has said about Protagorean relativism, 'beliefs are differentiated not merely by content but by subject and occasion of being held'.<sup>95</sup> In his analysis of Protagoras' doctrine, Sextus explains the privacy of the perceptual act that Protagoras' relativism seems to entail (together with the perceptual variability that such relativism surely implies) in the light of the differing dispositions that different perceivers have. Having said in the *Adversus Mathematicos* that 'he [Protagoras] asserts that all sense-impressions and opinions are true (*epei phêsi pasas tas phantasias kai tas doxas alêtheis huparchein*) and that truth is a relative thing (*tôn pros ti einai tèn alêtheian*)' (7.60), he also says that it is not 'appropriate to disallow one set of circumstances because of a different set of circumstances (*ouk esti de oikeion apo tòn diapherousôn peristaseôn tas diaphorous peristaseis athetein*) – that is to say, the appearances (*phainomena*) which occur in the state of madness because of the impressions received in the sane state of mind, and those of sleep because

---

92 On how our culture determines the variable way in which we perceive things, see Feyerabend (1975) and p. 73–4 below.

93 See 167b and p. 62–5 below.

94 See 157e–158a.

95 Waterlow (1977: p. 33, n. 18). On the point, see also Mendelson (2002: p. 9).

of those of the waking state' (7.62). Sextus concludes his analysis of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine by remarking that 'seeing, then, that no impression is received apart from circumstances, each man must be trusted regarding those received in his own circumstances (*mêdenos oun chôris peristaseôs lambanomenou, hekastô(i) pisteuteon peri tôn kata tên oikeian peristasin lambanomenôn*)' (7.63).

The point about the importance of the perceptual conditions as far as Protagorean relativism is concerned, together with his understanding of such relativism, is reiterated by Sextus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. After having remarked, as seen earlier, that matter is capable of being all things that appear to all, he openly attributes the following explanation of the phenomenon of perceptual variability to Protagoras: 'Men, he [Protagoras] says, apprehend different things at different times in accordance with their differing dispositions; for he who is in a natural state apprehends those things in matter which are able to appear to those in a natural state, and those who are in a state contrary to nature the things that appear to those in an unnatural state [...]. The same account applies to the different stages of life, and to people according as they are asleep or awake, and to each distinct kind of condition. Thus, according to him, man becomes the criterion of what is the case; for all things that appear to men also are the case, and things that appear to no man are conversely not the case' (1.217–218). By making the differing dispositions the main element to which one has to impute the perceptual variability that Protagoras' relativism entails, Sextus confirms again his probable independence of Plato in his analysis of Protagoras' relativism. The doctrine of flux, in fact, which plays a so essential part in Plato's treatment of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is not even mentioned in Sextus' analysis of Protagorean relativism in the *Adversus Mathematicos* and is only briefly referred to in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.<sup>96</sup>

Aristotle's treatment of relativism in book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* (especially 5.1006a1–6.1011b20) provides further confirmation of how logically extraneous the doctrine of flux is to relativism.<sup>97</sup> In arguing in defence of the most secure of all philosophical claims, namely the Principle of Non-Contradiction, Aristotle affirms that those philosophers who deny the Principle are either phenomenologists or relativists, the former holding that all appearances and beliefs are true, the latter that all appearances and beliefs are true relative to those who have them.<sup>98</sup> He also argues that the ontological foundation of both phenomenology and relativism is the view that all things are ontologically indeterminate. When he argues against phenomenology, he maintains that the phenomenologist holds (or has to hold) that things are ontologically indeterminate because they are all in perennial change. On the other hand, when he argues against relativism, he does not say that the relativist maintains that all things

---

<sup>96</sup> See *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.217.

<sup>97</sup> Aristotle's treatment has no historical value, as far as historical genuineness is concerned. He is in fact, in the second part of book Gamma, concerned with reconstructing the best line of reasoning that those who deny the Principle of Non-Contradiction could offer. His aim is very much theoretical and most of the arguments thus analysed for denying the Principle do not seem to be historically accurate but provided by Aristotle to make his case. On the point, see Lee (2005: p. 58).

<sup>98</sup> On the former view, see 5.1009a6ff; on the latter, see 6.1011a17ff.

are ontologically indeterminate because he believes that they all are in perennial flux. Ontological relativity is instead the key idea for the relativist; the perceiver (together with the conditions in which the perceptual act is carried out) becomes the fundamental element for establishing the ontological determinacy of the object that is being perceived. This point is openly recognized by Aristotle, when he says that ‘those who want to trace the force of the argument [that is, for denying the Principle of Non-Contradiction] [...] must take care to assert not that appearance is true, but rather that appearance is true to the one to whom it appears, and *at the time* when it appears, and *in the respect* in which it appears, and *in the way* in which it appears’ (6.1011a17–24: my emphases). The three specifications (the time, respect and way) that Aristotle here lists all contribute to creating the peculiar perspective through which the individual carries out the perceptual process.

Sextus and Aristotle thus impute the perceptual variability that Protagoras’ relativism entails to the fact that people perceive things under differing conditions and not to the fact that both the elements of the perceptual process, namely the object to be perceived and the perceiving subject, are in flux.<sup>99</sup> As we will see shortly, Plato himself suggests that the doctrine of flux is not an essential element of Protagoras’ relativism in the *Cratylus*, where no mention of the doctrine of flux is ever made in reference to Protagoras’ name and to his Measure Doctrine. What Plato ascribes to Protagoras in the *Cratylus* is again the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy, together with the same combination of perceptual and ontological relativism that we find ascribed to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*.

Before turning to the *Cratylus*, it is helpful, however, to see what the main difference is between my explanation of the role that the Secret Doctrine plays in the context of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* for the understanding of Protagoras’ relativism and the explanation that is offered by more traditional reading of this section and, lastly, Lee. Burnyeat’s Reading B, in fact, maintains that the Secret Doctrine is implied and that this, in turn, implies, Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine (as well as Theaetetus’ definition that knowledge is perception).<sup>100</sup> In the light of this interpretation, the three main theses that are discussed in the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, namely those of Theaetetus’, Protagoras’ and Heraclitus’ (in the Secret Doctrine) stand or fall together. As far as the Secret Doctrine is concerned, the problem of this interpretation is that it makes the Heraclitean theory of flux the philosophical fulcrum of the Secret Doctrine. In suggesting this, not only do those scholars who propose Reading B leave aside the other ontological thesis on which the Secret Doctrine is centred (that is, ontological indeterminacy), but also they fail to explain why it would be philosophically necessary, for someone adopting a relativistic standpoint (as Protagoras does), to share a Heraclitean theory of flux. As I have argued earlier, in fact, the theory of flux does not fit well into the context of Protagoras’ relativism.<sup>101</sup> Nor does it help to say, as Burnyeat does, that, since

---

99 On the point, see Broadie (2003: 81).

100 See Burnyeat (1990: p. 9); McDowell (1973: pp. 120–122); Chappell (2005: p. 49).

101 See above, p. 41. See also Lee (2005: pp. 86–92).

‘stability [...] entails objectivity’,<sup>102</sup> a relativist has to assume that the world is in constant flux.

Lee paraphrases Burnyeat’s argument about stability in this way: ‘if something remained stably F, this would constitute an objective state of affairs, on the basis of which a judgement about it could be convicted of being false. Protagoras denies objectivity, and is therefore committed to the thesis of constant change’.<sup>103</sup> But stability is allowed for in the world of the relativist.<sup>104</sup> What we actually need to know from the Secret Doctrine is the metaphysical reason why Protagoras can maintain his relativism that each thing has some perceptual properties only in relation to a perceiver. In short, what we need to know from the Secret Doctrine is the ontological reason on the basis of which nothing is one thing in itself but only in relation to the one who perceives it. What the Secret Doctrine should tell us is how it is philosophically connected with Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine. Since, on my account, Protagoras’ relativism does not imply (nor is it implied by) Heraclitus’ theory of flux as expounded in the Secret Doctrine, the remaining choice that is available is to make ontological indeterminacy the key idea that in the Secret Doctrine Plato connects with Protagoras’ relativism.

The importance of the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy is the main point I have defended in my explanation of the content and role that the Secret Doctrine has in connection with Protagoras’ relativism in the *Theaetetus*. By proposing such an explanation, I therefore take up a position against the traditional line of interpretation of the meaning of the Secret Doctrine exemplified in Burnyeat’s Reading B, and I side with Lee, who forcefully maintains, as I do, that what she calls the ‘relativity’ principle (what I call ‘ontological indeterminacy’) is ‘the most important element of the Secret doctrine’.<sup>105</sup> If one adopts the kind of reading of *Theaetetus* 153–160 that Lee and I suggest, however, one could easily ask why Plato constructs the Secret Doctrine on the theory of flux and on ontological indeterminacy, to explain the content of Protagoras’ relativism more fully, since, on the basis of the reading that Lee and I propose, Plato does not think that Protagoras is committed to any theory of flux. One possible explanation would be the one Lee offers when she says that the Secret Doctrine is ‘an amalgam of metaphysical doctrines which many would find plausible, and to which many of Plato’s predecessors were committed’.<sup>106</sup> In short, in the Secret Doctrine Plato deals with a combination of metaphysical doctrines that constitute the philosophical background of much of the preceding speculation, and in which Protagoras’ relativism was originally formulated. Because of this reason, Plato believes such a background is worth investigating for someone interested

---

102 Burnyeat (1990: p. 49); see also Sedley (2004: p. 43).

103 Lee (2005: p. 89).

104 See Lee (2005: p. 90): ‘Stability is possible even in a relativist world: if it appears to me for all my life that this stone is black, the relativist should say that it will be black for me for that entire length of time. Its remaining stably black does not make it an “objective fact” in the sense of being true independently of whether I perceive it as black or not’. See also Brown (1993: 212).

105 Lee (2005: pp. 93 and 100).

106 Lee (2005: pp. 92 and 154).

in Protagoras' relativism, and this is what he does when he expounds the Secret Doctrine in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>107</sup>

At this point, I believe that the difference between the canonical interpretation of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine that, on the one hand, Burneyat and those scholars adopting Reading B propose and, on the other, the unconventional understanding of the same section that Lee and I suggest is clear. I also believe that this change of perspective in the interpretation of the Secret Doctrine may advance our comprehension of the connection between the epistemological and ontological aspects that characterizes Protagoras' relativism and, at the same time, of the kind of philosophical treatment that Plato devotes to such relativism in the *Theaetetus*. Lee and I, however, take opposite views about the plausibility of the relativistic views that Plato attaches to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Lee is happy to identify the 'relativity' principle as the key idea of the Secret Doctrine and explores Plato's treatment of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine in detail. In her study, in fact, she mainly aims to reconstruct, from the point of view of history of thought, the background in which Protagoras' relativism matured and against which Plato, Aristotle and Democritus reacted. By contrast, once I have identified ontological indeterminacy as the principle around which the Secret Doctrine and Protagoras' relativism are centred, I try to find out further elements for explaining ontological indeterminacy in terms of differing dispositions (and not in terms of any Heraclitean theory of flux). In so doing, my aim is a philosophical assessment of Protagoras' relativism *sub specie aeternitatis*; Lee legitimately aims for a more historical target and, in so doing, expresses a different evaluation of relativism. This difference of approach between our studies will emerge more fully later.<sup>108</sup>

---

107 On this point, see Lee (2005: p. 117): 'The Secret Doctrine is an experiment in thinking about relativism [...]. It is simply a line of argument which Plato thought was promising for a relativist to pursue'.

108 See below, pp. 85–7.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Chapter 2

# Wisdom and Incommensurability

### Protagoras in the *Cratylus*

Let us now remain focused on the question about the philosophical linkage between Protagoras' relativism, ontological indeterminacy and Heraclitus' theory of flux. Let us do so by considering a brief section of the *Cratylus*. In this dialogue, there are three interlocutors on the stage, namely Socrates, Hermogenes (the brother of Callias) and Cratylus, a follower of the doctrine of Heraclitus. The dialogue deals with the problem of 'correctness of name', a problem not very common in our philosophy of language but whose treatment in the *Cratylus* involves the discussion of quite modern positions. The dialogue can be divided into three main sections: the discussion between Socrates and Hermogenes on names (389–391), the long section on the etymologies of certain words (391–421), and the final debate between Socrates and Cratylus (421–440). The section that is most relevant for us is the first. Socrates and Hermogenes put forward and discuss Hermogenes' view that names are correct 'by convention' (*sunthêkê*: 384d1) or 'by agreement' (*omologia*) (while Cratylus thinks names to be correct by nature: *phusei*: 383a5).<sup>1</sup>

Hermogenes says to Socrates: 'no one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement. I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name [...]. No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage (*nomô(i) kai ethei*) of those who establish the usage and call it by that name' (384c10–d8). Socrates glosses Hermogenes' position by rephrasing it on the lines that 'whatever anyone decides to call a particular thing is its name' (385a1–2), and that this is the case 'whether it is a private individual (*idiôtês*) or a community (*polis*) that does so' (385a4). Reformulated in this way, Hermogenes' position amounts to two different ones, with quite different philosophical appeal. If it is a private individual who calls the objects in the world by whatever name he decides (Socrates offers the example of someone who privately calls 'horse' what is publicly called 'man': 385a6–10), we can label this position the 'Humpty-Dumpty' thesis, as it is normally called in contemporary debates of philosophy of language (Humpty Dumpty, a character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, says: 'when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less').<sup>2</sup> If it is a community that decides to name things

---

1 On the *Cratylus*, see Sedley (2003); Baxter (1992) and Goldschmidt (1986).

2 The full passage goes: 'And only one for birthday presents, you know. There is glory for you!' 'I don't know what you mean by "glory"' Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there is a nice knock-down argument for you!".' 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument"' Alice

according to the semantic ‘rules and usage’ that such a community has established, we cannot help but think of Wittgenstein’s idea that the meaning of a word is its use in the (public) language.<sup>3</sup> The Humpty-Dumpty position is not very easy to defend, since very few arguments could be advanced for holding that the individual somehow privately decides the meaning of a word (I cannot actually think in fact of one such argument).

On the other hand, the idea that the meanings of the words are determined by the uses that these have in the languages of a community of speakers sharing the same idiom and playing the same language games is not uncommon in current discussion in philosophy of language and is an idea that has its own logical cogency.<sup>4</sup> Hermogenes’ initial position is thus split into two different theses, of diverse philosophical strength, but Plato treats both of them as being somehow equivalent. The reason for Plato’s doing so, I believe, is that he is reproducing in this initial section of the *Cratylus* the exegetical pattern he employs in the *Theaetetus* when he offers his explanation of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine. We have so far seen that in the *Theaetetus*, the Measure Doctrine has also been taken as a theory of perceptual truth (with an ontological commitment), for which each perception is true (of what perceptually is) for the individual who has it. Later in the *Theaetetus* Plato will widen the application of the Measure Doctrine so as to include the case of ethical judgements, so that every ethical belief of a given community is true (of what ethically is) for the community that holds it (and for as long as it holds such an ethical belief: see *Tht.* 172b). While he deals with Hermogenes’ semantic conventionalism in this initial section of the *Cratylus*, Socrates interprets it by focusing on the dichotomy individual/community (*idiôtês/polis*) that is so fundamental in his interpretation of Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>5</sup>

By making Hermogenes’ semantic conventionalism best understood if interpreted on the Protagorean lines that are so clearly indicated in the *Theaetetus*, Plato is signalling, I believe, the philosophical dangerousness that Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine could potentially display, not only when interpreted as a theory of perceptual truth or as a theory of ethics (the two positions endorsed by the Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus*), but also when its application is extended to concerns of philosophy of language. Plato best betrays his worries about Protagoras’ subtlety just when he signals the danger that a possible widening of the domain of Protagoras’ relativism to key philosophical areas might imply. Protagoras’ doctrines are philosophically subtle, Plato might have believed, not only because they are such in themselves, as Plato’s treatment of the Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus* shows, but also because they stimulate the formulation of other philosophical positions, like that of Hermogenes’ semantic conventionalism, which are not genuinely Protagorean but which betray a kind of Protagorean genesis. To show the philosophical interrelation

---

objected. ‘When I use a word’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – nothing more or less’ (Carroll, 1982: p. 190).

3 See Wittgenstein (1953: §43).

4 *Ibidem*, §§244–272.

5 This is so although it is worth noting that when he discusses Hermogenes’ conventionalism in the *Cratylus*, Socrates does not discuss a theory that is openly connected to Protagoras or that he openly attributes to Protagoras.

between Protagoras' relativism and Hermogenes' conventionalism, Socrates finds it natural not only to read the latter in a Protagorean fashion but also to continue the discussion by inviting Hermogenes to say what he thinks of the widening of his conventionalism at the ontological level of 'the things that are'. It is at this point that Protagoras and his Measure Doctrine are explicitly brought in.

This happens at the end of 385e, where Socrates says:

Let's see, Hermogenes, whether the same thing (*sc.* what his conventionalism implies) also seems to you to hold of the things that are (*ta onta*). Is the being or essence (*ousia*) of each of them something private for each person (*idia(i) ekastô(i)*), as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is 'the measure of all things', and that things are to me as they appear to me, and are to you as they appear to you (*ara hoia men an emoi phainetai ta pragmata einai, toiauta men estin emoi: hoia d'an soi, toiauta de soi*). Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own (*auta hautôn tina bebaioteta tês ousias*)? (385e4–386a4).

There are two important points in this passage. The first is that the perceptual reading of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine offered in the *Theaetetus* is here confirmed by the use of exactly the same words: the Measure Doctrine is again taken as a theory of perceptual truth, of an ontological kind. The second point worthy of attention is the following: the doctrine of ontological relativism (which, although already recognized as the key feature of Protagoras' doctrine in the *Theaetetus*, is mainly kept in the background in the discussion of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine in that dialogue) becomes the main aspect of Plato's treatment of Protagoras' doctrine in the *Cratylus* and is openly recognized as such. The passage reported above in fact explicitly attributes to Protagoras the ontological thesis that 'the being or essence of each of [the things that are] is something private for each person (*idion ekastô(i)*)'. In the first version of the theory of visual perception that Socrates advances in the *Theaetetus*, the link established at any given moment between the perceiving subject and the perceived object in the perceptual act is '*idion ekastô(i)*' (private to each of them).<sup>6</sup> In the *Cratylus*, the same expression, '*idion ekastô(i)*', is used to refer to the link established, in the perceptual act, between the perceiving subject and the perceived object but at the ontological level of the process, not at the perceptual one. The perceptual essence of the perceived object is thus presented explicitly as depending on the perceiving subject.

While he attributes to Protagoras in the *Cratylus* the position of ontological relativism (always held in connection with perceptual relativism), Plato never mentions the doctrine of flux, which was so essential a part of his treatment of Protagoras' doctrine in the *Theaetetus*. This confirms the suggestion that the doctrine of flux is most likely to be an attribution, on Plato's part, of a philosophical position to Protagoras that he probably never held. On the other hand, not only is ontological relativism explicitly attributed to Protagoras in the *Cratylus*, but also the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy is explicitly brought into the discussion, and this evidently confirms that these are the two ontological positions that Plato unmistakably attaches to Protagoras. After having expounded Protagoras' Measure Doctrine, together with

6 *Tht.* 154a1–3. See also above, pp. 46–7.

its peculiar ontological implications, at 385e, Socrates goes on by communicating to Hermogenes his concerns about the weaknesses of such a doctrine, which seems to make wisdom an empty note, as we will see shortly.<sup>7</sup> Once he believes he has shown Hermogenes the philosophical inconsistencies of Protagoras' doctrine, Socrates in fact says:

If it isn't the case that [...] each thing has a being or essence privately for each person (*hekastô(i) idia(i) hekaston tôn ontôn estin*), then it is clear that things have some fixed being or essence of their own (*dêlon dê hoti auta hautôn ousian echonta tina bebaion esti ta pragmata*). They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us (*ou pros hêmas oude hup'hêmôn helkomena ano kai kato tô(i) hêmeterô(i) phantasmati*). They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature (*kath'hauta pros ten hautôn ousian echonta hê(i)per pepuhkan*) (386d8–e4).

This is a crucial passage. Socrates sets forth two ontological alternatives: the first one is ontological objectivism, of a Platonic kind, which states that things are by themselves, 'in relation to their own being or essence' (we can here recall Aristotle's expression '*autha kath'hauta*', 'themselves by themselves', as referred to his own ontological view that things have a determinate essence).<sup>8</sup> The second option is ontological relativism, of a Protagorean sort, which states that each thing has a private essence for each person and, since it is so, things are in relation to us and are made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. The logic of this latter ontological option, namely Protagoras', is thus the following: since things have a private essence for each person, it follows that things are not determinate in themselves (they are not in relation to their own being), but they are determinate in relation to us (in relation to how they appear to us). This is a clear reformulation of the doctrine of ontological indeterminacy that is briefly expounded in the *Theaetetus*; evident too is the logical relationship that occurs between the thesis that each thing has a private essence for each person (that is, ontological relativism) and the thesis that states that things are determinate in relation to each of us and not to their own essence (that is, ontological indeterminacy). The doctrine of ontological indeterminacy reformulates, at a more advanced level, ontological relativism: if things are not themselves by themselves (that is, if ontological indeterminacy is true of things), they will be something only in relation to something else (hence, ontological relativism is then true of things). In its pregnant brevity, this passage of the *Cratylus* expounds the core of the ontological positions that Plato ascribes to Protagoras, without any other additional argument (which the literary and argumentative structure of the *Theaetetus* made necessary, in that context). The passage also restates the dichotomy between (ontological) objectivism and relativism that is so essential in Plato's treatment of Protagoras' doctrines in the *Theaetetus*, as well as being so fundamental for us if we are to understand the real matter of the philosophical dispute between Plato and Protagoras.

7 There is a dispute about the correct pagination of the text (and thus the correct order of the arguments) in this section: see Schofield (1972), where it is proposed to transfer 385b2–d1 to follow 387c5. *Contra* Mackenzie (1986).

8 See *Metaphysics* Γ 6.1011a18 and 4.5.1006a32–34; see above, p. 51.

## The Defence

Let us go back to the *Theaetetus*. The philosophical position that Plato's Protagoras has been developing so far is a combination of perceptual and ontological relativism. Each perception is true for the individual who has it and as long as he has it. This is the case because, in the perceptual process, the individual peculiarly establishes the perceptual essence of the object (its ontological status). Put differently, Protagoras' doctrine maintains that each object has no perceptual essence of its own, hence it is ontologically indeterminate; it is something and becomes determinate, from an ontological point of view, when it happens to be in contact with something else (the senses or, more generally, the mind of a particular perceiver). (I have argued that this is the case not because everything and everybody undergoes perennial modifications, of a Heraclitean kind, but because something is always perceived from someone's particular perspective or according to someone's particular disposition at a given time.) One of the consequences of Protagoras' doctrine is that each of us becomes the judge of his perceptual world and we are always correct in our perceptions since we all construct our own perceptual world. According to this position, also those under hallucinations, or asleep, or dreaming or mad would have perceptions that are true for them and they would be the sole judges of their altered worlds (although the notion of 'normality' seems to be rather slippery and unconventional in the world of Protagoras).<sup>9</sup>

Socrates confirms the peculiar form of Protagorean relativism at the end of his first face-to-face confrontation with Protagoras' doctrine, when he explains to Theaetetus that when 'you apply the term "being" to a thing [...], 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 [...]. That is the meaning of the theory we have been expounding' (160b-c). The theory Socrates has been expounding is Protagoras', for whom (Socrates is summing up Protagoras' relativism) 'my perception is true for me – because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge [...] of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not' (160c). This kind of perceptual infallibility is what mostly disturbs Plato;<sup>10</sup> this aspect of Protagoras' doctrine is what makes Plato raise his objection against the legitimacy of Protagoras as a teacher. Socrates asks Theaetetus:

If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him (*ei gar dê hekastô(i) alêthes estai ho an di' aisthêseôs doxazê(i)*); if no man can assess another's experience better than he, or can claim authority to examine another man's judgement and see if it be right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual himself can

---

9 See 157e–158d. At 158b, Socrates formulates, for the first time in the history of philosophy, the Dream Argument: what kind of reasons could we offer for saying that in this very moment we are not sleeping and that what we are thinking and saying is not a dream? On the importance of this argument in modern philosophy see Descartes (*Meditationes*, I) and, in contemporary philosophy, Malcolm (1958).

10 On Protagoras as an infallibilist, see Fine (1998, especially pp. 201–204) and Fine (1996a).

judge of his own world and what he judges is always true and correct (*ho pollakis eirêtai, autos ta hautou hekastos monos doxasei, tauta de panta hortha kai alethê*): how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be the teacher of other man and worth large fees? (161d3–e1).<sup>11</sup>

Socrates' objection makes a real point: how will it be possible for someone to claim to teach and be paid for such a teaching, if each of us is unerringly aware of his own world and what he judges is always correct and true for him? One might well argue, as Socrates does, that for Protagoras every world so privately constructed is thus true for its inhabitants and no possible way is available to us for deciding, from an epistemological point of view, whether any of such worlds is a false world. Such lack of decidability is paradoxical for Socrates and for any philosopher adopting an objectivistic point of view. On the other hand, one might suggest, as Protagoras will do in his Defence, that it is certainly impossible to compare such diverse worlds from an epistemological perspective (since there is no objective world to look at and take as a correct paradigm with which to compare all other worlds), but that there is a non-epistemological way for comparing them, for instance by disputing their different goodness and fruitfulness for those who live in them.

To put the whole matter more precisely, one may note that Protagoras' relativism, as depicted so far by Plato, maintains that each of us is unerring in his perceptual sphere; Protagoras' relativism also assumes that the perceiver determines the ontological essence of the perceived object. The examples that Socrates has used to illustrate Protagoras' doctrine have always been cases of sense perceptions; Socrates has made clear from the beginning of his discussion of Protagoras' theory that the latter concerns 'the case of hot and things like that' (152c2). But then, at a certain point, Socrates widens the spectrum of what might be called a perception, as to include 'pleasures and pains, desires and fears' (156b4–5), adding also that there are 'other [perceptions] besides, a great number which have names, an infinite number which have not' (156b6–7). Although Socrates widens the spectrum of the term 'perception' in this way, 'perception' (*aisthêsis*) has never been linked with 'judgement' (*doxa*) in the part of the Protagorean section we have so far been faced with. There has been no talk of judgement up to this point in the *Theaetetus*.

Some modern philosophers clearly distinguish judgement on the one hand and perception on the other; they also assume that perceptual processes somehow involve a form of judgemental activity. Plato was historically the first to differentiate perception and perceptual judgements in the *Theaetetus* at 179c.<sup>12</sup> On the basis of this differentiation, he builds up his final refutation of the thesis that knowledge is perception by showing that, in order to have a perception, we need a perceiving mind able to coordinate the perceptual information obtained through the use of our

---

11 See also *Cra.* 385e–386d.

12 Socrates speaking: 'So long as we keep within the limits of that immediate experience of the individual which gives rise to perceptions and to perceptual judgements (*peri de to paron hekastô(i) pathos, hex hôn hai aisthêsis kai hai kata tautas doxai gignontai*), it is more difficult to convict these latter of being untrue' (179c2–4).

senses.<sup>13</sup> Before Plato, no epistemological distinction had ever been drawn between perception and perceptual judgement; ‘*aisthêsis*’ was the general term used by Presocratic philosophers to indicate ‘sense perceptions’, ‘feelings’ and ‘thoughts’ (with no clear differentiation, either terminological or conceptual, between the three terms).<sup>14</sup> Historically, Protagoras was not, most probably, aware of a distinction between perception and perceptual judgement; Plato has so far been respectful of terminological accuracy in reporting Protagoras’ doctrine, since he has never separated perception and perceptual judgement as far as Protagoras’ doctrine is concerned. But, in formulating his objection to Protagoras’ legitimacy as a teacher, Socrates speaks *en passant* of ‘what the individual judges by means of perception’, thus colouring Protagoras’ relativism about perceptions with a new epistemological distinction very likely to be foreign to the sophist. Of course, one might well argue that Plato has to talk of perceptual judgements because he assumes that every perception is a perceptual judgement and believes that not assuming this is one of the elements that make Protagoras’ doctrine a faulty one. It is important, however, to understand that, by talking of perceptual judgements, Plato introduces an epistemological distinction, namely between perception and perceptual judgement, which is probably alien to the sophist, both historically and to the figure of Protagoras as described so far by Plato himself.<sup>15</sup>

Attacked on his own claim to be wise and to be a teacher, Protagoras is offered the possibility of defending his doctrine and credibility as a teacher, but since he was dead at the time in which the dialogue is imagined to have taken place, Plato makes Socrates expound the defence of the sophist on behalf of the latter. Let us see what Protagoras is made to say in his reply to Socrates’ objection (later in this chapter, we will consider the question of the authenticity of this section, that is, whether Plato is actually reporting Protagoras’ genuine answer to what could have been an objection historically raised against him). Protagoras’ Defence runs from 166a up to 168c. Protagoras is made to reaffirm the fulcrum of his relativism by urging Socrates to refute what he maintains by showing that ‘each man’s perceptions are not his own private events (*ouchi idiai aisthêseis hekastô(i) hêmôn gignontai*); or that, if they are his own private events, it does not follow that the thing which appears “becomes” or, if we want to speak of being, “is” only for the man to whom it appears (*to phainomenon monô(i) ekeinô(i) gignoito, e ei einai dei onomazein, eîê hô(i) per phainetai*)’ (166c3–6). Protagoras defends his own doctrine and his legitimacy as a teacher by maintaining that some people are indeed wiser than others and that this

13 See 184a–186e. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 5 (especially 1009b12–15); *De Anima* III 3.427a19–b, on which see Lee (2005: pp. 158; 168–180).

14 See LSJ, s.v. ‘*aisthêsis*’ and ‘*aisthanomai*’; Schirren (1998) and Farrar (1988: pp. 54–58). Aristotle claimed that his predecessors believed that knowing is a kind of perceiving (*De Anima* III 3.427a26–29). On the whole question, see Lee (2005: pp. 78–79, with further references, and pp. 138–139, with arguments against Snell’s claim that Presocratics were not able to distinguish between knowing and perceiving).

15 Relying on such an epistemological distinction, in connection with Protagoras’ doctrine Fine (especially Fine 1996a and 1998) talks of Narrow (perceptual) and Broad (judgemental) Protagoreanism. Because of the historical reasons I have just given, I believe that such a distinction may be misleading for a plausible interpretation of Protagoras’ relativism.

does not contradict his own relativistic doctrine. Protagoras' argument is long and ingenious: for the sake of clarity I will report it fully.

Protagoras is made to say:

I take my stand on the truth being as I have written it. Each one of us is the measure both of what is and of what is not; but there are countless differences between men for just this very reason, that different things both are and appear to be to different subjects. I certainly do not deny the existence of both wisdom and wise men: far from it. But the man whom I call wise is the man who changes the appearances – the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him (*all auton touton kai lego sophon, hos an tini hēmōn, hō(i) phainetai kai esti kaka, metaballon poiēsē(i) agatha phainesthai te kai einai*) [...]. For instance, I would remind you [*sc.* Theodorus] of what we were saying before,<sup>16</sup> namely, that to the sick man the things he eats both appear and are bitter, while to the healthy man they both appear and are the opposite. Now what we have to do is not to make one of these two wiser than the other – that is not even a possibility – nor is it our business to make accusations, calling the sick man ignorant for judging as he does, and the healthy man wise, because he judges differently. What we have to do is to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is *better*. In education, too, what we have to do is to change a worse state into a better state (*houtō de kai en tē(i) paideia(i) apo heteras hexeōs epi ten ameino metablêton*); only whereas the doctor brings about the change by the use of drugs, the professional teacher does it by the use of *logoi*. What never happens is that a man who judges what is false is made to judge what is true. For it is impossible to judge what is not, or to judge anything other than what one is immediately experiencing; and what one is immediately experiencing is always true (*oute gar ta mē onta dunaton doxasai, oute alla par'ha an paschē(i), tauta de aei alêthē*). This, in my opinion, is what really happens: when a man's soul is in a pernicious state (*hexei*), he judges things akin to it, but giving him a sound state of the soul causes him to think different things, things that are good. In the latter event, the things which appear to him are what some people, who are still inexperienced, call 'true'; my position, however, is that the one kind are *better* than the others, but in no way *truer* (*ha dê tines ta phantasmata hupo apeirias alêthē kalousin, ego de beltiō men ta hetera tôn heterōn, alêthestera de ouden*)<sup>17</sup> (166d1–167b4).

Protagoras is made to conclude his own defence by comparing the wise man he professes to be not only with doctors but also with gardeners who 'when they find a plant sickly, proceed by causing it to have good and healthy, that is, "true" perceptions, instead of bad ones', and eventually with the wise and efficient politician 'who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones' (167b7–c4).

Protagoras' Defence raises many philosophical points. As far as wisdom is concerned, Protagoras is made to state that the wise man exists and is the one who can change the appearances by operating a modification in the state (*hexis*) of the perceiver so that the latter is able to perceive good things in place of bad ones. The wise man is the one who, by means of *logoi*, can render an individual, previously sick in his way of perceiving things, into a new person with a more healthy perspective on the world. The modification that the individual undergoes in

16 See 159d-e.

17 Levett/Burnyeat translation slightly modified. On the Defence, see Cole (1966) and (1972); Vlastos (1956: pp. xx–xxiv); Nill (1985: pp. 28–29); Sedley (2004: pp. 54–57).

his state or disposition towards the world (and hence the modification of the quality of his perceptions) does not concern, according to Protagoras, the epistemological level, since both the individual with unhealthy perceptions and that with good, better perceptions are incorrigibly correct in their perceptual apprehensions. Protagoras' relativism, in fact, assumes that what one experiences is always true. Only those people who are without any experience (*hupo apeirias* 167b3) believe that it is at all possible to compare epistemologically two different perceptions and establish which is the true one (by, possibly, referring to an objective standard of judgement). It may be noted that what Protagoras says leaves intact the force of his relativism, since not only does he reaffirm that every individual is the unique measure of his perceptual (and private) world, but also that every individual is the measure of the new, better perceptual world gained through the interaction with the wise man. To take two of Protagoras' examples, the wise man acts in the same manner as the doctor does with his patients and the gardener with his plants: both and only the patients and the plants (with their reactions) can witness the goodness of the imparted cures. Similarly, only the individual can say he is satisfied with his new perceptual habit (no one else, the wise man included, being able to live in the private world of the individual in question).

At this point, and even allowing that Protagoras' explanation of what wisdom consists in is a plausible one, one may wonder how the kind of teaching that Protagoras proposes to undertake might be carried out. There are no details on this aspect in the *Defence* and one may only speculate. An example can be of some help. Let us take a case in which someone is faced with a bad feeling. As seen earlier, at *Theaetetus* 156b Plato includes feelings in the category of perceptions when he deals with Protagoras' doctrine.)<sup>18</sup> Zoe is a competitive runner at the end of a very successful career: she is a 400 metres runner. She is used to running against other people: she does it (1) to go beyond her physical and emotional limits; (2) to beat her rivals. For the time being, Zoe was more satisfied if she achieves her personal best and comes fourth than if she comes second but without achieving her personal best. She is now happy with this idea but when she was younger, the desire of beating others was much stronger and this created an intense sensation of fear in her so that she was completely at unease with herself before every competition. After years of intense competitive activity, all of a sudden the desire to beat her rivals and the fear that went along with it became pernicious for her, as it created a sort of competitiveness with which she was uncomfortable.

Zoe's trainer, an old athlete who successfully became a great trainer, started talking to her about his own competitive experience. He told her that when he could run, he ran against others but also against himself and his own limits. He taught Zoe another way of living with the competitive activity and slowly she came to understand that the real and noble meaning of her running lies mainly in this kind of fight against herself. After being taught that way, Zoe's pernicious perceptions and feelings disappeared and she really started enjoying her running activity again,

---

18 See above, p. 2.

with a wide range of good and healthy sensations: satisfaction, joy, and so on.<sup>19</sup> Zoe remains the measure of her own perceptual world also after having been taught by the kind of Protagorean wise man whose picture has been sketched in the example. But what makes the wise man wise? It cannot be the possession of some objective truths that should be imparted to his students, so that these latter could become wiser. Nor could it be that among all the possible perceptual apprehensions that can be obtained from the observation of an object or an event, Protagoras' wise man claims to be able to say which is the true one and thus teach his students how to have such a true perception. Protagoras clearly admits not being able to change (perceptual) falsehood into truth, since there exists no falsehood for him. This thesis is an inevitable consequence of his relativism and is openly stated in the Defence (167a7 ff); Plato ascribes the same position to Protagoras' followers in the *Euthydemus*.<sup>20</sup> Protagoras professes to work on perceptual appearances, not on objective truths. One of the elements that could make him a wise man, according to his own explanation in the Defence, is that, since he interacts with unsatisfied individuals, he may well improve his own state of expertise by assessing the reactions to his teaching of such plurality of people. In modern parlance, the feedback he receives from the people he teaches substantially contributes to the formation of his own wisdom, so that he may well proclaim that he is wise exactly because, by being confronted with such a great variety of individual cases, he has a wide experience to rely on.

The point about experience is hinted at at the end of the Defence, I believe, when Protagoras is made to say that there are people who, because of lack of experience (*hupo apeirias* 167b3), believe that the good perceptions of the satisfied individual are truer than those of the unsatisfied one. The kind of experience that Protagoras is likely to be referring to is all gained on the field, since he has to face a wide spectrum of different individual cases, each one peculiar in its own specificity, each one requiring its own way out, each one preventing the wise man from formulating a unique and standard solution valid for all cases. Protagoras maintains that only those who have no experience at all may believe that what should be taught in the case of someone having bad perceptions is to correct those perceptions by recurring to a paradigmatic case that constitutes the truth on the matter. If Plato believed that perception is knowledge, he would assume, as most empiricist philosophers would have done until quite recently, that only one perception of the perceived object is the correct one, all the others being mistaken. Protagoras would maintain that this approach to the question is naïve, or indeed idealist, and does not take into account the irreducible plurality of individual cases, empirically determined. Protagoras' argument might become more logically stringent if we note, as it has already been done, that

---

19 This example provides the kind of meaning I ascribe to the 'better' of the Defence. The British philosopher C.S. Schiller thought Protagoras to be the first pragmatist in the history of thought because of this idea of 'better' (see Schiller 1907: p. 1). My understanding of 'better' and of the whole Defence is similar to the one offered by Cornford (1935: pp. 72–73), and Cole (1966: 111). On the ambiguity of the term, see Burnyeat (1990: p. 23).

20 See *Euthydemus* 286c, Socrates speaking: 'The followers of Protagoras made considerable use of it [i.e. of the argument maintaining that contradiction is impossible] [...]. The argument amounts to claiming that there is no such thing as false speaking, doesn't it?'

for Protagoras, and for every Greek philosopher before Plato, ‘*aisthêsis*’ means not only ‘perceptual apprehension’ but also ‘sensation’, ‘feeling’ and ‘thought’.<sup>21</sup> How is it possible to hold that the sensation of fear someone may be feeling at a certain moment should not be felt on that very occasion? How is it possible to maintain that on a certain occasion, a certain sensation should not be felt?

As Feyerabend has remarked, ‘sensations [*sc.* perceptions] for Protagoras are neither the technical entities Plato constructs to get [Protagoras] into trouble (156a2ff) [*sc.* in the *Theaetetus*] nor Ayerian sense-data; they are what common people rely on when judging their surroundings. Things are hot or cold for a person when the person feels them to be hot or cold, and not when a philosopher, using theory, pronounces the presence of The Hot or The Cold.’<sup>22</sup> Protagoras could not but have used the term ‘perception’ in this non-technical sense. If this is the case, Protagoras’ doctrine as expounded so far by Plato, from the first announcement at p. 152 that Man is the Measure of All Things to the reference to lack of experience in the Defence, could not but assume a polemical tone against the idealist approach taken by philosophers who, by separating theory and practice, end up by postulating the existence of an objective reality quite often in contrast with our experience and everyday life. For, if it is true that Protagoras may have trouble in assuming that there is no objective reality to be perceived (and thus that there is no objective knowledge to be taught), it will also be true that the notion of ‘objective’ reality seems to lose philosophical appeal and consistency, once we have realized that the so called objective reality is made up by many particular realities and that such realities also very much depend upon their changing historical contexts.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, if we think of what is nowadays required from someone who is socially recognized as most capable of transmitting information and expertise, that is, a university teacher, it may be noted that what he does reflects in some way what Protagoras’ wise man seems to be understood as doing. In our universities, lecturers and professors are asked to revise their teaching according to the feedback they receive from students so that the dialectic between teacher and pupil is very much similar to that operating between Protagoras and his unsatisfied individuals. If we take the case of philosophy departments for a more specific example, what teachers there aim at, in an ideal case, will not be the transmission of any sort of philosophical truth, but rather to instil in their students a sensibility for some aspects of life and thought, so that the student may acquire a more advanced and satisfactory understanding of themselves and of the world they live in. A present-day teacher’s target is close to Protagoras’: both aim at having satisfied students, no matter if they

---

21 On this point, see also Mendelson (2002: p. 8) and Schiappa (1991: p. 97).

22 Feyerabend (1987: p. 50).

23 Reference to the discussion on incommensurable theories in philosophy of science is here obvious. See, again, Feyerabend (1987: p. 53): ‘Objectivists have not constructed one world, but many [...]. The most fundamental science, physics, has so far failed to give us a unified account of space, time and matter. What we have, therefore, is a variety of approaches based on a variety of models and successful in restricted domains’; ‘What counts as evidence [in science] depends on attitudes and judgements that change with time, profession, and occasionally from one research group to the next’ (p. 75). On how slippery the notion of reality is, see also Goodman (1978: chapter six).

are not provided with the kind of ultimate truth that is both Socrates' and Plato's target in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>24</sup>

If Protagoras' educational aim in the Defence is quite different from Socrates' and Plato's, it will also be true that the educational process Protagoras seems to allude to in his Defence is similar, at least in the procedure that it follows, to the type of midwifery that Socrates professes to practise. In both cases, pupils should have direct contact with their masters; through a dialogical interaction with these masters they will reach the different educational targets their masters set forth for them. Through a dialogical interaction both the Protagorean pupil and the Socratic student are able to revise, respectively, their own unsatisfied perceptions and incoherent beliefs. Through the use of *logoi* both Protagoras and Socrates want to make their students wiser, the former by providing them with a more satisfactory way of looking at things, the latter by leading them to the discovery of truth. Such proximity of educational procedure between Socrates and Protagoras is what makes the teaching of the latter a serious challenge for Socrates and Plato, as far as the education of the young is concerned. This confirms once again that one of the issues that is always present in the discussion on knowledge in the *Theaetetus* is that of education.<sup>25</sup>

## Two Fragments

If we found some minor grounds for discerning in the Secret Doctrine of the *Theaetetus* the elements that might be genuinely Protagorean from what is a probable Platonic intrusion, at the moment we lack such grounds for claiming that the Defence contains genuine Protagorean material. Scholarship tends to consider the Defence authentically Protagorean, at least in its core.<sup>26</sup> However, the arguments for maintaining that the Defence is authentically Protagorean are not as strong as one would wish them to be.<sup>27</sup> A better chance of detecting the authenticity or otherwise of the Defence might be offered – so I propose – by an external comparison, that is, a comparison between the Defence itself and two genuine fragments of Protagoras, namely B6aDK (the Two *logoi* fragment) and B6bDK (the Weaker/Stronger *logoi* fragment).<sup>28</sup> I suggest that one can in fact find some reasonable consonance between the ideas expressed in the two fragments and the meaning of the Defence. Modern

---

24 On philosophical education as a process aiming at modifying the taste of the learner (with no particular reference to content of belief), see Wittgenstein (1977: p. 17e): 'A present-day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it' (translation of P. Winch).

25 On the proximity between Protagoras' method and Socrates', see the remark of Diogenes Laertius (9.52), who ascribes the invention of the dialogical procedure adopted in the Socratic dialogue to the sophist.

26 Scholars who believe that the Defence is authentic are Campbell (1883: pp. xviii–xxx); Cornford (1935: p. 72); Kerferd (1981: p. 134); Untersteiner (1996: pp. 102–103). More cautious are McDowell (1973: pp. 165, 172–173); Burnyeat (1990: p. 22, n. 30). Against the authenticity of the Defence, see Cole (1966: 107).

27 See e.g. Cornford (1935: p. 72).

28 See above, p. 6.

interpreters provide two alternative readings for the two fragments, a rhetorical one *and* a philosophical one. The Greek text of the fragments reads, respectively: ‘*Protôs ephê duo logous einai peri pantos pragmatos antikeimenous allêlois*’ (B6a= Diogenes Laertius 9.51); ‘*Ton hêtôtô de logon kreittô poiein tout’ estin*’ (B6b= Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.24.1402a23).

Some interpreters have taken the fragments to mean, respectively, that ‘on every subject there are two discourses, one opposed to the other’, and that ‘it is possible to make one of these two discourses more convincing than the other’. On the basis of this rhetorical interpretation, in the two fragments Protagoras just wanted to warn his students of the great power that the use of words is able to provide.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the philosophical interpretation takes the fragments to signify, respectively: ‘[Protagoras was the first to say that] on every thing [that is, experience, fact], there are two opposite accounts’ and ‘to make the weaker account the stronger’. The emphasis in such a translation is on *logos* and *pragma*. ‘*Pragma*’ is taken in its basic meaning of ‘thing, concrete reality’; ‘*logos*’ is given its wider meaning of ‘account’, that is, not only ‘discourse’ but also what is behind the discourse, that is, ‘thought, mental process’.<sup>30</sup> What I believe can be suggested is that the philosophical interpretation of the two fragments in question is consonant with the kind of reading of Protagoras’ Defence in the *Theaetetus* that I have sketched. We have previously seen that an individual may have pernicious perceptions, even emotions and thoughts on the basis of the wide semantic spectrum that the term ‘perception’ has for Protagoras and for any Presocratic philosopher. The individual may taste a food as bitter, or feel fear in front of another person or even be incapable of making any reasonable sense of an event in his life. After the kind of *sophos* that Protagoras briefly describes in the Defence has done his job, the individual in question has new better perceptions, emotions, thoughts.<sup>31</sup> Through the action of the *sophos*, the same food that tasted bitter before to the unsatisfied individual now tastes as different, as ‘opposite’ (*Tht.* 166e3).

In this respect, it can be said that the individual in question has experienced two opposite ways (bitter and sweet) of perceiving the same thing (in this case, the food); we could paraphrase this idea by using the words Protagoras uses in fragment 6a and saying that on the tasting of the food ‘there are two opposite accounts’. It may also be argued that of the two accounts that one can possibly produce of the thing or event with which one happens to be faced, one account can be considered as *hettôn*, the other as *kreittôn*. Some people can bring it about that the more unsatisfactory account of the thing or event in question is replaced by a more satisfactory one. This is precisely what the Protagorean *sophos* claims to be able to do in the Defence. When the individual is unhappy with his own perceptions, emotions and thoughts, the *sophos* is said to be the one who can ‘change the appearances – the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and

29 The rhetorical interpretation is propounded by Versenyi (1963) and Guthrie (1969: p. 182).

30 The philosophical interpretation is suggested by Schiappa (1991: pp. 107–114); Untersteiner (1996: pp. 79–114) and Cole (1972: 34–37).

31 See above, pp. 63–5.

makes good things appear and be for him'.<sup>32</sup> The *sophos* is able to work a change in the disposition of the unsatisfied individual so that the latter may have good perceptions, emotions and thoughts, in place of bad ones.

From this perspective, there seems to be an hermeneutic echo between the Defence and the concepts expressed in the two fragments; Socrates may be thought to be offering Protagoras' Defence with these two 'fragments' in mind.<sup>33</sup> Plato shows himself familiar at least with the idea expressed in 6b, when he includes it in the charges attributed to Socrates during his trial in the *Apology*.<sup>34</sup> But he is most likely to have also known the idea expressed in 6a, which was famous enough for Aristophanes to have played widely on it in his *Clouds*.<sup>35</sup> There is a third element that makes one suspect that Plato was familiar with these two slogans of Protagoras' and that he might be thus commenting on them in the Defence. This third element is the language of the Defence itself. On the basis of the philosophical interpretation, Protagoras' fragments mean that on the same thing there are two opposite accounts (*logoi*) and that it is possible to make the weaker account (*logos*) the stronger. In the Defence the *sophos* is said to change the worse state into a better one by means of '*logoi*'.<sup>36</sup> Most important translations into English of *Theaetetus* 167a5–6 render '*logoi*' as 'words' (Levett/Burnyeat), or 'discourse' (Cornford), or 'things he says' (McDowell) – all of them taking the word *logos* in its basic linguistic meaning (with the exception of Chappell, who translates as 'arguments'). But *logos* has a much wider semantic field, covering not only 'speech' or 'discourse' but also 'thinking' or 'account of' or again 'formula'. G.B. Kerferd has correctly pointed out that in ancient Greek '*logos*' had a wide range of meaning and that this is especially the case for the sophists and their time, when the philosophical lexicon was less sharp and detailed than the one Plato and Aristotle later codified.<sup>37</sup> It is thus reasonable to

---

32 166d6–8.

33 What nowadays is a fragment was not evidently such at Plato's time. When in this section I say 'fragment', I mean 'the idea expressed in the fragment'.

34 See *Apology* 19b5–6: 'Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse (*hettō*) into the stronger (*kreittō*) *logos*.'

35 See Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 889ff.

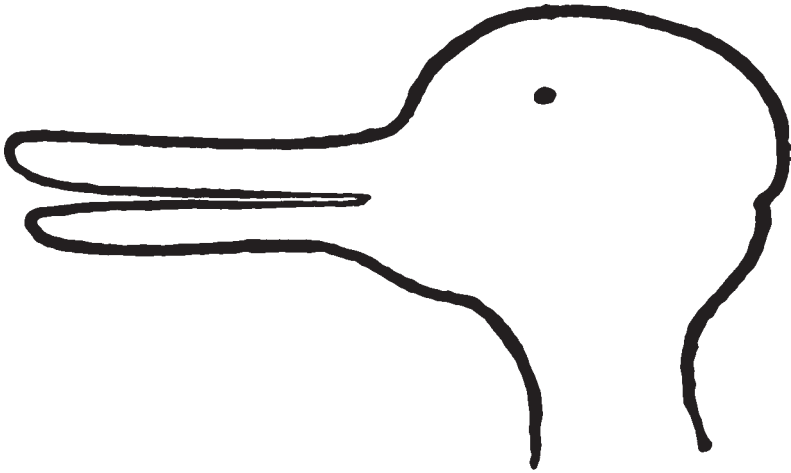
36 167a5–6.

37 See Kerferd (1981: pp. 83–84): 'In the case of the word *logos* there are three main areas of its application or use, all related by an underlying conceptual unity. These are first of all three areas of language and linguistic formulation, hence speech, discourse, description, statement, arguments (as expressed in word) and so on; secondly the area of thought and mental processes, hence thinking, reasoning, accounting for, explanation (cf. *orthos logos*), etc.; thirdly, the area of the world, that *about* which we are able to speak and to think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws and so on, provided that in each case they are regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process. While in any context the word *logos* may seem to point primarily or even exclusively to only one of these areas, the underlying meaning usually, perhaps always, involves some degree of reference to the other two areas as well, and this I believe is as true for the Sophists as it is, say, for Heraclitus.'

think that, at least in its general lines, when he offers the Defence of the sophist in the *Theaetetus*, Plato makes Socrates rely upon genuine Protagorean material.<sup>38</sup>

### Incommensurability

The Defence has provided us with further elements on Protagoras' relativism. The doctrine of the sophist may seem a rather simple one, in so far as it apparently reduces all the cognitive activities of human beings to perceptual apprehensions. We have in fact seen that Protagoras seems not to have drawn any epistemological distinction between sense perceptions, emotions and thought, since the term 'perception' could not but indicate for him all the cognitive activities human beings are able to perform, with no further indication about possibly diverse levels of epistemological intensity for such activities. By relying on this undifferentiated concept of perception, Protagoras maintained that the individual is the epistemological standard for whom some things are and some are not. To remain in the mere perceptual sphere and by using a classical example of modern epistemology, Figure 2.1 may appear as a duck's head to someone and as the head of a rabbit to someone else.<sup>39</sup>



**Figure 2.1** Duck/rabbit head (see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 194e)

38 Other scholars have discussed a connection between *Theaetetus* 166a–168c and DK80 B6a/b. See G.B. Kerferd, 'Protagoras', in Edwards (1967: vol. IV, pp. 732–741); Schiappa (1991: chapter 6).

39 See Wittgenstein (1953: Part II, p. 194e); see also Kuhn (1970: chapter 10).

For one perceiver, the figure is indeed a duck's head and for the other, it is indeed a rabbit's head. There seems to be no way of saying that one of the two is wrong; it can be reasonably maintained that the figure in question is a duck's head for one person and a rabbit's for someone else. According to Protagoras, each individual may thus determine, ontologically speaking, what is real for him at a certain moment, on the basis of his disposition at that very moment. Not only does Protagoras have an excessively reductive conception of our cognitive powers by limiting them all to the same epistemological capacity but he also maintains that every individual is always correct in his perceptions. On these grounds, one may suspect that the doctrine of the sophist is not only too simple to capture the richness of human cognitive capacities and the multiform reality we are faced with, but it also ends by postulating a plurality of individuals living in their own worlds with inadequate access to that of others, perhaps with none at all. The charge that can be levelled against Protagoras' doctrine is not only that of excessive theoretical simplicity but also that it makes the comparison between different worlds impossible by implying a kind of solipsism. On the other hand, Protagoras is made to say in his Defence that a dialogical interaction between individuals is allowed and that a comparison between different perceptions and perceptual worlds is indeed possible. Is there a way to make Protagoras' positions more philosophically coherent? This can be done, I believe, by referring to the idea of 'incommensurability'.

Incommensurability has become much a debated idea since the publication of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and Feyerabend's *Against Method*.<sup>40</sup> Incommensurability is a concept not openly formulated by any Greek philosopher, at least in the way the concept is elaborated in contemporary philosophy.<sup>41</sup> What I propose to do here is to use such a concept to illuminate the form of relativism ascribed to Protagoras by Plato in the *Theaetetus* (and *Cratylus*). I will not claim that any form of incommensurability is formulated in any section of the Platonic dialogues that concern Protagoras; what I wish to do is to get a better grasp of Protagorean relativism by attempting to make his doctrine a more coherent one through the use of the notion of incommensurability. At this point we here depart, as far as Protagoras' theories are concerned, from historical plausibility to move towards the more theoretical aim of this book, namely a philosophical assessment of the force of Protagorean relativism by identifying its possible connections with modern (forms of) relativism. Borrowing a particularly evocative formulation from Mohan Matten (as said in the 'Introduction'), what is under scrutiny at this point is 'Protagoreanism *sub specie aeternitatis*'.<sup>42</sup> To achieve this target, I believe that incommensurability is a (modern) philosophical concept that can play a rather powerful exegetical role in understanding Protagoras' type of relativism. As Margolis says in *The Truth about*

---

40 See Kuhn (1970) and Feyerabend (1975). See Feyerabend (1962) for the very first formulation of incommensurability in print.

41 Margolis suggests that Kuhn's notion of incommensurability may be viewed 'as a natural extension of the ancient puzzle posed by the Pythagorean theorem' (Margolis 2003: p. 42; see also pp. 55–56). A closer look at the history of Greek mathematics reinforces the legitimacy of Margolis's claim: see Toth (1997: pp. 71–83).

42 See above, p. 8.

*Relativism*, the two commonest and strongest forms of relativism in the history of thought are, in fact, Protagoreanism and Incommensurabilism.<sup>43</sup> From a theoretical point of view, it is illuminating to use one key idea of the latter form to illuminate some aspects of the former.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the notion of the ‘incommensurable’ is used with reference to scientific theories. Kuhn believes that an accurate analysis of the history of science shows that it does not progress following a linear pattern, according to which, for example, Einstein’s dynamics would incorporate Newton’s account of dynamics and, by incorporating it, would make the latter a more complete theory. Science progresses, Kuhn claims, not in virtue of a steady transition from one theory to another but through a scientific revolution that makes older theories and scientific procedures ‘incommensurable’ with new theories and procedures. Einstein’s and Newton’s dynamics cannot coexist in the same scientific picture; they are scientifically incommensurable. Kuhn never defines incommensurability in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (he uses the term very few times in the course of the book); in his discussion of the resolution of scientific revolutions (pp. 148–152), he describes ‘the most fundamental aspect of the incommensurability of competing paradigms’ (p. 149). He says (p. 150):

In a sense that I am unable to explicate further, the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. One contains constrained bodies that fall slowly, the other pendulums that repeat their motions again and again. In one, solutions are compounds, in the other mixtures. One is embedded in a flat, the other in a curved, matrix of space. Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. Again, that is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other. That is why a law that cannot even be demonstrated to one group of scientists may occasionally seem intuitively obvious to another. Equally, it is why, before they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift. Just because it is a transition between incommensurables, the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like the gestalt switch, it must occur all at once [...] or not at all.

What Kuhn says here not only reiterates the point made earlier about how difficult is to define ‘reality’ and how modifiable reality is according to different points of views, but it also makes clear that to accept a scientific paradigm means to live in a certain world. It also makes plain that full communication between different scientific paradigms (and thus worlds) is impossible, unless there is a paradigm shift that must occur all at once, so letting people used to less promising paradigms obtain a refreshing and unexpected change of perspective.<sup>44</sup> The lack of a clear definition of ‘incommensurable’, however, generated confusion among philosophers, so that some

---

<sup>43</sup> See Margolis (1991: pp. 87–118); see also Mendelson (2002: pp. 35–41).

<sup>44</sup> I here focus on ‘methodological’ incommensurability more than ‘semantic’ incommensurability, although the two are very closely related. On the distinction, see Sankey (1997) and Margolis (2003).

of them assumed that ‘incommensurable’ means ‘incomparable’. In response to this conceptual confusion, Kuhn offered further clarifications on incommensurability in the article ‘Theory-Change as Structure-Change: Comments on the Sneed Formalism’.<sup>45</sup>

In that article, Kuhn writes:

Most readers of my text [*sc. The Structure*] have supposed that when I spoke of theories as incommensurable, I meant that they could not be compared. But ‘incommensurability’ is a term borrowed from mathematics, and it there has no such implication. The hypotenuse of an isosceles right triangle is incommensurable with its side, but the two can be compared to any required degree of precision. What is lacking is not comparability but a unit of length in terms of which both can be measured directly and exactly. In applying the term ‘incommensurability’ to theories, I had intended only to insist that there was no common language within which both could be fully expressed and which could therefore be used in a point-by-point comparison between them’ (pp. 190–191).

Incomparable theories can be compared to any ‘required degree of precision’; they cannot be fully expressed by means of a common language, since each theory is framed upon a particular and irreducible (to anything else) scientific framework. In his penetrating explanation of incommensurability, Richard Bernstein makes plain that incommensurability needs distinguishing not only from incomparability but also from (logical) incompatibility. (Two theories are logically incompatible when one new theory, for instance Einstein’s dynamics, is not logically derivable from an older theory, such as Newton’s. One could well express a logical approximation of Newton’s dynamics in terms of Einsteinian dynamics; this can be done only after having accepted the new Einsteinian scientific paradigm. If two competing scientific theories were compatible, no scientific revolution would indeed happen, but only a linear transition from one poorer theory to one richer, more scientifically comprehensive.)<sup>46</sup>

Understood in such a fashion, incommensurability does not mean incomparability but it does mean incompatibility. If Kuhn mainly restricts the use of incommensurability to the domain of science,<sup>47</sup> in chapter 17 of *Against*

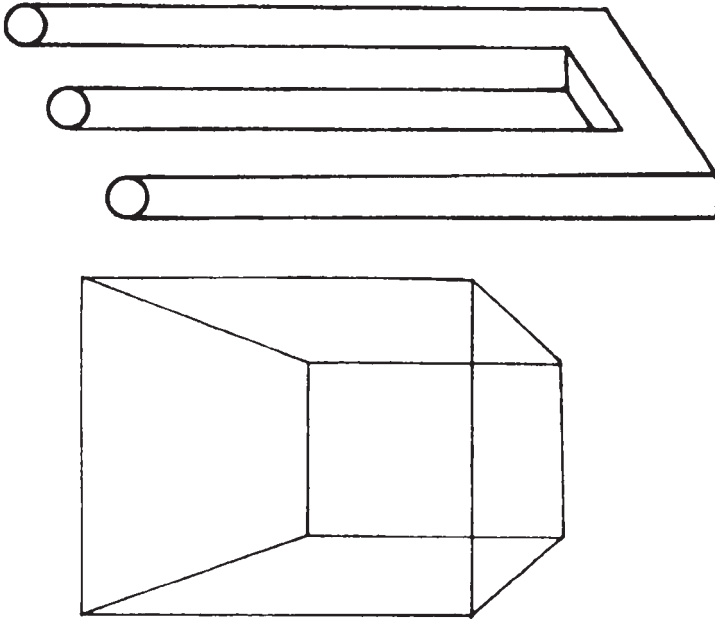
---

45 See Kuhn (1976); see also the Postscript, §5 in Kuhn (1970). Incommensurability is something like a conceptual hydra. For an informative account of recent discussions on incommensurability, see Sankey (1999). On Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability see Doppelt (1982); on the three conceptual phases of Kuhn’s elaboration on incommensurability, see Sankey (1993). The list of critics of Kuhn is long and includes K. Popper, I. Lakatos, I. Laudan, S. Toulmin. The most trenchant of those criticisms can be found in some articles collected in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970, with Kuhn’s replies: pp. 231–278) and in Davidson (1984). By contrast, the most philosophically sympathetic reading of Kuhn’s project is, I believe, that offered by Richard Rorty in Rorty (1979: pp. 322–331) and by Margolis, in Margolis (1991: pp. 87–118) and Margolis (2003: pp. 44–76).

46 See Bernstein (1983: pp. 82–85, for the distinction between incommensurability, incomparability and incompatibility; pp. 79–93, for incommensurability in natural sciences; pp. 93–108, incommensurability in social sciences). On incommensurability as distinct from semantic intertranslatability, see Margolis (2003).

47 See Kuhn’s brief discussion of perceptual cases in Kuhn (1970: chapter 10).

*Method* Feyerabend widens its application to other areas, so as to include perception and thought. Firstly, he warns the reader that it is impossible to define ‘incommensurability’ and that ‘the phenomenon [of incommensurability] must be shown’ (p. 225); secondly, he maintains that cases of incommensurability already occur in the perceptual sphere. This is the case since, given proper perceptual stimuli but different classificatory systems, our perceptual apparatus will produce perceptual objects that are not commensurable. In Figure 2.2 Feyerabend gives the example of the following pictures:



**Figure 2.2** Feyerabend’s pictures, from Chapter 17 of *Against Method*

He says that when we observe one of them, we can decide to focus our attention on the piece of paper on which the lines of the picture are drawn; in this case there is no three dimensional object to be seen. On the other hand, we may decide to focus our attention on the peculiarity of the picture and, in this case, there is no piece of paper any more, but rather a three-dimensional object to be perceived. The two perceptual objects so obtained are incommensurable and there is no way to fix, mentally, the transition from one perception to the other. Feyerabend maintains that the kind of perceptual image that we perceive depends upon our mental frameworks, which are in turn modifiable according to our own will, habits, dispositions, and so on. He also believes that his thesis about the incommensurability of perception is confirmed by the type of perceptual development that Piaget described in *The Construction of*

*Reality in the Child* (London 1999).<sup>48</sup> According to Piaget, the child's perceptual apparatus undergoes some different stages before reaching a relatively stable form. At one stage, the child is believed to perceive not material objects but just a sequence of images of what adults perceive as material objects. There is no logical compatibility (in the sense specified above) between the type of perception that one child has and that of an adult. In short, the perceptual (and conceptual) world of the child, made up of perceptual images, and that of the adult, composed by material objects, are incommensurable. These conceptual worlds cannot both be employed at the same time and no logical or perceptual connections can be established between them.

Feyerabend suggests that perceptual (and conceptual) shifts of perspective may also occur in the life of an adult, indeed that such shifts should be encouraged in order for us to reach a more adequate knowledge of ourselves and of the world we live in. By substituting an anthropological for a logical approach, Feyerabend examines the conceptual framework (as revealed by their sculpture, painting and writings) of those philosophers and artists living in ancient Greece before Socrates. His analysis is acute and learned and ends with the formulation of his three theses about incommensurability. The first two derived from what Feyerabend says on perception; the third derives from his considerations on scientific progress, not discussed here. The first thesis is that 'there are frameworks of thought (action, perception) which are incommensurable' (p. 271): Feyerabend says that this is an historical-anthropological thesis, that is, one obtained through the observation of historical-anthropological facts. Secondly, 'the development of perception and thought in the individual passes through stages which are mutually incommensurable' (p. 274.) Thirdly, 'the views of scientists, and especially their views on basic matters, are often as different from each other as are the ideologies that underlie different cultures. Even worse: there exist scientific theories which are mutually incommensurable though they apparently deal with the same subject matter' (p. 274).

### **The 'Objective Standard' Objection**

By using the notion of incommensurability as defined by Kuhn and Feyerabend, one might think of Protagorean perceptions as incommensurable entities, and so use the expression 'Protagorean Incommensurability'. This might help us to make Protagoras' doctrine (possibly) more philosophically coherent and, thus, to assess the potential force of (his) relativism and of relativism in general. In the world of Protagoras, every perceiver has his own infallible perceptions and lives in his own perceptual world. To use Kuhn's expression, Protagorean individuals might be thought of as practising their trades in different worlds, so that they perceive different things, although they may look from the same standpoint and in the same direction. Protagorean individuals might be thought of as confronted with relative realities so that what is perceived to be obvious to one is not obvious to someone else. As Feyerabend has remarked, one might think that the incommensurability that is typical of the perceptual development of a child could be characteristic, at least

---

48 Original French edition, Paris 1923.

from a theoretical point of view, of other stages of the perceptual life of an adult. If this is the case, the perceptions of a certain individual will be incommensurable with the kind of perceptual apprehensions he had before, or with those of other individuals undergoing different perceptual stages. As seen above, some people might perceive a three-dimensional object where others see a piece of paper with a two-dimensional picture on it. This perceptual episode described by Feyerabend might well happen in the world of Protagoras, indeed it seems a modern reformulation of the type of (perceptual) doctrine that Protagoras is made to hold in the *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus*.

As we have seen, incommensurability does not mean incomparability, and neither does Protagorean incommensurability signify incomparability. In his Defence, Protagoras has made clear that perceptions are always true for those who have them but this epistemological infallibility does not prevent the wise man from being able to compare different perceptions, all true in their peculiarity for those who have them, from the point of view of their goodness. What Protagoras insists on in the Defence is that it is not possible to compare the different perceptions of different individuals from an epistemological point of view by disputing their truth or falsity. Not only is incommensurability a powerful exegetical idea that illuminates the philosophical content of Protagoras' doctrine further, but it also helps to assess the philosophical strength of this doctrine by allowing it to be faced with one of the strongest epistemological objections one may raise against relativism in general and Protagoras' relativism in particular (when considered *sub specie aeternitatis*). The objection is the following one: how is it possible to speak of a comparison, of whatever sort or nature, between mental entities (be they Protagorean perceptions or Kuhn's scientific theories) without postulating a neutral, single, objective framework of commensuration?

As Popper objects to Kuhn: if we are all 'prisoners caught in the frameworks of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language', how will it be possible to communicate with those adopting a radically different framework or paradigm?<sup>49</sup> As has also been objected to those anthropologists, such as Peter Winch and Clifford Geertz, who advocate relativistic positions, how is it possible to speak with someone adopting a different cultural framework (and conception of the world) if not by invoking a third and neutral language, in which the two cultures in question may be both first translated, to be later compared? In the case of Protagoras, Plato, in his criticism of the relativistic doctrine that he attributes to the sophist, never explicitly raises this kind of objection, which has been formulated here by adopting a contemporary philosophical perspective. But the assumption that there is an objective epistemological standard with which perceptions (perhaps) and judgements (surely) need confronting in order to establish their falsity or truth is the philosophical belief Plato never gives up in the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* or indeed in the whole dialogue, no matter how difficult it might appear to find such a standard. (Such an assumption will display its full force against Protagoras' relativism when we are to be faced, as we will be in at *Theaetetus* 177–179, with Plato's considerations on the objectivity of the healthy and of the advantageous/

---

49 See Popper (1970: p. 56) and Davidson (1984: p. 190).

useful.) As far as Protagoras is concerned, the objection as regards the necessary presence of a neutral paradigm of commensuration needs however to be spelt out carefully and rephrased along lines more suitable to Protagoras' case.

When in the Defence he replies to Socrates' objection about wisdom,<sup>50</sup> Protagoras moves the level of the discussion away from epistemological concerns to include, as we have seen, considerations on the satisfactoriness of perceptions. Protagoras replies that there is no need of an epistemologically objective standard by which the different perceptions and thoughts of different individuals can be compared, since such a standard does not exist, each man being the measure of his own world. Diverse perceptions of different individuals should be compared, Protagoras claims, in the light of how one is (perceived to be) 'better' than the other. The notion of 'better' has been translated as 'more satisfactory'; there seems to be little point in pretending that the idea of 'more satisfactory' needs an objective paradigm of commensuration, since every individual is able to judge for himself about the satisfactoriness of his new perceptions. But this remark does not save Protagoras from the type of objection, calling for an objective paradigm of commensuration, which has been raised against modern relativists such as Kuhn and Feyerabend. Protagoras has in fact to explain how it is at all possible that the individual can understand his mental world and what happens in it without being provided with an objective epistemological standard of measurement with which he can measure his own perceptions, feelings and thoughts and know what they are.<sup>51</sup>

The point I raise here is the same one that critics of Kuhn, Feyerabend and of those anthropologists sensible to relativism raise when they talk of the necessity of a neutral framework of commensuration (when two different scientific theories or societies are to be compared). What is being questioned in this case is the capacity, for the philosopher or the anthropologist, to compare communities not sharing the same scientific and cultural paradigm. In the case of Protagoras, what could be debated is the capacity of a single individual to make sense of his own internal world (that of his perceptions broadly understood) in the absence of an objective standard of measurement. Protagoras' relativism assumes that each individual is the subjective measure of his own world. As is well known, Wittgenstein claimed that it is impossible for an individual to make any sense of his internal world by using a private language, known to him only, because this would make the very notion of correctness an empty one. If we imagine someone adopting a private language for defining his internal world, Wittgenstein maintains, we would end up with a picture of someone who is not even able to re-identify the sensation that he previously and privately called 'S', since nothing could assure him that he is not mistaken in such a re-identification. Wittgenstein claims that only rules publicly determined can render the individual, any individual, capable of making sense of his own inner world.<sup>52</sup>

---

50 See above, pp. 62.

51 I have briefly mentioned this point earlier when the risk of solipsism was raised in connection with Protagoras' doctrine: see above, pp. 70.

52 For Wittgenstein's argument against Private Language, see Wittgenstein (1953: §§243 ff). On the topic, see also Kripke (1982); Ayer (1985: chapter 6).

Myles Burnyeat has suggested that, on the account of Reading B, when Plato finally refutes the conjunction of Theaetetus', Protagoras' and Heraclitus' theses (at *Theaetetus* 179–186) by showing that they all lead to a *reductio ad absurdum*, he is in fact formulating a close analogue with Wittgenstein's argument against Private Language.<sup>53</sup> The absence of a paradigm of measurement and commensuration, which is neutral, single and objective, represents a real philosophical threat for relativism. All ancient and modern critics of relativism have suggested that the lack of an objective paradigm of measurement and commensuration opens the field to dangerous irrationality or to the use of force in place of reasoned persuasion.<sup>54</sup> At this point, it is important to see how modern relativists escape the threat and how their answer to the objection about the absence of a neutral paradigm of commensuration has striking similarities with what Protagoras says in the Defence.

### The (Possible) Answer

The most original arguments for defending the thesis that comparison is possible without recurring to any neutral framework of reference are, I believe, those of Feyerabend in chapter 17 of *Against Method*.<sup>55</sup> In responding to Popper's charge of the Myth of the Framework, Feyerabend criticizes the pretence of logic to provide us with rules that are always valid in every discipline, that is, with rules that are neutrally and objectively valid. Instead of relying on 'logical reconstruction' when comparing different scientific paradigms (or societies, cultures, forms of life), Feyerabend adopts an anthropological method; this is the reason why he claims that his theses are not logical, but historical-anthropological. Such a method is 'the correct method for studying the structure of science (and, for that matter, of any other form of life)' (p. 249). He describes it in these terms:

An anthropologist trying to discover the cosmology of his chosen tribe [that is, of a society incommensurable with his own] and the way in which it is mirrored in language, in the arts, in daily life [...] first learns the language and the basic social habits; he inquires how they are related to other activities [...]; he tries to identify *key ideas* [...]. Having found the key ideas the anthropologist tries to understand them. This he does in the same way in which he originally gained an understanding of his own language [...]. Having completed his study, the anthropologist carries within himself both the native society and his own background, and he may now start comparing the two. The comparison decides whether the native way of thinking can be reproduced in European terms (provided there is a unique set of 'European terms'), or whether it has a 'logic' of its own, not found in

---

53 Burnyeat (1990: p. 47, n. 60).

54 For the former charge see Popper: 'By relativism – or, if you like, scepticism [?] – I mean the theory that the choice between competing theories is arbitrary; since either there is no such thing as objective truth; or, if there is, no such thing as a theory which is true or at any rate nearer to the truth than another theory; or if there are two or more theories, no ways or means of deciding whether one of them is better than another' (Popper 1970: p. 369); for the latter, see Rorty (1979: p. 317).

55 On the point, see also Kuhn (1970: Postscript, §5) and Kuhn's replies in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970 pp. 231–78).

any Western language. In the course of the comparison the anthropologist may rephrase certain native ideas in English. This does not mean that English as spoken independently of the comparison is commensurable with the native idiom. It means that languages can be bent in many directions and that understanding does not depend on any particular set of rules (pp. 250–251).

He provides further details on this process of understanding when he adds:

Each item of information [obtained through the process described above] is a building block of understanding, which means that it is to be clarified by the discovery of further blocks from the language and ideology of the tribe rather than by premature definitions [...]. [There are] preliminary attempts to anticipate the arrangement of the totality of all blocks. They are then to be tested and elucidated by the discovery of further blocks rather than by logical clarifications (a child learns the meaning of a word not by logical clarification but by realizing how it goes together with things and other words). Lack of clarity of any particular anthropological statement indicates the scarcity of the material rather than the vagueness of the logical intuitions of the anthropologist (pp. 251–252).

In his careful comments on these passages, Bernstein has suggested that it might be useful to stress that in the hermeneutical process that Feyerabend describes,<sup>56</sup> he employs the ‘experience-near’ and the ‘experience-distant’ concepts that Clifford Geertz has so defined:

An experience-near concept is roughly one which an individual – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialists – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims.<sup>57</sup>

The kind of understanding that Feyerabend believes the explorer (or the anthropologist or the philosopher) needs to carry out when two alien societies come across each other is a demanding dialogical interplay in which the explorer attempts to understand a radically different form of life, incommensurable with his own, firstly by observing alien facts and habits, secondly by formulating partial blocks of understanding through the use of experience-near and distant concepts; thirdly, by modifying these blocks of understanding in the light of the new information obtained through the empirical discovery of other essential facts about the alien society in question. However difficult it may be to define this process of understanding more scientifically, it has to be noted that no objective paradigm of commensuration is employed by the explorer in the kind of understanding that Feyerabend describes. According to Feyerabend, the comparison between incommensurable views of the world, for instance that of Archaic Greece and ours, is thus possible by applying the anthropological method he has described, and without referring to any scientific procedure objectively measurable and identifiable.

---

<sup>56</sup> Bernstein (1983: p. 90).

<sup>57</sup> Geertz (1979: 151).

If it is true that Feyerabend's anthropological method is hardly definable in scientifically precise terms, it is also true that it is a rational procedure. On the one hand it requires sympathy, patience, careful attention; on the other it allows for a rational judgement to be formulated about worse and better understandings of the phenomenon in question. When he gives his own interpretation of the archaic Greek view of the world in chapter 17 of *Against Method*, Feyerabend is the explorer whose process of understanding of what is alien for him he has so vividly described. Feyerabend does not claim that his interpretation of Archaic Greece is the correct one (since there is no objectively correct interpretation available) but a correct one, which can be replaced by a better one, that is, a more perspicuous and adequate one. There are two other points related to this. Firstly, if seen under this light, the confrontation between alien cultures and societies becomes distant both from the mute contemplation of something that is irremediably and perennial foreign, on the one hand, and, on the other, from the easy projection of someone's world view upon something that is alien and resistant to quick comprehension. Secondly, when we compare our own culture with another one, not only do we learn something about the society under scrutiny but also about our own society, since we are able to understand it in light of an enriched and more wide-ranging perspective. The comparison between what is already known and what is still unknown in fact sheds light not only on the latter but also on the former. The more the anthropologist (or the philosopher, or the simple observer) is confronted with alien cultures, societies, world views, paradigms, the more he will know the society he lives in as well as the societies he is confronted with. The more the anthropologist is able to have experience of other society and alien cultures, the more he knows. His expertise, his professional wisdom comes from abundance of experience, not from the epistemological reduction of an unknown view of the world to his allegedly objective one. On this basis, knowledge is provided by experience on the field, not by the making of any objectively determinable comparison.

Feyerabend provides us with arguments for maintaining that there is no need for an objective paradigm of commensuration when two different societies and forms of life are compared. This is so because the comparison is made possible by a subtle and patient work of confrontation between the two alien cultures operated by the interpreter who, in performing such a hermeneutical action, gains a partial and (over time) modifiable comprehension of the foreign society and, contextually, a better and more profound understanding of his own. Feyerabend's answer to the objectivistic constraint has close similarities with the kind of arguments that Protagoras is made to expound in his Defence, or at least with the type of arguments that anyone who wants to defend the sophist from the objectivistic critique may deduce from what Protagoras says in the Defence. In the Defence, there are two Protagorean individuals, the unsatisfied perceiver and the wise man. When he tries to replace the unhealthy perceptions of the former with better ones, the latter does not refer to any neutral paradigm of epistemological commensuration between different perceptions, since he assumes that there is no objective way, from an epistemological perspective, to discriminate between false and true perceptions. What the wise man may well be thought to do when he is faced with the unsatisfied perceiver is to perform the subtle and sympathetic task that Feyerabend assigns to his explorer. Protagoras' wise man

applies the same procedure of sensitive and partial understanding that Feyerabend's explorer applies to his alien societies to the case of his unsatisfied perceiver, so that in the end the Protagorean wise man can make the unhappy perceiver change his disposition toward the world and thus have better perceptions. Through a careful observation and analysis of what the unsatisfied perceiver says, the wise man forms a partial comprehension of the inner world of his 'patient', which is successively modified by further information. The kind of understanding that the wise man obtains of the inner world of his perceiver is perfectly rational, based on a procedure identifiable and describable in rational terms, although it is far from the type of scientific precision that someone adopting an objectivist stance may want to ascribe to any rational procedure.<sup>58</sup>

The point about the absence of an objective paradigm of epistemological commensuration for Protagoras' wise man is evident also from another possible remark that can be made, again in the light of another reference to what Feyerabend says, on the kind of educational action that the sophist claims to perform in the Defence. As remarked above, in chapter 17 of *Against Method* Feyerabend claims that the kind of interpretation of Archaic Greek society that he sketches is a correct one. But he does not assume that his interpretation is the correct one, suggesting instead that other interpretations can be better than his, that is, more adequate and comprehensive than his own. Again, there is no objectively determinable standard of commensuration to which we can appeal when we interpret something; there is no neutral standard of commensuration that can establish which is the correct interpretation of the phenomenon in question. However, worse and better interpretations of a certain phenomenon can be identified. This is the same point Protagoras makes in his Defence when he assumes that there are indeed worse and better perceptions, all true in their peculiarity for those who have them. There is no true perception of the object or event in question, Protagoras maintains, since, if there were one, there would also necessarily be an objective truth to be determined. At the same time, there are worse and better kinds of perception. There are perceptions that can be more or less profitable to have, in the sense that they are not only more satisfactory for those who have them than others, but also, possibly, they can be richer in content and more profound than others (their superior satisfactoriness might lie in this). To see the sun over a mountain at the sunset might be seen as a normal episode in the rhythm of the day, or, alternatively, admired as a rare spectacle showing the perfection of the natural world.

Protagoras' wise man and his unsatisfied perceiver understand each other well and can talk of better and worse perceptions even in the absence of a neutral paradigm of epistemological commensuration. One may also suspect that both the wise man and the unsatisfied perceiver gain a better understanding of who they are through their mutual encounter. They both learn more about themselves by seeing how they react when they are confronted with somebody else's way of perceiving things, as much as Feyerabend's explorer gains a more wide-ranging comprehension of his own society when he is faced with the diverse customs and ways of life of a foreign

---

58 In objectivistic terms, any procedure is seen as rational in so far as it conforms itself to rational standards that are objectively identifiable.

society. If the interaction between Protagoras' wise man and the unhappy perceiver is what makes the latter change his dispositions towards the world and gain better perceptions, the same interaction will be what makes the wise man such by allowing him to be confronted with many cases of unsatisfied perceivers so that he becomes able to discriminate perceptions on the basis of their being differently satisfactory for different individuals.

If the reciprocal confrontation between individuals is so essential a part of the kind of understanding we can obtain of what we are, then Protagorean individuals, be they unhappy perceivers or wise men, may well be imagined to understand their inner world not by referring to a neutral paradigm of commensuration or to an objective standard of measurement with which to map such a world; they do so instead by understanding and assessing other people's reactions to the same situation with which they happen all to be confronted. Protagorean individuals build up the knowledge of their inner world, that of their perceptions, emotions and thoughts, by being faced with other people's diverse ways of reacting in face of the same event, as the case of the wise man and unsatisfied perceiver seems to show. Protagorean individuals may be imagined as making sense of their own inner worlds as long as they are in contact with one another and live the kind of interaction that Protagoras illustrates in his Defence. In the Protagorean world, individuals learn what love (one of Protagoras' perceptions)<sup>59</sup> is when they see what kind of reaction (what is usually taken to be) love causes in other people. They do not need an objective definition of love to assess if what they feel is in accordance with the given definition, or not; they just see the kind of reaction that other people have when they are thought to be in love. (If you change the cultural environment in which love is experienced, its meaning will change accordingly and this will show, according to Protagoras, that there is no objective definition of love.) This might be thought to be the case also as far as perceptions and thoughts are concerned.<sup>60</sup>

Once they have learned how to feel, perceive and think and the meaning of the terms related to these activities, Protagorean individuals may be thought of as forming their judgements in a certain situation or when faced with an event by relying both on the cultural environment and form of life they live in and on the kind of disposition they have at the moment in which their judgements are shaped. Since dispositions are different even for individuals brought up in the same cultural environment (a disposition depending also on the peculiarity of the individual), this explains why judgements of a certain event or in a certain situation are different for individuals belonging to the same society. What I have just described as possibly happening in the world as described by Protagoras is what occurs in our everyday

---

59 See *Tht.* 156b.

60 Recent discoveries in neuroscience such as that of mirror neurons may confirm this point. According to Vittorio Gallese (Gallese and Stamenov 2002), when we observe people performing a certain action, the same cells that are active when we ourselves perform that very action become immediately active in our brain only in virtue of our merely observing that action performed by others. This is so even in the absence of any common language or shared rationality. This makes clear that interpersonal understanding between members of human species is possible because of the sharing of a natural condition that is itself pre-linguistic and pre-rational.

life. When something happens in our world, namely when we perceive an object, feel a sensation, form a thought, we build up our own judgements of the event in question not by checking their correspondence with an ideal, objective standard of measurement (so that there is one correct perception of the object, one right sensation to feel, one unmissaken thought to form), but by relying on our particular and modifiable point of view or inclination of the moment. We form our judgements of a certain event by reflecting the cultural environment in which we are brought up but also, and I would add mainly, by adopting the particular point of view, shaped by our own personal and subjective factors such as individuality, sensibility, which all make us the person we are. Of course, the objectivist may dispute the 'rationality' of judgements formed in that way, and invoke an objective standard of measurement with which those judgements are to be confronted. On the other hand, one might reply, as Protagoras does, that the individual is the only and sole measure of his own world; the only rationality we can aspire to is, it can be added, the one that is historically set and determined by single individuals and by the kinds of reason that the societies those individuals live in are able to produce.

### **The Scope of Protagoras' Relativism**

After having explored the philosophical objections that one may raise in connection with Protagoras' doctrine as Plato expounds it, the scope of Protagoras' relativism becomes more evident. The type of relativism the sophist is made to maintain in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Cratylus* is not restricted to sense perceptions but concerns all the cognitive activities that we are more used to differentiating into perceptual, emotional and judgemental. Protagoras maintains a quite commonsensical conception of knowledge on the basis of which the only knowledge human beings are able to obtain is that relative to their own peculiar and modifiable perspectives. Each individual has his own perceptions, emotions and thoughts and, out of such elements, he constructs his (relativistic) knowledge of those objects and events he happens to be faced with. According to Protagoras, it makes no sense to conceive of knowledge outside this individualistic perspective and to treat it as a philosophical concept in need of an objective definition (what Socrates is after in the *Theaetetus*). For Protagoras, there is no further knowledge to be gained apart from this particularistic one, and there is little sense (probably none) in trying to identify objective ideas among cases that are always temporally set and subjective, dependant upon a particular point of view.

One may object, following Hegel, that Protagoras' relativism falls within infancy of Greek thought and that philosophy has to wait for Plato's objectivism in order to reach a more substantial and mature stage. But it might be equally argued that Protagoras' relativism represents a coherent, minimalist theory of knowledge, which acquires its philosophical strength by proposing an elementary, yet adequate account of the power of all our epistemological activities. On Protagoras' account, wisdom thus consists not in the objective knowledge of eternal (Platonic) ideas but

in the concrete experience obtained by being confronted with many individuals and different cases (this is the sense of his polemical reference, against Socrates, to the lack of *apeiria* in the Defence).<sup>61</sup> The empiricist and anti-idealist tone of Protagoras' conception of knowledge is well witnessed in what he says in his polemic against the geometricians.<sup>62</sup> In reporting what are taken to be Protagoras' actual words, Aristotle says: 'Sensible lines are not like those of which the geometrician speaks (since there is nothing sensible which is straight or curved in that sense; the circle touches the measuring-rod not at a point, but along a line, as Protagoras used to say in refuting the geometricians)' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* B 2.997b34–998a5=80DK B7).<sup>63</sup> Protagoras' point here is that the objects of geometry are sense objects and not pure geometrical entities, as some geometricians believe. A real, physical sphere will touch a real, physical measuring-rod along a line (as we can witness with our eyes when we look at real spheres and measuring-rods), and not in one geometrical, hypothetical single point (as the geometricians will believe and will have to say if they want to be coherent with the theoretical approach on geometry they adopt). But, if one is not trapped in the kind of idealist approach that the geometricians adopt, one will soon be able to see how things really are, namely that the sphere can touch the measuring-rod along a line.<sup>64</sup>

By means of the empiricist and anti-idealist tone of his conception of knowledge and of his speculation *tout court*, Protagoras forms a contrast to the idealist and highly speculative tone of Socrates' philosophical activity, which so much contributed to create what we still, at least in some more traditional and conservative areas, call 'philosophy' (although I am more than ready to admit that at the moment the term indicates a variety of activities that can hardly be subsumed under one concept).<sup>65</sup> With his speculations, Socrates in fact began a revolution in philosophy by adopting the kind of philosophical approach that aimed at identifying objective ideas (what later became Platonic Forms) among the plurality of individual cases, uneasily catalogued under single concepts. We are now so well accustomed to this Socratic approach as to identify it, as I have said, with philosophy; no one could plausibly deny the probable explosive impact that Socratic speculation had on Presocratic philosophy and on fifth-century BC Greek society that was under so demanding a

---

61 See 167b3 (and above, pp. 63–5). On the Platonic approach, see 186d2–5, Socrates speaking: 'Knowledge is to be found not in the experiences but in the process of reasoning about them; it is here, seemingly, not in the experiences, that it is possible to grasp being and truth'. On the question, see also Farrar (1988: pp. 50 ff).

62 I use the term 'empiricist' with reference to Protagoras' doctrine in the light of the interpretation of the *Theaetetus* that Chappell has recently offered (Chappell 2005). On the basis of this interpretation, the *Theaetetus* is best understood if Plato is taken to argue there against empiricist theories of knowledge, such as e.g. those of Protagoras and Heraclitus. *Contra*, see Sedley (2004: p. 47, n. 12), where Protagoras' doctrine is seen as a form of idealism.

63 See above, p. 6.

64 On the anti-idealist tone of Protagoras' speculation against the geometricians, see Vlastos (1956: xv) and Farrar (1988: pp 52–53).

65 For an unconventional judgement on Socrates, see the famous condemnation of Nietzsche, who believed that Socrates began a dangerous regression in Greek philosophy (hence in philosophy *tout court*) in Nietzsche (2000: chapter 18).

process of radical transformation. When things change radically, many options are put forward, to meet the challenge of a radical modification. We had better be careful not to forget the options that did not win only because we are accustomed to the one that won. Socratic philosophy won to the disadvantage of the Protagorean solution but the latter was still a possible solution: a solution that perhaps has manifested its strength in the last century, when, as Bernstein remarks, ‘relativism, a stream in the philosophy of the past two hundred years [...] has swelled in recent times into a roaring torrent’.<sup>66</sup> Socrates and Plato were aware that Protagoras was not alone in advocating relativistic positions; relativistic issues were widely diffused in Greek society at that time.<sup>67</sup> The two opposite figures that are contrasted in the Digression of the *Theaetetus* well testify, so I believe, to the contrast of the two alternative ways for solving the crisis: on the one hand, there was the Socratic interest for what things are in themselves; on the other there was the Protagorean insistence on the single case, on the inevitably relativistic perspective with which single things are perceived and understood by people.

Not only did Protagoras adopt a philosophical alternative to the Socratic approach to philosophy but he was also the thinker who opposed a philosophical belief, long established in Greek thought, on the basis of which truth is difficult to discover and is hidden from us. Parmenides is the philosopher who gave most importance to this idea.<sup>68</sup> Ancient sources, in fact, witness Protagoras as proposing anti-Eleatic arguments in one of his books. There is a passage from Eusebius that goes: ‘In a passage that I [Prosenes, the character speaking] came upon by chance while reading Protagoras’ book *On Being*, I do find Protagoras using similar counterarguments against those who propose being as one.’<sup>69</sup> Earlier in the previous chapter, we have seen evidence that Protagoras believes that being is not one but that everything is something only in relation to somebody or something else.<sup>70</sup> This kind of ontological position can now be better understood, once one sees it with reference to Protagoras’ other commitment aimed to show that truth is indeed available to us and that each of us is the relative measure of the empirical world with which one happens to be faced.

The empiricist and anti-idealist stance of Protagoras’ speculation will have to be paired with its anti-theological tone, if we are to have a complete picture of the cultural battle that the sophist fought. Protagoras was famous in antiquity for his

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein (1989: p. 13).

<sup>67</sup> See Herodotus 3.38 on ethical relativism (quoting Pindar’s slogan that ‘Nomos (custom) is the lord of all’); Xenophanes (21DK B15): ‘But if cows and horses or lions had hands or could draw with their hands and make things men can make, then horses would draw the form of gods like horses, cows like cows, and they would make their bodies similar in shape to those to which each had themselves.’ Plato seems to recognize the appeal that (Protagorean) relativism had on Greek society of that time at *Tht.* 172b.

<sup>68</sup> See Parmenides’ poem (DK28 B1), where it is claimed that knowledge is hardly attainable by human beings and that ordinary human opinions need to be avoided because highly deceptive.

<sup>69</sup> See Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* X 3.25=DK80 B2, which actually reports a passage from Porphyry’s Lecture on Literature (book I). On this, see Lee (2005: p. 28).

<sup>70</sup> See above, pp. 39–42.

professed agnosticism, which probably caused him to be exiled and his books to be burnt. He declared: ‘Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist [or what form they might have], for there is much to prevent one’s knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man’s life.’<sup>71</sup> Protagoras’ point here is not that the gods do not exist but that they cannot be the objects of human knowledge, since it is impossible for human beings to know their existence. By maintaining such a position on the existence of the gods, Protagoras gives his fundamental contribution to the process of secularization of Greek society that has been called ‘Greek Enlightenment’ and that the Sophists themselves began and led. For Protagoras, human beings can only know what they are faced with in their everyday life, with no epistemological concern whatsoever for what is divine or for things ‘in themselves’.

If I am correct in my reconstruction of Protagoras’ doctrine, Protagoras can be plausibly seen as proposing an empiricist philosophy with a strong anti-idealist tone (against the innovator Socrates and the traditional line of thought exemplified by Parmenides) and one provided with a clear anti-theological meaning (against the intersection of rational speculation and religion so typical of Greek culture before Greek enlightenment).<sup>72</sup>

At this point, it is useful to see how my reconstruction of Protagoras and of his philosophy differs from the one Lee sketches in her book. In the initial part of her study, where she reconstructs the philosophical and cultural background of Protagoras’ speculation, Lee sees the sophist and his doctrine in terms similar to the one I have used here, arguing that Protagoras’ philosophy is best understood as a reaction to Parmenides and the line of thought for which knowledge is something hardly attainable by human beings (pp. 38–39; see also pp. 28–29). When she comes to specify the philosophical content of Protagoras’ doctrine on the basis of Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Lee offers an account of Protagoras’ relativism that is also similar to the one I have offered in the preceding sections. Borrowing from Sarah Broadie the label of ‘relativism of fact’, Lee suggests that what is essential for Protagoras ‘is not [the question] “What is it for the truth of a sentence or proposition to be relative to a person?” but rather “What is it for properties and states of affairs to be relative to believers or perceivers?”’ (p. 44). By defining Protagoras’ position as ‘relativism of fact’, Lee shows that the dispute about whether Protagoras is best understood in the *Theaetetus* as a relativist or an infallibilist is easily solved, once one has realized that not only does the relativism Protagoras defends concern the conditions of knowledge, but that it also concerns the states of affairs that make our beliefs knowledge of something.<sup>73</sup>

---

71 For the fragment and its sources, see above, p. 6. See also Farrar (1988: p. 51).

72 The interpretation of Protagoras’ figure and doctrine that I have here sketched is consistent with the view of Protagoras as the first ‘humanist’: see Schiller (1907) and (1908); Versenyi (1962). For a fresher account of Protagoras and his doctrine, see Farrar (1988: pp. 44–99) and Broadie (2003).

73 For the dispute between Burnyeat (for whom Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is a relativist) and Fine (for whom Protagoras there is best seen as an infallibilist), see Burnyeat (1976a and b) and Fine (1996a and b), (1998a and b). On the dispute, see Lee (2005: pp. 30–45).

In my interpretation of Protagoras' relativism, I spell out Lee's 'relativism of fact' by showing the epistemological and the ontological aspects that such relativism carries with it. In so doing, not only do I make use of Margolis' definition of robust relativism to make good sense of Protagoras' doctrine, but I also take a defensive approach towards relativism in general. At this point Lee and I see things rather differently. Lee, in fact, offers an account of relativism that is rather different from the sympathetic one I give (pp. 30–35; 41–45). She claims that relativism is mainly an epistemological doctrine,<sup>74</sup> and one with unclear aspects, especially with regard to its precise content (pp. 33 and 35). She also makes an historical claim: 'one should not assume that the idea of relativism about truth can be found in the ancient world' (p. 34), adding that it makes no sense to talk of philosophical relativism before Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' (p. 35). In the light of these views, Protagoras' relativism has thus to be a kind of naïve, philosophically ingenuous form of relativism.<sup>75</sup>

On Lee's view, Protagoras' 'relativism of fact' is just a primitive form of contemporary worked-out versions of relativism. Since his version of relativism was an elementary one, Protagoras was not fully aware of the philosophical consequence of his doctrine. So, 'it was almost certainly the philosophers of the next generation [*sc.* Plato and Aristotle] who developed Protagoras' provocative thesis [*sc.* the Measure Doctrine] into something more, by asking questions about the measure doctrine and proposing answers on his behalf' (p. 29).<sup>76</sup> On the basis of such views, in the remaining part of her study, Lee scrutinizes all the questions and answers that Plato, Aristotle and Democritus saw as arising from Protagoras' unresolved relativism. As I hope is clear from what I have so far said, the approach I take towards Protagoras' relativism is rather different from Lee's since, in exploring this philosophical position, I aim to make it a coherent doctrine, more coherent than Plato wants it appear to be.

In order to do so, for instance, I offer an interpretation of Protagoras' Defence in the *Theaetetus* that makes Protagoras' relativism a more defensible and philosophically appealing doctrine. Protagoras' Defence in the *Theaetetus* is a key section of the dialogue because it is here that Plato offers a possible way out for the kind of philosophical inconsistencies that he sees in Protagoras' doctrine. An analysis of that

---

74 See p. 3: 'Our focus [in the book] will be relativism in epistemology, and the two central "relativist" ideas we will examine are the idea that everyone is a "measure" and has equal epistemic authority, and the idea that properties, such as sensible qualities and value properties, are relative to perceivers.'

75 See pp. 21–29 for Lee's hypothesis about the philosophical content of Protagoras' *Alêtheia*.

76 See also p. 22: 'My guess is that even if we had [Protagoras'] book, we would be unable to determine how he would have answered these questions [i.e. essential philosophical question as regards his relativism]'; p. 23: 'Protagoras' claim is an orphan [with reference to *Tht.* 164e–165a, 165e, 168c] not only because Protagoras is no longer alive to defend it, but also because it is part of a written text which cannot answer questions or respond to criticisms, and only says the same thing again and again [...]. In the case of the *Alêtheia*, the only thing which it says is "man is the measure of all things".' Given the historical evidence we have on Protagoras' book, I can see no way of being so confident as regards the content of Protagoras' *Truth*.

section is thus important not only for someone who seeks a philosophical defence of Protagoras' relativism but also for someone who is keen on reconstructing the line of argument that Plato develops out of Protagoras' Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus*. In her lengthy and well-informed study, Lee does not offer an analysis of the passage. This absence is what betrays, in the clearest possible way, the difference of approach towards (Protagoras') relativism that Lee and I adopt. Of course, it will be perfectly legitimate to assume that relativism is not a coherent philosophical positioner, alternatively, that it is one, if one gives credible reasons for his or her assumptions.

I believe that Lee gives good reasons for defending her assumptions about Protagoras. The question I raise is this. If Protagoras was not able to see the most important consequences of his philosophical doctrine and if his relativism was in need of fundamental reconstruction amendment by Plato and Aristotle, why did Plato (and Aristotle) make Protagoras a key figure for discussing relativism? If Protagoras' relativism was a philosophically undeveloped doctrine, why did Plato and Aristotle – even Democritus – devote essential sections of their works to discussing such relativism? Lastly, why should one write a book on the kind of responses that Plato, Aristotle and Democritus gave to Protagoras' relativism, if this relativism were an undeveloped philosophical position? Lee gives convincing answers to many questions about Greek epistemology, but I believe that, by the end of her book, the reader is left in doubt as regards the questions I have just posed.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Chapter 3

# Ethics and Forms of Life

### **Ethical Relativism**

Plato has so far depicted Protagoras' relativism in the *Theaetetus* as a doctrine that concerns the individual and his cognitive activities. In the rest of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* (and in the first part of the *Protagoras*) we see a recalibration of Protagoras' relativism, which Plato widens so as to include the polis, most precisely those ethical judgements that a community of many individuals has to formulate, in order to be such. When it concerns the individual, Protagoras' relativism is a particular form of perceptual relativism, which we would qualify nowadays as cognitive relativism and which displays both a commonsensical tone and an ontological commitment. When it concerns society, Protagoras' relativism will instead assume the form of a doctrine of ethical (or social, if you prefer) relativism, whose content we are about to assess.

The treatment that Plato devotes to Protagoras' ethical relativism in the second part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* (167 ff.) is limited both in length and in philosophical specificity, especially if it is compared to the detailed and wide-ranging account of Protagoras' perceptual relativism that Plato so skilfully constructs in *Theaetetus* 152–167. It seems as though Plato is transferring the logical pattern of his reconstruction of Protagoras' (perceptual) relativism to cases where ethical judgements are involved. Plato might do that because, perhaps, Protagoras' relativism was historically a more important case of cognitive relativism than of ethical relativism; or Plato thought it was so. Another explanation, the most plausible I believe, is that after having expounded in the first part of the Protagorean section the details of Protagoras' perceptual relativism (together with its philosophical strength, dangers and weakness) Plato does not need to analyse the ethical relativism endorsed by Protagoras' Measure Doctrine with the same accuracy and depth with which he has analysed Protagoras' perceptual relativism. Plato's overall aim in the *Theaetetus* is in fact to find out a plausible account of knowledge: he might believe he has already shown as philosophically implausible the definition of knowledge as perception and, hence, the relativism endorsed by Protagoras' Measure Doctrine are. He has to go on to test the second candidate that may provide us with a correct definition of knowledge, namely true judgement, instead of further concentrating on Protagoras' relativism. In any case, the limited treatment of Protagoras' ethical relativism that Plato provides us with in the *Theaetetus* (and which is confirmed, on my interpretation, in the *Protagoras*) is helpful in so far as it allows us to form a complete picture of Protagorean relativism.

Our analysis of the *Theaetetus* has arrived at the point where Protagoras is made to offer, through Socrates' mouth, his own Defence.<sup>1</sup> After having compared the wise man, whose picture he has so vividly drawn, to the gardener and the 'wise and efficient politician', Protagoras is then made to say:

The wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself (*epei hoia g'an hekastê(i) polei dikaia kai kala dokê(i), tauta kai einai autê(i), heôs an auta nomizê(i)*); but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just (*all'ho sophos anti ponerôn ontôn autois hekastôn chrêsta epoïesen einai kai dokein*) (167c4–7).

After a few lines, Protagoras invites Socrates to discuss his own Measure Doctrine, on whose basis 'for each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be (*ta panta, to te dokoun hekastô(i) touto kai einai idîôtê(i) te kai polei*)' (168b5–6). The point the Defence makes here is that the wise man, of a Protagorean sort, and the wise and efficient politician are comparable in so far as the first one is able to make the individual modify his own attitude towards the world (so that he is able to have more satisfactory perceptions), while the second is able to make the city change its own conventions as regards what is just and admirable (once it has been realized that such conventions are not wholesome for that city any more). Also, the wise man and the efficient politician may coincide in the same individual, that is, the Protagorean *sophos*, who is able to make beneficial use of his wisdom for the cases of both the single individual and the city.

Protagoras' relativism is thus made to endorse a form of ethical relativism. 'Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself': these words formulate an ethical doctrine on the basis of which a city decides what has to be taken as just and admirable, and for how long. According to this doctrine, there is no objectively determinable criterion for establishing what is just and admirable. The just and the admirable are differently defined by different cities or by the same city over different periods of time. Since they cannot be defined in objective terms, namely by referring to a standard that does not depend upon any temporal circumstance and/or geographical location, the just and the admirable can be defined only in relativistic terms, that is, by conceiving them with reference to the agreement that a particular group of people have reached (over a determinate period of time) on how to define the just and the admirable. Gilbert Harman has defined ethical relativism as the doctrine for which 'dictates of morality arise from some sort of convention or understanding among people [...]; there are no basic moral demands that apply to everyone';<sup>2</sup> in the light of this definition, in the two passages of the *Theaetetus* reported above, Protagoras is effectively ascribed a form of ethical relativism, restricted to the case where the just and the admirable are concerned.

1 See above, pp. 59–66.

2 Harman (1989: 363). See also Harman (1982: 189).

Another key passage of the *Theaetetus* widens the application of Protagoras' ethical relativism further by including in its domain not only the just and the admirable, but also what is religious, irreligious and what may or may not fittingly be done. The passage in question is situated just after the Digression; it is here Socrates sums up his own understanding of Protagoras' doctrine, after having dealt with it for more than twenty pages. Socrates exhorts Theodorus to consider political questions, that is, matters that, literally speaking, pertain to the polis. He then goes on: 'Some of these are questions of what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory [*sc.* of Protagoras] may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes on these matters as establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city (*hoia an hekastê polis oiêtheisa thêtai nomima hautê(i), tauta kai einai tê(i) alêtheia(i) hekastê(i)*)' (172a2–4). A few lines later, the same point is reiterated, when Socrates says: 'It is in those other questions I am talking about – just and unjust, religious and irreligious – that they [*sc.* the theorists – who include Protagoras – of the theory which has been speaking so far] are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own (*hôs ouk esti phusei autôn ouden ousian heautou echon*); in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems (*to koinê(i) doxan touto gignetai alêthes tote, hotan doxê(i) kai hoson an dokê(i) chronon*)' (172b4–6).<sup>3</sup>

These passages not only make Protagoras' ethical relativism a more wide-ranging doctrine by widening its domain of application, but they also restate it by highlighting an element that in its initial formulation is not under such a clear light. In the passage where Protagoras' ethical relativism is firstly formulated (167c4–7), it is said: 'whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable'. The focus here is on the italicized 'is'. In the passage just now reported, Socrates instead says: 'whatever view a city takes on these matters as establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city'.<sup>4</sup> He also adds: 'they are ready to insist that no one of these things [that is, just and unjust, and so on] has by nature any being of its own'. These last two passages insist on the ontological aspect of Protagoras' ethical relativism. To use a very general term, the 'things' that fall under the domain of Protagoras' ethical relativism do not have any being of their own, Socrates remarks. The expression 'being of one's own' is the same one that Socrates uses in the *Cratylus* to characterize the kind of ontological objectivism that he sees as alternative to the form of ontological relativism endorsed by Protagoras' Measure Doctrine (on the basis of which the being of things is something private for each person).<sup>5</sup> If on the grounds of Protagoras' ethical relativism, ethical things do not

3 Levett/Burnyeat translation modified and integrated with J. McDowell's. On this passage, see below, p. 119, n. 16.

4 A more literal translation of the last lines of the passage is that of John McDowell, in McDowell (1973: p. 47): '[Protagoras' theory] will hold that whatever sort of thing any state thinks to be, and lays down as, lawful for itself actually is, in strict truth, lawful for it.' I adopt the Levett/Burnyeat translation because I find it a suggestive one (although it is not strictly accurate to the Greek).

5 See *Cratylus* 385e–386a; above, pp. 55–9.

have an objective essence of their own (as these passages of the *Theaetetus* suggest), the ontological alternative will be that they have a private essence for each city. In other terms, what is seen (to be) just in one city is not such in another one. Each city collectively decides what has to be just, unjust, and so on. In so doing, the city also establishes what represents an ethical fact for it; by adopting such a relativistic perspective, the city decides what action has to be regarded as just, religious, or, conversely, unjust, irreligious and so on. Outside such a perspective, there is no action that is just or unjust *per se*, that is, in objective terms. In assuming that an action is ethical or, to paraphrase Socrates' expression, is an ethical fact for as long as it is seen as such by the group for which that action *is* an ethical action, the kernel of Protagoras' ethical relativism is the ontological commitment that such relativism carries with it. Protagoras' ethical relativism, in fact, does not only say that ethical values vary from one society to another so that they can consistently be formulated only by reference to the agreement that a certain group of people is able to reach successfully. Protagoras' ethical relativism maintains that some actions are ethical (and some are not) for a society; the ethical agreement that the society in question reaches is what establishes which actions are ethical and which are not.

This form of ethical relativism that Protagoras is made to maintain in the *Theaetetus* not only emphasizes the differences of ethical values in different societies (so that what is seen as just in one society is not in another); it also suggests, more importantly, that what is regarded as an ethical action or fact varies from one society to another. One society can treat the question whether immigrants have civil rights as an ethical matter, as a fact that pertains to its own ethos, that is, to the sum of those conventions and habits that constitute the way of life of the society in question. If a society sees a fact as an ethical fact and thus treats all those actions that originate from such a fact as ethical actions, that society will legislate on that ethical fact by producing a law that will be in force for as long as the society in question wants. If another society conceives the question of immigrants in mere economic terms, namely as a labour force with lower wages and reduced civil rights, that society will not treat the question of immigrants and of their citizenship as an ethical matter on which to legislate. This is the main point, I believe, in the position that Plato attaches to Protagoras when he is made to remark: 'whatever view a city takes on these matters and establishes as a law or convention, is truth and fact for that city', or when he is made to stress that ethical values do not have any being of their own.<sup>6</sup>

As said at the beginning of this chapter, Plato's treatment of Protagoras' ethical relativism in the *Theaetetus* is limited both in scope and length; it is thus hard to get more information, or a more profound comprehension of the kind of ethical relativism endorsed by Protagoras, on the sole basis of the passages of the *Theaetetus* just considered. After being captured by the philosophical subtlety with which Plato treats Protagoras' perceptual relativism, some readers may be deluded

---

6 As far as the ontological commitment of Protagoras' ethical relativism is concerned, one could further assume not only that each society is perfectly legitimated in deciding what counts as an ethical matter but also that each society consistently lacks some ethical categories that another, quite legitimately, has. For instance, one society may have the ethical category of the 'heroic', while another may completely or partially lack it.

by the short and compressed treatment of Protagoras' ethical relativism that the *Theaetetus* offers. Burnyeat suggests that there is such a difference in treatments because in the *Theaetetus* Plato aims to consider and refute a relativist epistemology and that one can find moral relativism as a tempting ethical option without wanting to adopt a relativistic epistemology.<sup>7</sup> This hypothesis may be plausible and one may be content to concentrate on Protagoras' epistemological relativism, when one reads the *Theaetetus*. The danger is that, by accepting Burnyeat's explanation of the little consideration that Plato devotes to Protagoras' ethical relativism in the *Theaetetus*, one runs the risk not to consider the other source that is available to us for attempting to reconstruct Protagoras' ethical relativism, that is, the *Protagoras*. Lee accepts, for instance, Burnyeat's suggestion and, by so doing, in her reconstruction of Protagoras' relativism she examines in detail just one passage of the *Protagoras*, namely *Protagoras* 334a-c, to maintain that the passage provides evidence to conclude that Protagoras confuses two alternative accounts of relativity.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, my suggestion is that the *Protagoras* provides essential information on Protagoras' ethical relativism, hence on Protagoras' relativism *tout court*. What I want to offer in this study is, as far as Protagoras' relativism is concerned, an integrated reading of both the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, in order to provide a more wide-ranging account of such relativism and, hence, a philosophical assessment of relativism in general.<sup>9</sup>

## The Myth

Diogenes Laertius reports, among the titles of Protagoras' book, the following ones also: *On the State* and *On the Original State of Things*.<sup>10</sup> In the first main section of Plato's *Protagoras* (316b–328b), Protagoras tells a story, usually termed in the literature as the 'Myth' (320c–324d), in which he offers his own account of the first stages of human life. Some scholars believe that in writing the Myth, Plato actually relies on Protagoras' actual works, such as *On the State* or on *The Original State of Things*.<sup>11</sup> It might well be so, but we lack solid grounds for saying that it is definitively so, having lost Protagoras' original books. As we will see, the criterion of that weak historical plausibility I have appealed to earlier will be of some use

---

7 Burnyeat (1990: p. 33).

8 See Lee (2005: pp. 17–18). In her study, despite the initial remark that the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus* constitute 'the most extended and careful treatment of any intellectual figure' in Plato's works (pp. 3–4), Lee considers five passages of the *Protagoras*, two in the footnotes and three in the main text – devoting to each of them not more than three pages altogether. For my own account of *Protagoras* 334–c, see below, pp. 127.

9 The scholarly attempt to reconstruct Protagoras' relativism by offering such an integrated reading of the two dialogues has never been fully carried out. The attempts I am aware of to provide an integrated reading of Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* are Nill (1985) and Farrar (1988). The first shows too little concern for the *Theaetetus*, while, on the second, see above, pp. 17–8.

10 See above, p. 5.

11 See Untersteiner (1996: pp. 75–85); Havelock (1957: pp. 407–409); Nestle (1942: pp. 282–289). More prudent is Farrar (1988: p. 78).

also in the case of the assessment of the Protagorean authenticity of the Myth. It is, however, important at this stage to see why in the Myth Protagoras says something valuable for the reconstruction of his ethical relativism.

The *Protagoras* is a dialogue on virtue (*aretê*) and on the connected problem whether virtue can be taught. It is a dialogue of medium length (from p. 309 to p. 362, 53 Stephanus pages); the two main interlocutors are Protagoras and Socrates, but other famous sophists (such as Prodicus and Hippias), together with Critias, Callias, Alcibiades and the young Hippocrates (who is enthused about Protagoras' presence), are present at the discussion. After a short prologue (309a–310a) in which a discussion between Socrates and an unnamed friend is reported, there is an introductory section (310b–316a), which tells us of the meeting between Socrates and Hippocrates and of their visit to the house of Callias, where Protagoras happened to be at the time the dialogue is imagined to take place. An initial main section on the problem whether virtue can be taught follows (316b–328d), where Protagoras maintains that virtue can be taught, while Socrates that it cannot. Protagoras argues for his own position by offering a Myth (320c–324d) on the birth and development of human society and a proper argument, termed as 'Logos' (324e–328c). A second main section on the problem of the unity of virtue runs from 328e to 334c: Protagoras holds that all virtues are part of a whole, each virtue being different from the other and from the whole to which they all belong. Socrates scrutinizes Protagoras' position to refute it and to show that all virtues are one (and are knowledge, as he maintains in the last section of the dialogue). After a crisis in the discussion in which all other people present at the discussion intervene to calm Socrates down so that his discussion with Protagoras might continue (334c–338e), there is a section (339a–347a) where Protagoras and Socrates propose different and alternative readings of a poem of Simonides. But the interpretation of Simonides' poem is abandoned by Socrates as an activity unhelpful for someone who wants to know the truth (347b–348b). This part is followed by the last main section of the dialogue (348c–362a), where Socrates shows that all virtues are one, courage included 'a virtue that Protagoras was earlier ready to admit is different from all others' and that are all knowledge. In so doing, Socrates demonstrates that virtue is indeed teachable but that, contrary to Protagoras' initial claim, this is possible when virtue is correctly understood as closely related to knowledge.

At the beginning of the *Protagoras*, questioned by Socrates on the actual content of his teaching, the sophist claims to be able to teach *euboulia*, 'sound deliberation', to his pupils (318e5),<sup>12</sup> 'both in domestic matters – how best to manage one's household, and in public affairs – how to realize one's maximum potential for success in political debate and action' (318e6–319a2). Socrates infers that this amounts to promising 'to make men good citizens' (319a5), by teaching them political *technê*

---

12 *Euboulia* means, literally, 'good counsel', thus 'soundness of judgement' (LSJ, s.v.). For a philosophical use of the term, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.9.1142b6; on *euboulia* with respect to both private and public affairs, see also *Gorgias* 520e. Maguire (1977: 104–105) takes Protagoras' claim to teach *euboulia* as the only genuine Protagorean pronouncement to be found in the whole dialogue. See also Schiappa (1991: p. 184); on *euboulia* in Pre-Platonic thought, see Schofield (1986).

(technique), which in turn provides them with political *aretê* (virtue).<sup>13</sup> Socrates does not believe that Protagoras can teach political virtue since, on the contrary, he holds that political virtue cannot be taught. Socrates argues for that conclusion in two ways. First, the Athenians, he says, are commonly regarded as wise people and they only allow experts to speak on those subjects that they believe can be taught. When it is a question of running a city, they allow any citizen to speak. This ought to imply that political virtue is not teachable.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, it is evident that political virtue is not teachable, Socrates adds, if we think of domestic examples. Good citizens, such as Pericles, do not teach their sons to be good (citizens); or, if they do, they often fail.<sup>15</sup> To answer Socrates' objections, Protagoras delivers the Great Speech, which combines the Myth (320c–324d) and another part, usually termed as the 'Logos' (324d2–328c2). For our own purposes here, let us focus on the Myth, whose main part runs from 320c8 to 322d5.<sup>16</sup>

Protagoras begins his Myth, that is, the story of the birth and development of human society by saying that the gods 'moulded [mortal beings] within the earth, mixing together earth and fire and their compounds'.<sup>17</sup> When the right time came to bring them into the light of day, the gods order Prometheus and Epimetheus to equip each species with the power it required. Epimetheus has the responsibility to distribute different powers to the various species; when it comes to the turn of human beings, he realizes that he has nothing left for them. To amend Epimetheus' mistake, Prometheus steals from the gods practical wisdom (*entechnos sophia*, 321d1), together with the use of fire. Equipped in such a way, human beings acquire the wisdom for their mere survival (*euporia tou biou*, 321e3), but not political wisdom.<sup>18</sup> Protagoras describes human life at this pre-political stage in such a fashion:

Since man thus shared in a divine gift, first of all through his kinship with the gods he was the only creature to worship them, and he began to erect altars and images of the gods. Then he soon developed through *technê* the use of articulate speech and of words,

---

13 In the *Protagoras*, Plato is ambiguous as regards the use of terms such as *technê* and *aretê*, often using one in place of the other; we will see later that an *aretê*, a virtue or an excellence in the performing of an ability, is normally taken to be the result of (the possession) of a *technê* (a skill). On the lexical uncertainty as regards *technê*, *aretê*, and so on in the *Protagoras*, note that *euboulia* = political *technê* = good citizenship (319a) = virtue (319e2, 320a3, b5, c1) = political *sophia* (321d5) = again political *technê* (322b5) = political virtue (322e ff) = justice (*dikaïosunê*) and self-control (*sôphrosunê*) = justice and the rest of political virtue (326a6, b2) = justice, self-control and piety (325a1) = human virtue (human *aretê*, at 325a2). On this lexical confusion, see Taylor (1991: p. 73).

14 319b3–d7.

15 319e1–320b3. For a fuller version of this argument, see *Meno* 93a–94d; also *Dissoi Logoi*, chapter 6, in Sprague (1972).

16 For an analysis of the argumentative structure of the Myth, see Brisson (1975); see also Guthrie (1957: pp. 84–94); Taylor (1991: pp. 76–103); Schiappa (1991: pp. 181–187). On the possible reasons for which Plato chooses a myth for expounding Protagoras' ideas, see Farrar (1988: pp. 87–98).

17 320d2–3.

18 See 321d4–6: 'That is how man acquired his practical skill, but he did not yet have skill in running a city.'

and discovered how to make houses and clothes and shoes and bedding and how to get food from the earth. Thus equipped, men lived at the beginning in scattered units, and there were no cities; so they began to be destroyed by the wild beasts, since they were altogether weaker. Their practical art was sufficient to provide food, but insufficient for fighting against the beasts – for they did not yet possess the art of running a city, of which the art of warfare is part – and so they sought to come together and save themselves by founding cities. Now when they came together, they treated each other with injustice, not possessing the art of running a city, so they scattered and began to be destroyed once again (322a3–b8).<sup>19</sup>

According to Protagoras' story, a political stage follows such a pre-political moment and at this time Zeus (through Hermes) provides human beings with *aidôs* and *dikê* (respect and justice), 'to be the principles of organization of cities and the bonds of friendship'.<sup>20</sup> When Hermes asks Zeus if he (Hermes) has to distribute justice and respect in the same way as he did with all other techniques, namely, to some people and not to all people,<sup>21</sup> Zeus orders Hermes to do the following:

[Distribute *aidôs* and *dikê*] to all [...] and let all share in them; for cities could not come into being, if only a few shared in them as in the other arts. And lay down on my authority a law that he who cannot share in conscience and justice is to be killed as a plague on the city (322d1–5).

According to Protagoras' Myth, each and every human being must possess justice and respect, that is, each and every human being must share in political virtue; if it were not so, there would be no city at all.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to what Socrates believes, every citizen of a city has to share in justice and respect to be citizen of that city; this is what makes the Athenians right to allow anyone to speak in the Assembly when political matters are discussed. In order to show the implausibility of Socrates' position on the teachability of political virtue, Protagoras, however, has to demonstrate not only that everyone shares in political virtue, but also that the Athenians believe that political virtue does not come as a 'natural process (*phusei*) or by chance (*tuchê(i)*)' (323d5), but that it is taught and that everyone acquires it 'by practice, training and teaching (*epimeleia, askêsis, didachê*)' (322d6–7). Protagoras shows that this is the case by

---

19 What strikes one in the above description is Protagoras' reference to the gods and their cult. This reference seems to contrast with Protagoras' well-known agnosticism (on which see above, p. 85). Some scholars have conjectured that the passage (and hence the whole Myth) may be regarded as not authentically Protagorean (see Levi 1940: p. 290, n. 1). Such a sceptical position about the authenticity of the passage is not necessary, since Protagoras' fragment on the gods (see above, p. 6) is a theoretical fragment (referring to the unknowability of gods' existence), while the Myth is a *genealogical* and *historical* account of the early stages of human life.

20 322c2–3. *Dikê* is normally taken to mean 'justice', whereas *aidôs* may be generally (and by and large) translated as 'respect', both for oneself and others. The two terms are later equated respectively with *dikaïosunê* (323a1) and *sôphrosunê* (323a2). On *aidôs*, see Cairns (1992).

21 *Aidôs* and *dikê* are in fact first regarded as *technai* (322b8) and then as (political) *aretai* (323a1).

22 Protagoras' conclusion that every man must share in political virtue is reinforced by another brief argument, to the general effect that anyone who says to be lacking in political *aretê* would be regarded as being mad: see 323a5–c2.

advancing the argument from punishment. He begins his reasoning by noting that in the case of undesirable features that one is ready to ascribe to nature or chance, nobody gets annoyed with those people who display such unpleasant characteristics. When it is instead the case of good qualities that people acquire through practice, training and teaching, everyone gets irritated with those who do not display such good qualities, but their opposite, and everyone believes that those persons should be punished for showing such lack. Since people get annoyed with, and correct, anyone who is unjust and irreligious, Protagoras goes on, this should imply that political virtue is generally believed to be acquired by practice and teaching.<sup>23</sup>

This is even more evident, Protagoras adds, if one thinks of the role that punishment plays in ancient and modern society. If one considers the effect that punishment has for the wrongdoer, one will be further convinced that political virtue is teachable. No one in fact punishes a wrongdoer only because he has done wrong; this would mean to exercise the kind of vengeance that is typical of beasts. Punishment is correctly undertaken not with a view to the past wrong action, but with a view to the deterrent effect that such a punishment has on the wrongdoer and on those who see him being punished. This at least is the intention that those who administer punishment have; this intention demonstrates their belief that virtue can be learned. Since the Athenians are among those who conceive of punishment in such a way, this will prove their belief that political virtue is acquired through teaching.<sup>24</sup> Protagoras' whole argument in the Myth has thus principally shown that every member of a political community has to share in political virtue; on the basis of such sharing, Protagoras' story has demonstrated that political virtue can be taught, or, at least, that the Athenians believe so.

One preliminary remark to make on the argument from punishment that Protagoras offers concerns the means by which he claims that one can learn political virtue. Protagoras says that it is 'by practice, training and teaching' (322d6–7) that people acquire political virtue. We have seen that in two of his extant fragments, the sophist declares: 'teaching requires natural endowment (*phuseôs*) and practice (*askêseôs*)' (80DKB3); 'art (*technê*) was nothing without practice (*meletê*) and practice nothing without art' (80DKB10).<sup>25</sup> The line of the *Protagoras* just quoted seems to be consistent with the educational views expressed in the two fragments, since in both cases it is remarked that there is great need of practice (*epimeleia*, *meletê* and *askêsis*) to acquire an art and, hence, the corresponding virtue. In the fragments, Protagoras also stresses the importance of a natural disposition (*phusis*) in the person who has to learn something; in the *Protagoras*, the kernel of Protagoras' Myth is, correspondingly, that, although political virtue does not come by nature, everyone *naturally* shares in it, namely everyone has a *natural* disposition to improve, by practice, one's political virtue. On Protagoras' account, it is possible to teach political virtue because everyone naturally shares in it, although different

---

23 For this part of Protagoras' argument, see 323d1–324a3.

24 For this part of Protagoras' argument, see 324a3–d1.

25 See above, p. 6.

people have different degrees of political virtue (this difference of degree is exactly what makes the teaching of political virtue possible).<sup>26</sup>

The consistency of the views on education respectively suggested in the fragments and in the section of the *Protagoras* under scrutiny not only provides us with at least some reasons for supposing that there is a certain degree of historical authenticity in what Plato makes Protagoras say in the Myth. It also allows us to address the main conceptual point that Protagoras' Myth makes, namely that political virtue (*arête*) is the result of political technique (*technê*). As far as Protagoras' ethical relativism is concerned, this is an essential point and one that makes Protagoras' account of the birth and development of human society well consistent with the kind of ethical relativism that, on my interpretation, Plato ascribes to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*.

### Virtue and Technique

On the basis of what Protagoras says in his account of the development of human society, one can identify three main stages, which can be named after, respectively, the three gods of the Myth, Epimetheus, Prometheus and Zeus. The first stage of human society (the Epimetheus stage) is that in which human beings were completely unequipped, 'naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed', because Epimetheus was very unwise in distributing those abilities that the gods gave to him and to Prometheus when they were asked to create mortal races. Since Epimetheus absent-mindedly used up those abilities for non-reasoning animals, human race was left with no ability at all and exposed to the danger of extinction.

The second stage of human society (the Prometheus stage) is that in which, by stealing practical wisdom (*entechnos sophia*, 321d1, later defined at 322b3 as *dêmiourgikê technê*) and fire from Athena and Hephaestus, Prometheus equipped human beings with the wisdom for staying alive, for their mere survival (322a1). Through the use of such practical wisdom, human beings were able to display a religious attitude; they worshipped gods and erected altars to them. They also were able, through the use of the new practical capacity assigned to them, to articulate speech and words, to build houses, make clothes and shoes, to use the food from the earth for their survival. At this stage, human beings were equipped with all those basic abilities and techniques that allowed them to live; it is worth noting that, among such abilities, there is also the use of language (in which Protagoras was historically known to have had a strong interest).<sup>27</sup> Later on (322d), it is explicitly said that such abilities or techniques are distributed in such a way that, for instance, a person practising the medical technique is enough for all other people who are not doctors. What is clear is that, at this stage of human life and, by implication, also in human life *tout court*, some people are given some abilities, other people other capacities. Although there

---

26 It is evident that, if all citizens have the same degree of political virtue, there will neither be teachers of political virtue (namely people displaying better degrees of it) nor pupils (namely people lacking a good degree of it). On this, see 324d2–328c2, especially 326e6 ff. (the argument of the flute-player).

27 For Protagoras' interest in language, see Diogenes Laertius 9.53 (=DK80 A1) and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.5.1407b6 (=DK80 A27).

is such a difference, human beings were well able to acquire a minimum level of survival, at least among small groups of people. Larger groups, indeed cities, did not exist at this stage, since human beings were not yet given political technique (*politikê technê*: 322b5 and b8) and were not able to live all together peacefully.

The third stage of the development of human society (the Zeus stage) is that in which Zeus, through Hermes, decided to provide human beings with justice and a sense of respect (*dikê* and *aidôs*), in order that they may be able to constitute cities and live together. Asked by Hermes whether justice and respect needed to be distributed like all other techniques, that is, to some but not to all, Zeus ordered that they be distributed in such a way that all had a share. Had this not been the case, Zeus warns, no city would have existed. To highlight the fundamental importance that all citizens of a city should share in justice and respect, Zeus ordered that those who were not able to share in them should be killed as a plague on the city. There are two points worth stressing in this third and final stage of the development of human society. The first one is that justice and respect are often referred to as ‘techniques’ (*technai*: see 322b5, 8, c5, d4); this is not so straightforward, since *aidôs* and *dikê* were traditionally taken in Greek thought as two ethical values typical of the moral life of aristocratic societies. Secondly, by contrast with what happens in the case of all other abilities, all human beings have to be equipped with political technique, and all human beings are thus able to display a certain degree of political virtue (as it is said at 323a), which is what allows them to talk in the assembly (and Protagoras to maintain that virtue is teachable).

According to Protagoras, these are the three stages of the birth and development of human society. By proposing such an historical and genealogical account, Protagoras becomes a defender of a democratic conception of human gathering. To be such, a society needs all its members to be provided with political technique and to share, though differently, in political virtue. Such a conception closely matches the type of democratic society Pericles was about to transform Athens into. To recognize that each and every citizen is provided with political technique and virtue means to justify, from a philosophical point of view, the very existence of the Athenian assembly, taken as the place where all citizens directly exercise their capacities for democratic involvement.<sup>28</sup> The reference to justice and, in particular, to respect seems, however, to colour Protagoras’ account of an anti-democratic vein, since, as said earlier, those are the main values upon which Greek aristocratic societies were traditionally believed to be formed. The apparent contradiction is solved, once one has conceived of justice and respect as two ethical values that are not only typical of an aristocratic society. *Aidôs* and *dikê*, respect and justice, can easily be newly interpreted along democratic lines, namely more in consonance with the historical climate of the time of Protagoras and Pericles, where more people were about to ask for more influence on the political life of the polis. From an historical point of view, to focus on traditional values such as justice and respect when elaborating a democratic theory of society made the birth of such a society appear a less dangerous event for those conservative elites that were traditionally hostile to the enlargement of political rights. From a philosophical perspective, to reinterpret justice and respect

---

28 On Protagoras as a thinker whose theories are fully organic to the Athenian democracy, see Farrar (1988: pp. 77–98); see also Adkins (1973).

along new lines and so to show that their meaning is dependent upon historical contingency is what Protagoras possibly wants to suggest with the account of the birth and development of human society that he offers in the Myth.<sup>29</sup>

With this remark, we come to consider the much debated question of the correct interpretation of Protagoras' Myth. Some interpreters deny that Protagoras' Myth is consistent with a doctrine of ethical relativism, that is, the position that the sophist is made to maintain in the *Theaetetus*. Those scholars claim that the Myth instead allows for a kind of ethical objectivism, since justice and respect seem to be pictured there as two ethical values that constitute the ethical backbone of each society.<sup>30</sup> It is true that, when he speaks of the passage from the Prometheus' stage to the Zeus' stage, Protagoras says that Hermes brings respect and justice to all human beings, as if justice and respect were two ethical values having objective existence. But respect and justice are actually equated with political virtue and political virtue is best described as the result of political technique, namely as the kind of virtue or excellence corresponding to the application of the political craft that Protagoras takes to be an essential ability for human beings.<sup>31</sup> The point about political virtue (hence justice and respect) being the result of the application of political technique becomes clearer once we have looked at the comparison that Protagoras draws at 322ab between practical technique (*dêmiourgikê technê=entechnos sophia*, at 321d1) and political technique. The passage runs:

Then he [sc. man] soon developed through *technê* the use of articulate speech and of words, and discovered how to make houses and clothes and shoes and bedding and how to get food from the earth. Thus equipped, men lived at the beginning in scattered units, and there were no cities; so they began to be destroyed by the wild beasts, since they were altogether weaker. Their practical art (*dêmiourgikê technê*) was sufficient to provide food, but insufficient for fighting against the beasts – for they did not yet possess the art of running a city (*politikê technê*), of which the art of warfare is part – and so they sought to come together and save themselves by founding cities. Now when they came together,

---

29 On Protagoras' ethical relativism, on the contrary, as a doctrine merely enforcing the existing *status quo*, see Taylor (1926: pp. 246–247); *contra* Taylor (1991: p. 100); Schiappa (1991: pp. 170–171). On this respect, see the evidence of the *Theaetetus*, where in the Defence Protagoras' wise man is best seen as an innovator since he professes to be able to change the existing *status quo* of a polis (into a better one when the city is not satisfied with its political balance any more).

30 On the Myth as expressing a form of ethical objectivism, see Taylor (1991: p. 101); *contra*, Chappell (2005: p. 120). On the inconsistencies between the ethical relativism of the *Theaetetus* and the ethical positions expounded in the Myth of the *Protagoras*, see Nill (1985: pp. 36–37); on the philosophical compatibility between the views expressed in the two dialogues, see Kerferd (1949) and Vlastos (1956: pp. xx–xxiv).

31 On the conceptual link between *aretê* and *technê*, see Taylor (1991: pp. 75–76): 'Someone possesses a craft [*technê*] in the fullest sense only when he is good at it, i.e. possesses the corresponding skill or excellence [*aretê*], and hence the claim to teach an art is the claim to teach the appropriate *aretê*.' For the equation between political virtue and political technique, see also 319e2, 320a3, b5, c1.

they treated each other with injustice, not possessing the art of running a city, so they scattered and began to be destroyed once again<sup>32</sup> (322a5–b8).

Through practical techniques, human beings are provided with a multi-faceted capacity that allows them to create a language and to make houses, clothes, shoes and get food. Similarly, political *technê* can reasonably be taken as a particular capacity given to all human beings to allow them to live together by producing that political virtue, the idea of justice and respect, which is to be shared by all those people living in the same community. Provided with political technique, human beings are not only able to fight against beasts but they can also give up fighting against each other and find political virtue, namely a shared idea of justice and respect on the basis of which they can live together peacefully. But this does not mean that the shared idea of justice and respect is objectively valid in any given society. In the light of the strict parallel that Protagoras draws between practical arts and political technique, it follows that the same technique, if applied by different people and in different contexts, will produce quite different results (in the case of political technique, it will produce rather different political virtues). Although all human beings are provided with the practical capacity to speak, they speak in fact different languages, according to the geographical place where they happen to live or to the historical time when they happen to live. On the same ground, although they are equipped with the same ability to build houses, get clothes and food, different people have different types of houses, dress in different ways, have different activities to provide their own food. It may easily be inferred that things will go the same way as far as political technique is concerned. Although all human beings are given the capacity to live together, to cohabit politically, they build their communal life on different conceptions of political virtue, namely on different ideas of what is just and respectful.

The concept of technique that was historically predominant in the fifth century BC helps us to understand that for those Greeks living at that time, such as Protagoras, the employment of a technique just meant following some codified procedures; no assumption was ever made about the objectivity of the result obtained through the application of those codified procedures. To apply the same technical procedure in different contexts and by different individuals did not mean that the excellence or virtue obtained through the application of such a procedure needed to be objectively the same one in all cases and, above all, that the performing of such an excellence amounted to obtaining the same results.<sup>33</sup> This is the point that I believe was most essential in the Greek conception of *technai*: the focus was on the codification of all those procedures that constituted a skill, not on the identity and objectivity of the results obtained through the performance of such procedures. Originally believed to be the exclusive prerogative of the gods, with the birth of the Athenian democracy, techniques were conceived as tools by which human beings were able to obtain results that could improve their lives, in terms of welfare, security and social cohesion. The account of the birth and development of human society that Protagoras gives in the Myth combines the divine origin of the *technai* with their role for improving human

---

32 322a5–b8: see above, p. 96.

33 See Kube (1969); Cambiano (1991: pp. 15–28).

life. Greek thinkers focused their efforts on codifying all those rules that were meant to be followed in the application of a particular technique.<sup>34</sup>

An exemplary case of this effort of categorization is that of ancient medicine. The author of the pamphlet *Ancient Medicine* stresses the importance of the application of the codified medical procedure for restoring the health of his patients, while at the same time warning that a good doctor is someone who is able to apply sensibly that codified procedure to the single case, which is unique and irreducible to a medical science vainly pretending to be objective and objectively applicable in all cases.<sup>35</sup> The contrast the author of *Ancient Medicine* draws is that between an objective science that is incapable of making good sense of the single case and a flexible procedure that instead concentrates on the particular case and its uniqueness. To apply the same medical procedure, it is assumed in the pamphlet, does not amount to obtaining the same (objective) result, since much depends on the reaction of the particular patient under treatment. The measure of the success of the treatment is the patient, not the fact that the doctor applies a standard, objective science to the particular case in question.<sup>36</sup> As is explicitly remarked in chapter 15 of *Ancient Medicine*, it is hard to understand ‘how those who maintain the other view and abandon the old method in order to rest the *technê* on a postulate [that is, those who aim at introducing an objective medical science] treat their patients on the lines of this postulate. For they have not discovered, I think, an absolute cold and hot, dry and moist [that is, objectively determinable elements]’.<sup>37</sup>

Since in Protagoras’ Myth, respect and justice (specifically), political virtue (in general) are best seen as the result of the application of a technique, this does not leave much space for an objectivist reading of such a Myth. The Myth also allows for a relativistic interpretation of Protagoras’ account of how human society was born, developed and works. Applied in different contexts and by different people, political technique produces different political virtues, that is, different conceptions of justice and respect. Such a relativistic reading of Protagoras’ Myth is thus fully consistent with the doctrine of ethical relativism endorsed by the sophist in the *Theaetetus*, on the basis of which each community decides on which ethical values to ground the peaceful cohabitation of its members. As Protagoras says in that dialogue, ‘whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself’. If in the *Theaetetus* Protagoras’ ethical relativism is formulated from a philosophical point of view, Protagoras’ Myth in the *Protagoras* tells us the historical, or anthropological reasons, why each society is perfectly justified in adopting those ethical values on which to construct its communal life.

---

34 On this taxonomic effort, see Kube (1969: p. 37).

35 The pamphlet (430–420 BC) is traditionally attributed to Hippocrates. See Jouanna (1990); in English, see Jones (1923) and Longrigg (1980). On *Ancient Medicine*, see Nutton (2004).

36 For the remarks about methodology, see especially chapters 2 and 9 of the pamphlet. On the relationship between philosophy and medicine in Greek Thought, see Jones (1946) and Kennedy (1985, with further bibliography and, now, Demont Unpublished); on the possible relation of mutual influence between *Ancient Medicine* and Protagoras’ relativism, see below, pp. 122–3.

37 On this passage, see the comment of Feyerabend, in Feyerabend (1987: pp. 68–69).

## Subjectivism and Emotivism

At this point, we may assess the philosophical consistency of Protagoras' ethical relativism by considering if such a doctrine could imply a form of subjectivism or emotivism. In a famous article, Philippa Foot maintains that the form of ethical relativism she defends does not imply any form of subjectivism or emotivism (she believes that such a kind of ethical relativism is the most credible one to adopt). She also argues that (a) ethical relativism can be a subjectivist doctrine for which if one thinks something right, it is right for him; (b) ethical relativism can maintain that moral judgements can be taken as reports of individual's or group's reactions, of the type 'I like this' or 'most of us approve of that'.<sup>38</sup> She demonstrates that the form of ethical relativism she defends is neither subjectivist nor emotivist by showing first that for ethical relativism to be a consistent doctrine, there needs to be a set of standards according to which moral right and wrong is determined. Some persons might believe that one action is right, while the set of standards of the community they live in yields the conclusion that action is wrong. Secondly, her ethical relativism does not imply emotivism, she argues, since in the context of the kind of ethical relativism she defends, one can meaningfully accuse individuals or groups of being mistaken in their moral judgements. If this is so, it will be the case that moral judgements are not reports of people's reactions. If they were, such people would have the last word in moral matters.

In the light of the definition of subjectivism given by Foot, Protagoras' ethical relativism is not a subjectivist doctrine, in the sense specified above, since in the context of the kind of ethical relativism described in the *Theaetetus* and confirmed in the *Protagoras*, an ethical judgement is relative not to a single individual but to a group of people. Plato is clear on this point, when in the *Theaetetus* he first formulates Protagoras' ethical relativism: 'whatever view a city takes on these matters and establishes as a law or convention, is truth and fact for that city'. Protagoras' ethical relativism assumes that the city is responsible for its ethical code and is the measure of such a code. One may wonder, however, what autonomy the individual is given to in the ethical life of the polis. In the light of the understanding of Protagoras' perceptual relativism I have offered in the previous chapters, the individual should be taken to be fully autonomous in his own relativistic knowledge. Since the kind of knowledge Protagoras speaks of includes not only perceptions and judgements but also emotional responses, one may assume that in the world of Protagoras the individual could be fully justified in acting on the basis of such knowledge, in particular on the basis of those emotional responses that are so essential a part of it.

Were this the case, there could be a clash between the ethical consequences of the actions of a certain individual and the ethical code of the society in which the individual in question happens to live. Let us take a concrete example. Let us think

---

38 See Foot (1982). Emotivism as an ethical theory was first formulated by Ayer, in Ayer (1936: chapter 6). On the ground of this theory, 'in every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgement, the function of the relevant ethical word is purely "emotive". It is used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them' (p. 111). It is on this aspect of emotivism on which Foot concentrates in her article.

of someone who, having assessed all the elements of the situation with which he suddenly happens to be confronted, forms his own understanding of such a situation and decides to give hospitality to people who are illegal immigrants. This is explicitly prohibited by the legislation of his country but, as said, he knows that he is faced with people who he believes are his equals; he knows that if he does not give hospitality to them, they will be forcefully returned to their country, where a cruel war is taking place. On the basis of such an understanding (which is, in Protagorean terms, the way through which the individual makes sense of, and knows, that very event with which he happens to be faced), the individual in question acts and contravenes the laws of his own country. One may believe that Protagoras' relativism allows him to act on the basis of his own understanding of the whole situation; on the other, such relativism openly says that the ethical code of the city is the measure of its communal life. How to solve this contradiction?

The first remark to make is that there is no element whatsoever in the Platonic dialogues under scrutiny to say that this problem was ever identified by Protagoras or Plato. Plato never raises this point in his detailed treatment of Protagoras' doctrine, possibly because he sees stronger contradictions in Protagorean relativism than this one, as we will see in the next chapter. How to solve the contradiction is thus something that is relevant to the assessment of Protagoras' relativism when it is considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. The contradiction is, however, more apparent than real. From a philosophical point of view, it makes sense in fact to say that an individual acts on the basis of his own relativistic knowledge but that he can do so until his actions collide with the ethical code of the society in which he lives. Were this the case, an individual is free to act on the basis of his own particular knowledge when this does not contravene the ethical norms of his society. When his actions contravene the ethical rules of his community instead, he should act on the basis of such rules, which should express, more or less, the ethical (common) sense of the society in question (although not that of the individual in question in that particular case). Such dissolution of the apparent contradiction between the individualistic side of Protagoras' relativism and its communal one confirms the commonsensical tone of his perceptual relativism. Protagoras' ethical relativism in fact makes the ethical opinion in a certain society the predominant criterion through which such a society decides its ethical code.<sup>39</sup>

As far as emotivism is concerned, it might be well argued that the form of ethical relativism that Protagoras endorses implies a kind of emotivism. The ethical rules that a society decides to employ as its own ethical rules are decided, on the basis of Protagoras' relativism, by the reaction of (the majority of) the people belonging to the society in question (and possessing political rights). In the context of Protagoras' ethical relativism, the ethical views that a society decides to employ as its own ethical rules seem to be the expression of the ethical common sense predominant in that society. It is true that, at least in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras insists on the importance of the assembly, where all the Athenians with political rights can express their own opinions on those political matters that are to be debated. Such insistence is a clear

---

<sup>39</sup> On the ethical conflict between individual and society in Greek Ethics, see White (2002, especially pp. 155–289) and Price (1997, especially pp. 162–205).

sign that the ethical rules of a society are somehow the result of a process involving a kind of reasoned detachment from the immediate reaction that the group of people involved in the debating process may have (when faced with an ethical matter). On the basis of Protagoras' relativism, ethical rules are nonetheless the mediated expression (through a communal discussion) of that reaction. Some wise people, of which Protagoras claims to be one, can try to influence and modify that reaction, but the newly formed ethical conventions remain the expression of a reaction, although modified by the improving action of the wise man. Although it is not a subjectivist moral theory, Protagoras' ethical relativism is an emotivist doctrine that maintains that each society has its own ethical code, which is the expression of the ethical reaction and attitude predominant in the society in question and which is also, to use again the idea of incommensurability, incommensurable with that of another society.

### Forms of Life

By referring to incommensurability, which has proved such an explicatory concept for the philosophical consistency of Protagoras' perceptual relativism, one may try to shed light also on the philosophical consistency of the kind of ethical relativism that the sophist is made to maintain in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*. Incommensurability means, as shown, incompatibility but not incomparability. As far as incommensurable perceptions are concerned, two individuals with different perceptions and perceptual schemata can understand each other well, not by referring to an objective paradigm of commensuration but through a subtle and patient process of reciprocal understanding. On the same lines, one may explain the dialogue that, on the grounds of Protagorean relativism, two societies with incommensurably different ethical codes can possibly have.<sup>40</sup> The confrontation between foreign countries and cultures is an essential question to consider, once we have looked at the process of political (and, thus, ethical) fragmentation that the actual world is witnessing. One of the most pressing issues at the moment in public debate is, in fact, how to make good sense of those acts that our culture conceives as irrational, primitive or uncivilized. How is it possible for us, who belong to the Western world, to understand the culture and way of life of those countries where women are not allowed to drive their own cars and have to walk in the streets with their faces covered by *chadors*? On a less drastic scale, within the Western world, how can someone belonging to a mainly family-centred culture and country make full sense of the lives of those other people living in other cultures and countries, where the communal benefit is seen as the sum of the benefits of all the individuals belonging to it? On an even less dramatic example, how can one living in an area of a country where all adult people engage in political activity make good sense of the behaviour of other people living in another area of the same country, where political action is not seen as a useful expression of one's political credo, with the inevitable risks and dangers that such an expression carries with it? Eventually, the most familiar (or, perhaps, the most demanding) example we can think of, how

---

<sup>40</sup> See above, pp. 77–8, for those passages of *Against Method* in which Feyerabend uses the example of the explorer wishing to make sense of and understand a foreign society.

can one make complete sense of the ethical code of the person one loves and lives with, if such a person comes from a different cultural background?

I focus on the most currently debated case, that of the confrontation between two foreign countries and alien cultures. On the basis of Protagoras' ethical relativism, each of the two societies that are confronted is right in establishing and enforcing their incommensurable ethical codes. Although their ethics are incompatible, they are nonetheless comparable, if interpreted on the basis of Kuhn's and Feyerabend's notion of incommensurability. When he describes the careful process of interpretation that his explorer needs to apply when he is confronted with a foreign society, Feyerabend makes clear that the two societies can understand each other and each other's way of life exactly by applying that careful process of interpretation and not by referring to an objective standard of commensuration.<sup>41</sup> If in interpreting the foreign society he happens to be faced with, the explorer applies what he believes to be an objective standard of measurement (which inevitably reflects the concept of rationality of the society he belongs to) the risk will be that the forms of life of the foreign society being explored will appear to him as irrational. The further step could be that, since it is not able to make good sense of such foreign forms of life, the society the explorer belongs to wants to change such irrational, indeed amoral, forms of life, in the name of a superior and more advanced idea of rationality and of communal life. To take an objectivist line, namely to assume that our standpoint of observation is a privileged one since our society is culturally, socially, economically superior to the one under scrutiny, might be a natural attitude to take, especially when the foreign practices to explain seem to be so unethical and irrational for us (and so hard for us to accept).<sup>42</sup>

The alternative to the objectivist stance can be complete indifference to all that is foreign for us (which some believe is the only coherent approach for the relativist to take, since it is wrongly assumed that relativism, by making every standard of rationality relative to some framework, makes the real confrontation between different rationalities, or cultures, an impossible matter). The only other path we can follow when we interpret forms of life and cultures so foreign and alien for us without adopting an objective standpoint is that patient, sensitive work of careful observation and interpretation, which Feyerabend speaks of. To employ such a kind of civilized confrontation when we try to understand another society and culture is the only way, relativists assume, by which the foreign society under exploration becomes less foreign (to apply such a kind of confrontation helps our society too to get a better and more perspicuous understanding of itself, as Feyerabend stresses).<sup>43</sup> Relativism is thus not only a better alternative to objectivism as far as the understanding of foreign societies and forms of life is concerned, but it seems to be the only realistic approach to take if we want to make adequate sense of what is there, of that which is out of the cultural domain of our society, but still something that exists in its own rights. It is at this point that I believe a further argument can be advanced, to make Protagorean relativism and relativism *tout court* a more appealing doctrine.

---

41 See above, pp. 77–82.

42 The case of Western societies 'exporting democracy' is obviously relevant here.

43 See above, p79.

When two cultures are taken to be incommensurable, as far as their respective ethical values and kinds of rationality are concerned, it is usually said that such cultures are the result of two different forms of life. This is what Kuhn and especially Feyerabend mean when they talk of incommensurable forms of life. This is also what I have so far meant when I have used the expression ‘form of life’: the expression stands for the sum of all those (rational) practices that make a certain society exactly that society. But there is, I believe, a more radical use of such an expression; one will find it if one reconstructs the genealogy of the use of the concept of form of life in philosophy.<sup>44</sup> As Janik and Toulmin have convincingly shown in their famous book on Wittgenstein’s Vienna, the cultural origin of the notion of form of life (*Lebensform*) needs to be traced back to the Vienna of the 1920s, where it was rather common for intellectuals and artists to use such an expression with no further specification.<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein is the first to make a philosophical use of the concept of form of life in his *Philosophical Investigations*, although it is not wholly clear what he means by this expression.<sup>46</sup> He talks of form(s) of life in only five places of his *Investigations*, namely §§19, 23, 241 and at pp. 174 and 226. In §19, Wittgenstein says: ‘it is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. – Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others. – And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’.<sup>47</sup> A similar idea can be found in §23: ‘There are *countless* kinds [*sc.* of sentences]: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence,

---

44 A concept alternative to that of form of life that could be of some use at the moment is Kuhn’s paradigm. The concept of ‘paradigm’ as elaborated by Kuhn is, however, even more elusive than that of form of life: on such elusiveness, see the Postscript in Kuhn (1970). Moreover, the notion of paradigm seems to be eminently an epistemological notion, whereas the concept of form of life has a wider range of application as to include epistemological as well as more fundamental human activities. For these reasons, I prefer to use the concept of form of life to explore Protagoras’ relativism. On the possible linkage between Wittgenstein’s form of life and Kuhn’s paradigm, see Barry (1996).

45 See also Janik and Toulmin (1973: p. 230): ‘[T]he notion of “forms of life” as the contexts for the language games within which linguistic expressions acquire their meaning, is itself a strikingly Loosian notion [*sc.* taken from Alfred Loos, the famous architect]. Loos himself had insisted that the design of any meaningful artifact must be determined by the “forms of culture” within which it is used [...] so that changes in design have to be justified by changes in our manner of life, rather than vice versa. Even the very term *Lebensformen* (or “forms of life”) itself [...] had a recognizable Viennese origin. One of the most successful works of popular neo-Kantian literature, published shortly after the First World War, was a contribution to characterology written by Eduard Spranger. By the late 1920s, this book had sold as many as 28,000 copies, and the title of this best seller was, quite simply, *Lebensformen*. Given Wittgenstein’s Viennese background, therefore, he was no more in a position to *invent* the term “form of life” than one could today invent the phrase “territorial imperative”; in the Vienna of the 1920s, this was just one of those cultural commonplaces that did not need explaining.’

46 On the elusiveness of the notion of form of life in Wittgenstein, see Black (1978).

47 For the *Philosophical Investigations*, I shall always use G.E.M. Anscombe’s translation. On §19, see Baker and Hacker (1980: pp. 135–138).

and others become obsolete and get forgotten [...]. Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.’<sup>48</sup> Again a link between form of life and language is established in §241: “‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’ – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.’<sup>49</sup> To understand this last paragraph better, it is worth quoting §654, where ‘form of life’ is not used, but where it is stated: ‘Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a “proto-phenomenon” (*Urphänomen*). That is, where we ought to have said: *this language-game is played*’.<sup>50</sup> At p. 226 Wittgenstein correspondingly defines the forms of life as the original datum, what has to be accepted as such. He says: ‘What has to be accepted, the given (*das Hinzunehmende, Gegebene*) is – so one could say – *forms of life*’. Lastly, and less significantly, at p. 174, he asks: ‘One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after to-morrow? – And what can he not do here? – How do I do it? – How am I supposed to answer this? Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life.’<sup>51</sup>

The first initial remark to make is that for Wittgenstein, a form of life seems to be (connected to) a primary activity; the concept of form of life relates to an activity (of which a language-game is a relevant part) that is essential to human beings and that is characterized by skills common to all those performing such an activity. Secondly, a language-game is itself characterized by language and by all those actions into which it is woven. Thirdly, and most importantly, a form of life is what must be accepted, the given. As Baker and Hacker eloquently say in their commentary on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘the notion of a form of life is connected

---

48 On §23, see Baker-Hacker (1980: pp. 157–158). On language and language-games, see §7: ‘In the language the following process will occur: the learner *names* the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teachers points to the stone. – And there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher – both of these being processes resembling language. We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) [*sc.* the kind of language Wittgenstein refers to at §2] as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games “language-games” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone [*sc.* the kind of language referred to at §2] might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the “language-game”.’ On language and language-game, see Kenny (1973: chapter 9); Baker-Hacker (1980: pp. 89–99).

49 On §241, see Baker-Hacker (1984: pp. 212–215).

50 On §654, see Baker-Hacker (1984: pp. 118–121).

51 In the whole of Wittgenstein’s corpus, there is one other occurrence of ‘form of life’, namely *On Certainty*, §358: ‘Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well)’ (tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe and D. Paul).

with that of a language-game, but is more general and elemental. A form of life is a given unjustified and unjustifiable pattern of human activity (part of human natural history) [...]. It rests upon, but is not identified with, very general pervasive facts of nature. It consists of shared natural and linguistic responses, of broad agreement in definitions and in judgements, and of corresponding behaviour'.<sup>52</sup> But to what extent may we say that the notion of form of life is something fundamentally elemental? To what extent may we say that a form of life is the given, the original datum, an unjustified and unjustifiable pattern of human activity? May we say that a form of life is what has to be accepted in the same respect in which we say that we must accept that it is raining outside or that two people over there are kissing each other? Or, perhaps, may we say that a form of life is what has to be accepted, as we have to accept that human beings have feelings and emotions and that there is no particular explanation for this? There are some physical explanations that can tell us why it rains; there are some biological (evolutionary) explanations for saying why human beings have feelings and emotions. There does not seem to be, nonetheless, any particular philosophical explanation for all this (with 'philosophical explanation', I here mean any explanation that may abstract from nature or history and show the crude (or pure) reasons why things must be that way).

## **Radical Use**

On this account, for Wittgenstein a form of life expresses something that is fundamentally characteristic of human beings as such; a form of life expresses all the series of attitudes that, taken all together, constitute human society and that cannot be given a further philosophical explanation. Human beings perceive, have emotions, speak, doubt, know and so on. Philosophically speaking, we have to accept all this and it makes little sense, Wittgenstein remarks, to try to find out something more essential than a form of life. Although all human beings perform all those rational activities that are so typical of human beings, they perform such essential activities in very different ways and in the context of their different language-games and of the correspondingly different forms of life. Although all human beings speak a language and play language-games, they do so differently. People speak different languages, play different language-games, and thus have different forms of life. But to use the expression 'form of life' as only indicating all the particular rational practices that a certain group of people recognizes as its own amounts to employing Wittgenstein's concept of form of life in a limited sense. My point here is that, by using the notion of form of life in such a mild sense, one may in fact distort the actual sense in which Wittgenstein uses the notion or, at least, one may lose a significant part of its full

---

<sup>52</sup> Baker-Hacker (1980: p. 137). The quotation continues as such: 'A language perforce contains moves which are not justified by reference to anything, but are simply accepted as appropriate, as a common pattern of linguistic behaviour by reference to which other moves are justified. Equally, any cognitive claims, as well as any doubts, occur within a framework of propositions that are not doubted, that belong to the frame of reference of the system of knowledge [...]. Training in what counts as justification, acceptance of undoubted truths of the world-picture, is acculturation in the form of life of a community.'

sense. To use the expression ‘form of life’ to indicate all the rational practices that a society recognizes as its own is justified by Wittgenstein’s use of such an expression in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This is the way in which the notion of form of life is currently employed in philosophy; this is also the meaning and sense that Kuhn and Feyerabend give to the term. What I want to argue for, however, is that Wittgenstein’s codification in philosophy of the concept of form of life allows for a more radical interpretation of it. On the basis of such a radical use of the concept, a form of life does not only express all the rational (ethical, aesthetical, and so on) practices that a particular society recognizes as its own and that are only typical of that society. Rather, it expresses something more fundamental than those practices, namely the fact that all human societies perform (although differently) and have to perform all those rational practices to be human societies. To be such, each society must be equipped with a certain kind of rationality, however different such rationality may be from that of another society. Such rationality is the result of the performing of some basic rational activities, such as the speaking of a language, the showing of emotional responses to someone else’s behaviours, and so on, and not the result of the sharing of some key ideas or concepts.<sup>53</sup>

Interpreted in its radical meaning, the notion of form of life helps to provide an element that could explain further how a comparison between incommensurable cultures and societies is possible, even in the absence of a neutral standard of measurement. As said earlier, the point about the comparability of incommensurables is the crucial point for relativism, which is often charged by its opponents with not being able to provide a credible explanation of how incommensurable societies can understand each other in the absence of a neutral standard of commensuration.<sup>54</sup> On this aspect, we have seen how Feyerabend illustrates the process of understanding through which a patient explorer gets a comprehension of a foreign society without referring to an objective standard of commensuration. I believe that such a process is a plausible one and makes good sense of how relativism can explain its approach to the question of the comparison between alien cultures. Wittgenstein’s notion of form of life, when interpreted in its more radical sense, adds to the plausibility of relativism the fact that different societies, although displaying rational and ethical features that are incommensurable, perform the same basic activities, such as speaking, having emotional responses to someone else’s actions, or having a communal life.<sup>55</sup>

The fact that alien societies perform (differently) the same fundamental activities that are fully and inextricably inherent to their humanity could be what makes the comparison of which Feyerabend talks an even more plausible matter. Although he is faced with alien customs and is not equipped with an objective rationality that may provide him with a neutral standard of commensuration for his attempt to

---

53 On the debate about the nature of human nature, namely on the foundation of human nature (and, thus, of human practices), see the debate between Chomsky (who argues for an objective, biological, foundation for human nature) and Foucault (who, instead, denies any objective foundation for human nature) in Chomsky-Foucault (1994).

54 See above, pp. 74–6.

55 On the claim that Wittgenstein’s concept of form of life implies a form of relativism, see Barry (1996); see also Putnam (1992).

compare his own society with the alien one, the explorer of Feyerabend is well able to recognize that those foreign people perform the same kind of basic activities, both rational and ethical, which he himself and the members of his own society perform. When he is put in a foreign land, with rational and ethical practices so distant from his own, the explorer might be happy to realize that at least those foreign people perform some activities that he recognizes as familiar, that those people are equipped with a conception of what is rational and ethical, no matter how such a conception is different from his own. The explorer will see in fact that those foreign people speak, have emotional responses that they try to manifest with their behaviours, live in a community (let us imagine the discouragement of the explorer once he is confronted with the case of people not speaking any language, not showing any emotional response to somebody else's actions, and so on). The familiarity of such facts constitutes the common element on the basis of which the explorer can begin to construct that process of patient understanding that is itself the only realistic way we have for understanding what is alien from us.

The radical use of the concept of Wittgenstein's form of life provides us with the common element that makes the comparison between incommensurables (in the absence of a neutrally objective standard of commensuration and measurement) a credible process. In the light of the notion of form of life, two different cultures are believed to share some basic activities and attitudes (the radical use of the notion of form of life), although they endorse different conceptions of rationality and ethics (the milder use of the notion of form of life). It is important to remark that the sharing of such fundamental activities is not a sharing of any content (of rationality or ethics), but it is instead a sharing of some basic features of the human life as such. Since people who belong to societies adopting incommensurable perspectives do not share any objective rationality and/or ethics, the sharing of such fundamental activities between those people does not allow for any objectivism. But if the radical use of the concept of form of life helped us to reach a more perspicuous understanding of what incommensurability means and, hence, to ground relativism on more solid foundations, one could reasonably maintain that the indication of some basic features that identify human beings as such (with no reference at all to the sharing of any objective conception of ethics, or of rationality) is what is under scrutiny in the Myth of Protagoras in the *Protagoras*.

Both in the Prometheus and Zeus stages, Protagoras remarks that human beings are provided, respectively, with two kinds of basic techniques: the first ones are those skills that allow human beings to speak, display religious attitudes, build up clothes and houses, get food from the earth, and so on. The second basic technique human beings are provided is political technique, which allows them to construct political gatherings and live peacefully. As we have seen, in the first part of the *Protagoras*, Protagoras stresses at many points that all human beings need to be provided with all such basic features. It has also been argued that the sharing of such essential activities does not mean that all people have to talk the same language, build up the same kind of houses, believe in the same gods or, more essentially for Protagoras, have the same political and ethical conventions. It has in fact been maintained that on the basis of the ethical relativism that he defends in the *Protagoras* (and in the *Theaetetus*), different communities have differently incommensurable viewpoints in

ethics. Since people belonging to different communities speak different languages, such communities also have incommensurable conceptions of what is rational. Protagoras' use of the concept of *technê* in the Myth of the *Protagoras* then allows for an anti-objectivist reading of the Myth, on the basis of which by using the term '*technê*' Protagoras signifies all those rational and ethical activities that are typical of human beings as such; he does not assume that, in the performing of such basic activities, they need to share any objective conception of rationality and ethics.

If this is so, Protagoras' techniques can provide that kind of common element on the basis of which the comparison between incommensurables (be they societies or individuals) in the absence of any shared standard of rationality or ethics is a credible business. Let us remember that the Protagorean wise man of the Defence of the *Theaetetus* says he is able to replace the bad perceptions of the individual with more adequate ones as well as the pernicious conventions of a city with wholesome ones. Given his relativism, we have argued earlier that there are plausible reasons for maintaining that Protagoras' wise man is able to work in that way even in the absence of any objective standard of epistemological measurement and commensuration.<sup>56</sup> He can do so, it has been argued, because he is supposed to employ, with regard to both the unhappy individual and the unsatisfied society, that subtle process of understanding that Feyerabend illustrates in chapter 17 of his *Against Method* (the activities of Protagoras' wise man in the Defence of the *Theaetetus* are well consistent with the exegetical process of Feyerabend's explorer). The Myth of the *Protagoras* adds a further element about the basic character of some human activities, namely those indicated by Protagoras' techniques: Protagoras' wise man is able to make sense of the perceptual world of the unhappy individual (and to change such a world) through a careful process of understanding and in the absence of any objective standard of measurement because both the unsatisfied individual as well as the wise man perform the same basic perceptual activity (they both have perceptions on the basis of which they construct their comprehension of the world).

Similarly, Protagoras' wise man is able to make sense of the ethical code of a society different from his own (and to make it change such a code when unsatisfied with it) because he can draw a comparison between the incommensurable ethics of his society and of that under scrutiny (in the absence of any shared conception of morality) on the basis of the awareness that both societies have their own ethos and are political societies, namely all their members perform the same basic political activity by sharing (although differently) in political virtue (differently defined in different contexts). By expounding such an account of the birth, development and working of human society in the Myth of the *Protagoras*, the sophist shows his awareness that there is a common element between societies adopting incommensurable ethical codes, but that such an element does not imply the sharing of any objective conception of morality. This does not mean incomparability between the incommensurable ethics of different societies, yet it grounds comparability on anti-objectivist foundations, that is, in a relativist context.

---

<sup>56</sup> See above, pp. 80–2.

## Chapter 4

# Inconsistency, Self-Refutation and the Heart of the Matter

### Plato's Objections

Protagoras' relativism has revealed itself to be both a form of perceptual (hence cognitive) relativism and a form of ethical relativism. In both cases, the kinds of relativism that Protagoras is made to defend in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Protagoras* commit the sophist to holding original claims about the ontological status of perceived objects and ethical matters. Most of my interpretation of the relativism of Protagoras (and, I believe, of every reasonable interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine in Plato) comes in fact from a certain reading of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, in particular from a certain understanding of Protagoras' Man is the Measure maxim (with the *Protagoras* and the *Cratylus* providing less detailed and wide-ranging accounts of Protagoras' relativism). The Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* begins with Socrates first quoting Protagoras' obscure and authoritative sentence. Relying on the maxim, which seems to allude and give hints at the truth more than affirm it explicitly, Socrates constructs his detailed account of Protagoras' doctrine.

In the light of all this, I have suggested that Margolis' definition of robust relativism is particularly congenial for a serious understanding of the philosophical consistency of Protagoras' relativism. As stated in the 'Introduction', Margolis' robust relativism is a threefold thesis on the basis of which (a) relativism is an alethic doctrine (it says something about the nature of truth); (b) it is an epistemological doctrine (since it says something on the conditions of truth and knowledge); lastly, (c) it has an ontological commitment (since it postulates something about the structure of the world).<sup>1</sup> Protagoras' relativism (as described in the dialogues of Plato, especially in the *Theaetetus*) is an ancient form of robust relativism since (a) through the statement of Protagoras' maxim, it (indirectly) says something about the (obscure) nature of truth; (b) by showing how people know things, make sense of those events they happen to be faced with, conceive of ethical questions, it says something about the conditions of knowledge and truth; (c) by demonstrating how perceptual and ethical things really are, it says something about the structure of perceptual and ethical reality. If my understanding of Protagoras' relativism as an ancient form of Margolis' robust relativism is plausible, we will be faced with a rather complete and challenging form of (ancient) relativism, one that I take to be particularly disturbing for Plato and for any philosopher who defends objectivist

---

1 See above, p. 10.

views. What kind of philosophical objections could one raise against such a kind of relativism? More circumstantially, what philosophical objections does Plato raise against Protagoras' relativism?

Plato raises, I believe, two objections towards Protagoras' relativism, of different type and philosophical consistency. The first one is a real objection in so far as it identifies two categories, such as the healthy and the advantageous or useful, which constitute, on Plato's account, exceptions within Protagoras' relativism and its ontological commitments. Protagoras' perceptual and ethical relativism could stand firm, Plato argues, if one did not consider how objective the health of the individual and the advantage for the polis are. This objection will be dealt with in detail in the next paragraphs, but it can be stressed from now on that this kind of objection takes into account both the epistemological and the ontological aspects that, on my interpretation, Protagoras' relativism displays. The second kind of objection that Plato raises towards Protagoras' doctrine is the well-known self-refutation argument, which has attracted so much attention for its alleged subtlety.

The self-refutation objection will be dealt later in this chapter, since, I will argue, it is not a credible objection to Protagoras' (robust) relativism. This is the case, because Plato's self-refutation argument is directed against Protagoras' relativism interpreted as a purely epistemological position. But the relativism that the sophist is made to maintain throughout the *Theaetetus*, the *Protagoras* and the *Cratylus* is not (only) an epistemological position; rather, as just said, it is a complex philosophical doctrine that successfully combines alethic, epistemological as well as ontological issues. To treat Protagoras' relativism as an epistemological thesis not only misses the kernel of the whole question, but also contradicts the kind of philosophical interpretation that Plato himself gives to Protagoras' doctrine in his dialogues. In constructing the self-refutation argument, or, according to Sextus, in borrowing it from Democritus,<sup>2</sup> Plato, however, identifies what has been taken to be the perennial problem for most kinds of relativism, namely that regarding the consistency of its own formulation. Before considering the merit of Plato's objections to Protagoras' relativism, I wish to begin with some remarks about the charge of inconsistency that is nowadays levelled against relativism and whose philosophical origins are in the self-refutation argument of the *Theaetetus*. I wish to do so because one of the aims of this book is to assess Protagorean relativism *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, to evaluate the philosophical consistency of the kind of relativism that Protagoras is made to maintain in Plato's dialogues. Secondly, in considering at this stage whether the charge of inconsistency can be levelled against Protagoras' relativism, I will make some remarks that are preparatory for the analysis and assessment of the self-refutation argument.

---

2 See Sextus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 7. 389–390: 'One cannot say that every presentation (*phantasia*) is true, because this refutes itself, as Democritus and Plato taught in opposing Protagoras; for if every presentation is true, the judgement that not every presentation is true, being based on a presentation, will also be true, and thus the judgement that every presentation is true will become false.'

## Protagoras and Inconsistency

Following Plato and Democritus, some contemporary philosophers argue against relativism in the following way. The relativist says that truth (or ethics) is relative to something or somebody. But, when he says so, does he want us take his statement in a relative way or in an objective one? If he wanted us take his own claim in a relative way, why should relativism be an interesting doctrine? After all, if interpreted in a relative way, the claim of the relativist would be one among innumerable other relative claims, made from other philosophical standpoints as respectable as his own. Taken in such a fashion, nobody would reasonably be interested in relativism as a philosophical theory of truth or ethics, or as a theory at all. On the contrary, relativism would be an appealing doctrine if the claim that truth is relative were taken in a non-relative way, that is, in an objective way. Were this the case, relativism would defeat itself because the very claim that truth is relative, if taken as an objective claim, would count as the concrete example that truth is not relative. The inconsistency argument that I have now briefly summed up in its main lines makes thus relativism either an unappealing doctrine on the one hand or self-refuting on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Some authoritative contemporary philosophers have clearly said that they are uncomfortable with such a quick dismissal of relativism. In his last book *Invariances. The Structure of the Objective World* (Princeton 2001), Robert Nozick begins his lengthy treatment of the question of relativism by making clear how unhappy he is with the inconsistency charge.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of ancient philosophy, instead, have long insisted on how subtle Plato's self-refutation argument is (hence, how inconsistent Protagoras' relativism is), although they often diverge on how successful the argument is (the majority believing that it is not).<sup>5</sup> Is the formulation of Protagoras' relativism in the context of Plato's dialogues (and, perhaps, historically) really inconsistent? When we consider the case of Protagoras' robust relativism as described by Plato, its most general formulation is Protagoras' gnomic statement that Man is the Measure of All Things. Protagoras' maxim is not a statement one should take literally; it is a statement that does not explicitly say that, for instance, relativism is such and such, or that truth is relative to such and such. Protagoras' maxim does not explicitly state relativism with the same clear language that philosophers, at least analytic ones, employ when they expound their own arguments and positions.

My point here is that, in the context of Plato's dialogues, the level at which Protagoras formulates his own relativism and communicates it to the world is not that of a clear analytic statement, of the kind we are accustomed to in philosophy nowadays. Rather, Protagoras formulates his relativism by hints and allusions. In the *Theaetetus* Protagoras is made to state his (relativistic) doctrine by recurring to an oracular and gnomic style. (This is the reason why Plato makes Socrates protest

---

3 For the first charge see McDowell (1973: p. 171); for the second one see Passmore (1961: chapter 4); Burnyeat (1976b); Putnam (1983, arguing against the kind of relativistic views endorsed by Rorty) and Putnam (1992).

4 See Nozick (2001: p. 6); see also Margolis (1991: p. 4).

5 See below, pp. 136–38.

about the secrecy of Protagoras' doctrine.)<sup>6</sup> The gnomic style, as well as the oracular one, was typical of Greek philosophical speculation before Plato and the Sophists. Let us think, for instance, of Heraclitus, who says in one of his extant fragments: 'The Lord, whose oracle is in Delphi, neither says (*oute legei*), nor conceals (*oute kruptei*), but it gives hints (*sêmeinei*)' (22DKB93). Protagoras' maxim neither openly says what relativism is nor hides what it is; rather, it gives hints at it. If, by following a codified pattern in Presocratic philosophy, Protagoras adopted such an indirect style in formulating his relativism, one could not accuse him of being inconsistent, since Protagoras' enunciation of his relativistic views cannot be read in a relative or objective way but in an oblique one. Also from a historical point of view, we know that Protagoras began his book *Truth* or *The Over-Throwers* with his maxim that Man is the Measure of All Things;<sup>7</sup> one may suspect that in the course of his book he provided examples on the basis of which the reader could give sense to the initial maxim and, consequently, could understand that relativism was indeed a coherent doctrine to be maintained.<sup>8</sup> In short, to use a distinction typical of contemporary philosophy, both in the context of Plato's dialogues and historically Protagoras can be taken not to say what relativism is; rather, he showed it.

### Saying and Showing

The distinction between 'say' and 'show' has been drawn by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>9</sup> The *Tractatus* is composed by a series of sentences, each one numbered following the pattern of those possible logical implications one can establish between them. Strictly speaking, Wittgenstein does not argue for the logical plausibility of his sentences; this work is left to the intelligence of the reader, who is invited to establish logical connections between the sentences. Once he has done that and grasped the whole meaning of the book, the reader is invited 'to throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it' (6.54). The full paragraph from which this quotation is taken runs: 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.' The tension between what a proposition can actually say and what it can show is present throughout the *Tractatus*. When he wrote the *Tractatus*,

---

6 *Tht.* 152c10 (reported above, p. 34 n. 55); *Tht.* 162a: "[Protagoras' *Truth* is] simply an oracle speaking in jest from the impenetrable sanctuary of the book.' On the oracular tone of the opening of Protagoras' book, see also Lee (2005: p. 84).

7 See above, p. 35.

8 For a different view as regards the content of Protagoras' *Truth*, see Lee (2005: pp. 22–29). I believe there are very few historical grounds for maintaining Lee's views on Protagoras' *Alêtheia*.

9 On the *Tractatus*, I use the translation by C.K. Ogden (London 1922). On the distinction between 'saying' and 'showing', see Geach (1976) and Block (1975), where it is argued that Russell misunderstood the *Tractatus* because he failed to grasp correctly Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing.

Wittgenstein thought that there are some atomic propositions that can meaningfully describe the world of facts (objects and events); in logic and in ethics, however, he maintained that nothing can be said meaningfully. What logic and ethics mean can only be shown.<sup>10</sup>

In 4.1212, Wittgenstein says: 'What can be shown cannot be said', with reference to logic. At 4.12, it is said with reference to the reasons why logic cannot say anything: 'Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form. To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world'; 4.022 insists on the point: 'The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. And it says, that they do so stand.' At 5.61, it is added: 'Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.' On ethics, at 6.42 it is said: 'There can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher'; 6.421 adds: 'It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental.' Ethics shows itself, its meaning, but it does not say anything. This point is hinted at in two famous sentences of the *Tractatus*, 6.521 and 6.522. They run respectively: 'The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)'; There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.'

However brief and general my explanation of the difference between saying and showing in the *Tractatus* may have been, the point I wish to raise is that there is a (codified) difference in contemporary philosophy between, so to speak, the possibly different levels at which a proposition can be stated and its different levels of meaningfulness. A proposition can be taken to say something, namely to express how things are in the world, to picture how the world of facts is; or a proposition can be taken to show something, to show how things are, without picturing them. The distinction between the saying and showing of a proposition lurks behind almost any sentence of the *Tractatus* and has been widely accepted in contemporary philosophy as a plausible distinction. The metaphor of the ladder being thrown away after one's having climbed upon it has become so famous that if one goes to visit Wittgenstein's grave in the small cemetery in Cambridge where he is buried, one will find, among part of the grass which covers it, some small ladders as memorials put by visitors. If, as it happens, one allows Wittgenstein to make legitimate use of the philosophical distinction between the saying and the showing of a proposition, why should one not allow Protagoras to make use of a similar distinction?<sup>11</sup>

---

10 For Wittgenstein's own critique to the position that meaningful propositions somehow picture the world, with reference to Plato's *Theaetetus*, see §48 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. On Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, see Anscombe (1963: chapters 1, 2 and 5); Kenny (1973: chapters 3 and 4); Ayer (1985: chapter 2).

11 On how essential the distinction is taken to be for a correct interpretation of the *Tractatus*, see Nordmann (2005), often referring to the discussion originated by the famous and controversial article of Cora Diamond on the topic (Diamond 1988).

As stated earlier, Protagoras' maxim does not explicitly state a theory of relativism; one may suggest that it shows (the meaning of) relativism; with its cryptic style, the maxim can be taken to allude to relativism. The maxim is a gnomic sentence in which Protagoras condensed the sense of his relativism without stating it explicitly. To express ideas in philosophy through the use of an obscure language that needed a further and experienced interpretation was typical of Presocratic philosophy, which inherited it from Greek religion and from the Delphic cult.<sup>12</sup> Protagoras could well be thought to make use of such a philosophical custom. In this respect, Feyerabend makes a similar point when he remarks: '[Protagoras' maxim] can be interpreted in (at least) two ways: as a premise "entailing" well defined and unambiguous consequences; or as a rule of thumb adumbrating an outlook without giving a precise description of it. In the first case (which is the one favoured by logicians) the meaning of the statement must be established *before* it is applied, or argued about; in the second case (which characterizes most fruitful discussions, in the sciences and elsewhere) interpreting the statement *is part of* applying it, or arguing about it.'<sup>13</sup>

If the distinction between the different levels (of meaningfulness) at which a proposition can be stated is plausible, Protagoras will not be consistently charged of inconsistency when he states his relativism. He states it by using a gnomic sentence, that is, a maxim that show how things are, without enunciating relativism directly. This may be so from an historical point of view (Protagoras opened his book on truth with his obscure maxim) and in the context of Plato's dialogues (in the *Theaetetus* the lengthy treatment that Plato devotes to Protagoras' relativism is the result of Socrates' own understanding of Protagoras' oracular statement that Man is the Measure). In both cases, Protagoras can be taken as stating his relativism in an indirect way. If this is so, the charge of inconsistency that is commonly taken to trouble relativists of any nature will hardly be applicable to the unusual formulation of relativism that Protagoras makes.<sup>14</sup> This makes Protagoras' doctrine a kind of relativism that escapes the dangers and inconsistencies of which some forms of modern relativism are susceptible. At this point, let us see whether Protagoras' relativism is able to escape Plato's objection to it. Plato's real objection to Protagoras' relativism is that concerning the objectivity of the healthy and the advantageous: we will deal with this first, leaving the actual dealing with the (inappropriate) self-refutation argument for a subsequent section.

## Health

After having expounded Protagoras' perceptual and ethical relativism, there is a passage in the *Theaetetus* where Socrates sums up such relativism and identifies two categories that, in his opinion, are particularly worrying for the consistency of Protagoras' doctrine. Since it is a crucial passage where Socrates both recapitulates

---

12 On this historical derivation, see Colli (1975).

13 Feyerabend (1987: p. 45).

14 For another kind of philosophical defence of relativism from the charge of inconsistency, see Nozick (2001: pp. 6–17); see also Margolis (1991, especially pp. 40–54); Lee (2005: p. 56).

Protagoras' relativism and advances his own critiques to it, it is worth quoting the passage in full. The text runs:

[SOC.]: We may also suggest that the theory would stand firm most successfully in the position we sketched out for it in our attempt to bring help to Protagoras [that is, Protagoras' Defence]. I mean the position that most things are for the individual what they seem to him to be, for instance, warm, dry, sweet and all this type of thing (*hôs ta men polla hê(i) dokei, tautê(i) kai estin hekastô(i), therma, xêra, glukea, panta hosa tou tupou toutou*). But if the theory is going to admit that there is any sphere in which one man is superior to another, it might perhaps be prepared to grant it in questions of what is good or bad for one's health. Here it might well be admitted that it is not true that every creature – woman or child or even animal – is competent to recognise what is good for it and to heal its own sickness (*peri ta hugieina kai nosôdê ethelêsai an phanai mê pan gunaion kai paidion, kai thêrion de, hikanon einai iasthai hauto gignôskon heautô(i) to hugieinon*); that here, if anywhere, one person is better than another. Do you agree?

[THEOD.]: Yes, that seems so to me.

[SOC.]: Then consider political questions. Some of these are questions of what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom. But when it is a question of laying down what is to the interest of the state and what is not (*en de tô(i) sumpheronta heautê(i) e mê sumpheronta tithesthai*), the matter is different. The theory will again admit that here, if anywhere, one counsellor is better than another; here the decision of one city may be more in conformity with the truth than that of another (*poleôs doxan heteran heteras pros alêtheian*). It would certainly not have the hardihood to affirm that when a city decides that a certain thing is to its own interest, that thing will undoubtedly turn out to be to its interest (*ouk an panu polymêseie phesai, ha an thetai polis sumpheronta oiêtheisa hautê(i), pantos mallon tauta kai sunoisein*). It is in those other questions I am talking about – just and unjust, religious and irreligious – that they are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems. At any rate those who don't altogether assert Protagoras' theory carry on their philosophy on some such lines as these.<sup>15</sup> (171d9–172b7).

The passage comes after Protagoras' Defence, where the sophist has been made to illustrate and defend his own account of wisdom. As stated, on the basis of such an account wisdom is not incompatible with relativism, since individuals

---

15 Levett/Burnyeat translation integrated with J. McDowell's. The Greek of the last two sentences presents some problems: the verbal expression 'are ready to insist' (*ethelousin ischurizesthai*, 172b3–4) has no subject, making the translation of this penultimate sentence dubious. On the other hand, the syntax and the vocabulary of the last sentence is hard, so to make it susceptible to different translations. I accept McDowell's construction of the passage, where the subject 'they' for 'are ready to insist' is being constructed as the theorists of the theory which has been speaking so far; for another construction, see Burnyeat (1990, p. 33, n. 41: the general 'men' in place of 'they'; the last sentence is also differently translated, in the following way: 'And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom'). See also Chappell (2005: p. 120); Sedley (2004: p. 64).

and societies can well be the measure, respectively, of their own perceptions and ethical conventions. This does not imply that there is no wise man able to help those individuals and cities change their attitudes when they are not satisfied with them any more.<sup>16</sup> In the passage, Socrates restates Protagoras' perceptual relativism and its ontological commitment when he says: 'most things are for the individual what they seem to him to be; for instance, warm, dry, sweet and all this type of thing'. Protagoras' ethical relativism is stated when it is said: 'whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city'; or 'what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems'. The ontological commitment that such a kind of ethical relativism carries with it is also stressed: 'They [*sc.* the theorists of the theory which has been speaking so far] are ready to insist that no one of these things [*sc.* just and unjust, religious and irreligious] has by nature any being of its own.'<sup>17</sup>

The passage of the *Theaetetus* under scrutiny thus restates Protagoras' relativism as a whole by linking its perceptual side with the ethical one and, above all, by bringing out the inextricable connection between the epistemological aspect and the ontological one that is typical of such relativism. While doing that, at the same time Socrates raises his objection to Protagoras' relativism. He does so when he says that there is a (perceptual) category in which one can claim to be objectively wiser than another one. This category is the healthy, which Plato here associates with other perceptual qualities, as if to be healthy or not were a particular property of things. By contrast with what happens as far as the case of the warm, dry, sweet, and so on are concerned, in the case of the healthy, Socrates maintains, not every man is the measure of what is and what is not.<sup>18</sup> Despite the brevity of the passage, Socrates' point is clear: what he seems to suggest here is that the doctor, the real expert, is the measure of who is healthy and who is not. As far as the healthy is concerned, Socrates suggests, an objective knowledge is available, to assess what is healthy and what is not. This objective knowledge, namely that provided by medical science, is the concrete proof that, at least as far as the case of the healthy is concerned, the perceptual relativism that Protagoras' maxim endorses is not correct. On the healthy, Protagoras' perceptual relativism betrays its implausibility; this, at least, is what Plato believes.

The point about the objectivity of what is healthy, as well as the idea that the doctor is the one who is the correct measure of what is healthy, is dealt with again later, at 178b-c, in a more detailed way (so to allow the reader grasp more firmly Plato's point). Once again, Socrates restates Protagoras' relativistic views that each human being has the criterion of perceptual qualities within himself, 'so when he thinks that *they are* as he experiences them, he thinks what is true and *what really is* for him (*hoia paskei toiauta oiomenos, alêthê te oietai hautô(i) kai onta*)' (my emphasis: 178b6-7). (Note again the combination of the epistemological aspect of Protagoras' perceptual relativism with its ontological commitment.) Socrates invites

---

16 For this point, see 167b-c and above, pp. 62-5.

17 For the lengthy analysis of the ontological implications of this passage, see above pp. 91-2.

18 See 171e1-8.

his interlocutor Theodorus to consider the case of the things that will happen in the future; he asks him whether, on the ground of Protagoras' relativism, each man has the criterion of the things that will be going to happen (not of those that are in the present or that were in the past) within himself. Socrates wants to know whether, when a person thinks that certain things will be in the future, such things actually happen for him as he thought they would.<sup>19</sup> To make his point clear, he offers the example of a feverish heat. His example is this: suppose that someone, a common person, believes he is going to get a fever and that his temperature will rise up to the fever point. On the other hand, a doctor believes that it will not be the case that the person in question will get any fever (178c2–4). Socrates asks Theodorus whether the future will confirm the judgement of the common person or that of the doctor. Or, Socrates adds, 'are we to say that it will confirm both; that is, that for the doctor the man will not have a temperature or be suffering from fever, while for himself he will?' (178c5–7). Theodorus answers that this would be absurd. On the basis of Socrates' argument, the healthy is thus objectively determinable (by an expert).

Is Plato's objection on the healthy a good one and, above all, does such an objection refute Protagoras' perceptual relativism? The first remark to make is that Plato's objection on the healthy would leave Protagoras' perceptual relativism almost intact, if it were not for the special character of the healthy. Plato in fact seems to suggest that Protagoras' perceptual relativism holds good for all other perceptual categories such as the sweet and the dry, but not for the healthy. Protagoras may be right in holding that each perception is true for the one who has it; this is what is openly said later on, when Socrates affirms: 'So long as we keep within the limits of that immediate experience of the individual which gives rise to perceptions and to perceptual judgements, it is more difficult to convict these latter of being untrue [...]. Perhaps it is not possible to convict them at all; perhaps those who profess that they are perfectly evident and are always knowledge may be saying what really is' (179c2–9).<sup>20</sup> So, Protagoras' perceptual relativism may hold good for most perceptions, but not for the healthy ones. As a philosophical objection, Plato's objection on the objectivity of the healthy against Protagoras' perceptual relativism does not look to be *prima facie* very promising, since it leaves the strength of such relativism virtually untouched. But let us face with the core of Plato's argument about the objectivity of the healthy and see whether he is right in maintaining that the healthy is objectively determinable.

Plato's objection could be further spelt out in the following way: Protagoras' perceptual relativism assumes that perceptual things are for the individual as he experiences them to be. If an individual perceives the wind as hot, that wind is indeed hot for him. His perception is true for him; the wind is something for him, and something hot. But, Plato argues, this is not the case for the healthy. It cannot be maintained that if an individual perceives something as healthy, that thing will be indeed healthy for him (this is roughly Plato's argument at 172e). Why can it not

---

19 'What about things that are going to be in the future? Has a man the criterion of these within himself? When he thinks certain things will be, do they actually happen, for him, as he thought they would?' (178b9–178c2).

20 This passage is central for Reading A: see above, p. 30.

be the case? It is not the case that an individual is the measure of what is healthy for him because the doctor is the one able to determine (objectively) what is healthy. He does so independently of the perceptions of the individual (who may perceive something as healthy when it is objectively not) and by relying (possibly) on an objective expertise (this is roughly what one can deduce from Plato's argument at 178b-c, which is complicated by the reference to the future). Let us take the case of the heat (of the fever), the example that Socrates himself makes at 178c, and imagine that it happens in the present and not in the future. If someone perceives his body as feverishly hot for him, while the doctor judges that it is not, who will be right?

On Plato's account, the doctor is right.<sup>21</sup> Plato assumes that the doctor is right in assessing the feverish heat of the individual because the doctor assesses the singular case by relying on medical science. If Socrates' example is actualized in our contemporary world, the doctor will be imagined to check the temperature of the individual with the thermometer. If his temperature is above 37°C, the individual will be feverish, since medical science says that that is the case. But Greek medicine such as that of the time of Protagoras, and even of Plato, was not something similar to our medical science, namely a set of medical principles, believed to be objectively valid in every circumstance. Rather, Greek medicine was something similar to homeopathic medicine, namely a set of cures to be imparted, with an eye always kept on the subjective reaction of the patient. As said briefly in the previous chapter, Greek medicine was a technique, with a codified set of procedures to follow, so that the doctor was able to provide a diagnosis of the illness of the patient under scrutiny and a prognosis for it, without being provided with any (objective) medical science.<sup>22</sup>

Since patients are different, their reactions to cures are also different. In the pamphlet *Ancient Medicine*, the author stresses that, in performing his medical task, the doctor has to apply the set of methodological rules that is typical of (Greek) medicine. In applying such medical procedures, the doctor has to be careful to do so by having in mind that what counts most is the reaction of the patient to the applied cures. The doctor should be a sensitive person capable of applying the codified medical procedure with the capacity to evaluate the specific features of the case of the patient under scrutiny. This can be done not by referring to a falsely objective medical science, but by accumulating a vast experience of the field. The author of the pamphlet remarks that the criterion of the success of the cures is the '*aisthêsis*' (perception) of the body of the patient, how the patient perceives himself and his body after being cured.<sup>23</sup> If this is the case, the doctor will be very similar to the wise man of the Defence of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*; his action will be very similar to that of the Protagorean *sophos* (one of the analogies that Protagoras is made to draw

---

21 As seen on the previous page, the alternative that Plato himself offers to the question is not that the individual is right in his perception of the feverish heat; rather, Socrates asks: 'Are we to say it [*sc.* the future] will confirm both [*sc.* the doctor's judgement and the simple man's]; that is, for the doctor the man will not have a temperature or be suffering from fever, while for himself he will' (178c6-7). On Plato's approach to medicine, see *Republic*, Book III.

22 See above, pp. 101-2.

23 I have here summed up the argument of *Ancient Medicine*, chapter 9.

in the Defence is in fact with doctors).<sup>24</sup> In both cases, wisdom is obtained through the gaining of a wide experience on the field and is not provided by any objective science or knowledge; in both cases, the success is reached once the patient and the individual (unsatisfied with his perceptions) have successfully perceived their new pleasant conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Both Greek medicine arguably and Protagoras' relativism resist any objectivist imposition and put the particular reaction of the individual at the centre of their concerns.<sup>26</sup> If this is so, Plato's objection (about the healthy) against Protagoras' perceptual relativism will not be very convincing. As regarding Greek medicine, the common man is the one who has to say how hot he feels his body to be; how hot the common man perceives his body to be is what constitutes the measure of his illness. We can well conceive of people having a body temperature as high as 37.8°C and not feel any acute discomfort (my sister is one of those people). Of course, the bodily temperature of 37.8°C is classified by medical science as fever; we are so accustomed to this way of classifying our illnesses that we may have difficulties in conceiving that, on the contrary, the patient is the measure of his own illnesses and health, as Greek medicine taught us to think.<sup>27</sup> For the Greeks and for the kind of medicine practised in Ancient Greece at the time of Protagoras and throughout the fifth century BC, the doctor is an expert who, without referring to an objective science, evaluates the unhealthy perceptions of the patient and is able to restore healthy perceptions in him in place of bad ones, that is, perceptions that the patient perceives as healthy.

The patient and his reaction is thus at the very centre of the medical process in Greek medicine. This is the reason why Plato offers the possibility of both the doctor and the common man being right (on the question of the feverish heat of the latter) as the alternative to his own solution (according to which the real expert, the doctor, is right). In proposing such an 'absurd' solution (in the words of Theodorus), Plato combines with some awkwardness the patient-oriented approach typical of Greek medicine with the attempt to transform medicine into an objective science. To put together the perspective of the patient with that of the expert (who is such because he is provided with an objective science) means to combine the codified conception of medicine with a new objective one.

The healthy therefore is not plausibly treated as an exception for Protagoras' perceptual relativism, since for a Greek the measure of one's health is one's perceptions, not medical science. But Plato's objection on the healthy would be unpromising also if one conceived of medical science as the criterion through which one can measure the health of the individual. To assume that medical science is the paradigm to which all individual cases of illness need to be referred at and in the light of which they all are to be explained means to assume that medical science can provide an objective

---

24 See 167a1–6 and above, p. 62.

25 For this point, see above, p. 63; see also Schiappa (1991: pp. 166–167).

26 For the relationship between ancient medicine and the Sophistic movement, see Kennedy (1985) and Farrar (1988: p. 73).

27 On the patient being the measure of his own illness and health, see Feyerabend (1987: p. 48).

paradigm of assessment. But, alas, this is hardly the case. We just need to think of the difference between Western medicine and, for instance, Chinese medicine, to understand how much a medicine is the result of a specific cultural environment, of a certain form of life (intended in its mild sense). As Feyerabend remarks, in his *Notes on Relativism*: ‘The concept of health is empirical, or historical [...]. It contains what happened to generations of patients and physicians side by side with their ideas of what a good life is supposed to be. It depends on the customs of those desiring health, it changes in time and cannot be summarised in a definition.’<sup>28</sup> Georges Canguilhem, Foucault’s master, in his milestone *Le normal et le pathologique*, has shown that our own understanding of what is normal and what is pathological in medicine very much depends upon cultural factors.<sup>29</sup> He criticizes the claim of positivist medicine to define illness as a quantifiable state with respect to objective norms and, at the same time, he shows how illness is rooted in the particular and subjective experience of the individual. In his *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault himself shows how our conception of psychological normality and madness is deeply dependent upon (and explicable only in terms of) our historical and cultural context.<sup>30</sup>

Plato’s objection to Protagoras’ perceptual relativism on the objectivity of the healthy is thus badly thought and formulated, not only in terms of historical plausibility (given the anti-objectivist tone of Greek medicine) but also in terms of philosophical consistency.<sup>31</sup> Let us be faced with Plato’s objection to Protagoras’ ethical relativism, to see if such an objection on the (objectivity of the) advantageous is more plausible than that on the healthy.

## Advantage

For the sake of clarity, I will quote again the passage where Socrates formulates his own objection to Protagoras’ ethical relativism about the advantageous. The passage runs:

The theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes of these matters [*sc.* just and unjust and so on] and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom. But when it is a question of laying down what is to the interest of the state and what is not, the matter is different. The theory will again admit that here, if anywhere, one counsellor is better than another; here the decision of one city may be more in conformity with the truth than that of another. It would certainly not have the hardihood to affirm that when a

---

28 Feyerabend (1987: p. 69).

29 Canguilhem (1978, especially part II).

30 See Foucault (2001).

31 On Plato’s objections to Protagoras’ relativism on the healthy and on the advantageous/useful, see Burnyeat (1990: pp. 32–33); McDowell (1973: pp. 172–173); Chappell (2005: pp. 111–120). All these commentators stress that the healthy and the advantageous/useful are, on Plato’s opinion, two particularly problematic categories for Protagoras’ relativism. None of them, however, spend too much in considering whether these two categories are in effect so problematic for Protagoras’ relativism. On such an underestimate, see Brown (1993: 214).

city decides that a certain thing is to its own interest, that thing will undoubtedly turn out to be to its interest (172a2–b2).<sup>32</sup>

As can be easily seen, the formulation, on Plato's part, of the objection regarding the advantageous ('what is to the interest of the state') parallels that on the healthy. As far as Protagoras' perceptual relativism is concerned, Plato says that such relativism may hold true for those perceptual categories such as the hot, the dry, and so on, but that this is surely not the case for the healthy. As far as Protagoras' ethical relativism is concerned, Plato goes on, it may even be a plausible doctrine for those cases that concern the just, the religious and so on; Protagoras' ethical relativism will be, on the contrary, a faulty doctrine if one thinks of the case of what is advantageous for the state. In the latter case, what one state decides may be 'more in conformity with the truth' (172a7–8) than the decision of another state. How could it be that the decision one state takes on what is advantageous for itself is more in conformity with the truth than that of another state? That will happen if what one city decides (as far as the advantageous is concerned) turns out to be really to its interest. In this case, the decision would be in conformity with the truth. To make this point amounts to maintaining the view that the advantageous is objectively determined, since among all the possible decisions one city can take on what is best advantageous for it, on the basis of Plato's argument only one will be the correct one, namely the one that, being in conformity with the truth, will reveal itself to be effectively advantageous. In other words, among all the events that a city may regard as being advantageous for it, only the event that will objectively turn out to be such could consistently be seen as advantageous. The advantageous event is such on the ground that it is objectively such, not because one city takes it to be such from its relativistic standpoint.

Given these premises, the measure of what is really advantageous is not the city that takes the decision about what is best advantageous for it. Rather, the measure of what is really advantageous for the city lies in the conformity between what the city believes to be advantageous for it and the objective truth of events; there is no event whose being advantageous for the city depends upon being judged as such by the city. The measure of what is really advantageous depends upon the fact that the decision one city takes on the advantageous will reveal itself to be really (objectively) the most advantageous decision for it to take. This seems the point Plato wants to make when he remarks that the advantageous is a possible exception for the domain of Protagoras' ethical relativism, an exception that makes such relativism an inconsistent doctrine. The point about the objectivity of the advantageous is also dealt with at 177d–178a, in conjunction with a further argument on the future (178b–179b) that is aimed at demolishing Protagoras' own claim to be a wise man (that is, someone possessing that kind of wisdom portrayed in the Defence).

Plato's overall argument in the whole section 177d–179b is not clear, so it will be helpful for us to follow it step by step. Let us focus first on 177d–178a. Socrates begins this part by stating that Protagoras' ethical relativism may hold good as far as the just and the right are concerned, but that his relativism will not hold good for the case of what is useful (*ôphelimon*). Apart from the change of adjective (now

---

32 See above, p. 119.

Socrates speaks of ‘useful’, while at 172a-b he talks of ‘advantageous’), Socrates reaffirms the point he makes at 172a-b about Protagoras’ ethical relativism: ‘[People] are perfectly ready to maintain that whatever any community decides to be just and right, and establishes as such, actually is what is just and right for that community and for as long as it remains so established. On the other hand, when it is a question of what things are good (*peri de tagatha*), we no longer find anyone so heroic that he will venture himself to contend that whatever a community thinks useful, and establishes, really is useful, so long as it is the established order’ (177d1–5).

There are people, Socrates argues, who can consistently maintain that Protagoras’ ethical relativism holds good for those ethical categories such as the just and the right. When it is a question of the good, namely a question of the ethical principle that Plato takes to be so central for his ethics and to be objectively determinable, no one could consistently hold that whatever a city takes to be useful for itself, it is really useful. (The dichotomy alluded to in this passage is between the objectively identifiable Platonic good and the useful, which Protagoras’ relativism takes, like all other ethical categories, to be relatively determinable.) On the contrary, Plato wants to show that the useful belongs to the category of the good, namely of the things that are objectively determinable. To do so, Socrates argues in the following way: a community aims at the useful when it legislates (177e4–5); ‘a community always makes such laws as are most useful to it – so far as the limits of its judgement and capacity permit’ (177e5–6). It seems the case however that communities often fail to judge what is most useful to them (178a2–3). On these grounds, one ought to conclude that what is most useful for a community cannot be established in relation to (the judgement of) the community in question, as Protagoras’ ethical relativism maintains.

The argument of 177d–178a is thus a reformulation of the same argument sketched at 172a-b. In both passages, Plato argues against the possibility of a relativistic determination of the useful by appealing to cases of experience: on the grounds of Protagoras’ ethical relativism, indeed by following its precepts, cities often take decisions that will turn out later not to be useful in the concrete reality of events. What one city thought useful for it from its relativistic standpoint turns out to be objectively not such. How sound is Plato’s objection (against Protagoras’ ethical relativism) on the objectivity of the advantageous/useful? To being with, as in the case of the healthy, Plato suggests that Protagoras’ relativism could be maintained for cases that concern what is just, religious, and so on, but not as far as the advantageous/useful is concerned. This makes Protagoras’ ethical relativism hold good for many ethical categories except for the case of the advantageous/useful. Again, Protagoras’ (ethical) relativism would be left unchallenged, were it not for the advantageous/useful.

If, however, we want to consider the philosophical core of Plato’s objection, we will have to ask whether the advantageous/useful is in fact objectively determined. Is it true that an event can be judged as advantageous (for someone) only in the context of an objective judgement, namely of a judgement that is not grounded upon any particular standpoint? It is hardly so. Let us take the case of two people lying down under the sun on a Greek beach. One of the two people is suffering the effects of being under the influence and still feels weak. The other comes from a period of

heavy work and thus looks forward to relaxing. How can one describe the event of being under the sun on a Greek beach in terms of being advantageous or useful for the two people? The most adequate description one can offer is that to be under the sun on a Greek beach is hardly useful for the individual who is recovering from his illness, while it is greatly useful for the individual who needs a relaxing holiday.

The event on a Greek beach can be differently (and consistently) described as useful for the second individual and not for the first one. If this is the case, the category of the advantageous/useful will make sense when we take it in a relational way, that is, when we specify the person or thing for which a thing is useful or advantageous. A thing is useful if (and only if) it is useful for somebody. The logic of the concept of usefulness or advantage requires that we use it always in relation to some person. The point about the relativity of the advantageous/useful is dealt with in a short passage of the *Protagoras* (which Gregory Vlastos believes to be authentically Protagorean).<sup>33</sup> In the passage, Protagoras says: 'I know of many things that are disadvantageous (*anôphelê*) to humans, foods and drinks and drugs and many other things, and some that are advantageous (*ôphelima*); some that are neither to humans but one or the other to horses; some that are advantageous only to cattle; some only to dogs; some that are advantageous to none of these but are so to trees; some that are good for the roots of a tree, but bad for its shoots [...].'<sup>34</sup> Protagoras then concludes that the good is a 'multifaceted and variable thing (*poikilon ti estin to agathon kai pantodapon*)' (*Protagoras* 334a2–b7).<sup>35</sup>

The advantageous/useful is a relational concept in so far as it needs to be completed by a further expression, namely 'for X', to make sense. Among all the kinds of goodness that we may think of, the advantageous/useful is the most relational one. In this respect, a modern reader may well think of the celebrated account of goodness that Georg Von Wright offers in *The Varieties of Goodness* (London 1963). In his analysis of the particular kind of goodness that he terms as 'utilitarian' and that includes such categories as 'the useful', 'the advantageous' and 'the beneficial', Von Wright makes clear how these kinds of goodness need to be understood in term of 'good for somebody'.<sup>36</sup> He also asks whether judgements concerning utilitarian goodness are objectively true or false, to conclude that they cannot be objectively decided. He argues that in judgements of usefulness, one ought to judge how relevant is the action being judged for the end or aim one wants to pursue. He makes the following example. A man wants to become a runner and considers whether he has to give up smoking. He has then to consider the effects of smoking upon excellence in running. After having pondered the question, he may conclude that smoking

---

33 See Vlastos (1956: p. xvi, n. 32); see also Schiappa (1991: p. 166).

34 334a3–c6.

35 Lee (Lee 2005: p. 18) believes that this passage of the *Protagoras* shows the 'relationality' of goodness, which is, on her account, something different from relativism. While I agree with her that relativism and relationality are two different ideas, I do not see, however, why these two views are in contrast and cannot be integrated, as, for example, the Pyrrhonist tradition does (see Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I. 38–39, 135–140, 177, plus references in Lee 2005, p. 18, n. 18). In these pages I myself show how the idea of relationality may be well included into relativism.

36 See Von Wright (1963: pp. 41–62).

has a detrimental effect on the attainment of his end. Another man may pursue the same end, that is, excellence in running, but he may reach a different conclusion on smoking (he may be immune to the effect of tobacco for constitution, or because he is placed in different circumstances). On these grounds, one has to conclude that smoking is not a harmful habit for every man who pursues the same end. This makes judgements of usefulness and harmfulness largely subjective, namely depending upon the particular point of view of the person making the judgement.<sup>37</sup>

Judgements of usefulness cannot thus be easily seen as objectively determinable. As in the case of the healthy, Plato's objection regarding the objectivity of the advantageous/useful is thus hardly placed.<sup>38</sup> Why does Plato choose such an awkward category to show the objectivity of ethical judgements and, hence, the inconsistency of Protagoras' ethical relativism? In this respect, the hypothesis I propose is that, in raising his objection on the advantageous/useful, Plato is actually focusing on a key ethical category of the moral life of Protagoras' time as well as his own. If this hypothesis were correct, then Plato would aim to hit Protagoras' ethical relativism in its core, in its more appealing and mundane application, namely that regarding the advantageous/useful. To show the plausibility of this hypothesis, we need first to consider the initial part of the argument that Plato constructs against the legitimacy of Protagoras' wisdom (that is, *Theaetetus* 178b–179b).

After having completed at 178a his argument on the impossibility of determining the advantageous/useful from a relativistic standpoint, Socrates invites Theodorus to consider the whole question from a different point of view by remarking that the useful belongs to the category of things that are going to be in future time. In Socrates' words, 'when we legislate, we make laws that are going to be useful in the time to come' (178a8–9). On this basis, the useful seems to have a special relationship with the future. Socrates remarks that, on the grounds of Protagoras' maxim, each man has the criterion of perceptual things such as white, heavy within himself, so 'when he thinks that they [*sc.* these things] are as he experiences them, he thinks what is true and what really is for him' (178b6–7). What Socrates wants to know now is whether, on the grounds of Protagoras' relativism, each man has the criterion of the things that are going to be in the future within himself. Socrates asks: 'Has a man the criterion of these [*sc.* the things that are going to be in the future] within himself? When he thinks certain things will be, do they actually happen, for him, as he thought they would?' (178b9–c2). Socrates focuses on the potential application of Protagoras' maxim to cases that concern the future. One question is pressing at the moment: why should one have to consider the application of Protagoras' maxim to the future? One may suggest that Plato makes Socrates do so to construct an argument aimed at showing that only real experts are able to judge what is going to happen in the future in light of an objective knowledge.<sup>39</sup> But is that really the

---

37 See Von Wright (1963: p. 49).

38 For Von Wright's analysis of the notion of health and healthy, which he includes in the category of utilitarian goodness, and for an understanding of these notions in terms of subjective (although he is more cautious on the subjectivity of medical judgements), see Von Wright (1963: pp. 51–62, especially pp. 60–62).

39 For this point, see below, pp. 132–4.

case? The choice, on Plato's part, to focus on the future is as strange as that of choosing the advantageous as the ethical category for showing the objectivity of ethical judgements. I believe that the whole picture may become clearer, once we refer to the concept of 'democratic knowledge'.<sup>40</sup>

## Democratic Knowledge

What I propose in this paragraph is no more than an exegetical suggestion that in the future in his attempt to refute Protagoras' ethical relativism may shed some light on Plato's choice to consider cases of what will be advantageous/useful. I will confine myself to sketch such a suggestion briefly, since I do not want to move too far away from the crucial question of this chapter, that is, that on the philosophical consistency of Plato's objections to Protagoras' relativism.

Borrowing some ideas from Michel Foucault (regime of truth) and J.L. Austin (performative speech),<sup>41</sup> the historian Josiah Ober defines democratic knowledge as follows:

Athenian democracy depended for its functioning on a socially and politically constructed 'regime of truth' that we may call 'democratic knowledge' [...]. Democratic knowledge was grounded, in the language of J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, on understanding the world of politics as 'the conventional effects of conventional procedures'. Thus the conventional procedures of the democracy (deliberating and voting) led to conventional effects (decrees and judgements of the *dikastêria* to which the citizens adhered). These conventions were created and maintained through constant, collective, public practice. Moreover, democratic debate was open, and neither speakers nor decision makers needed to be acknowledged experts. The Athenians simply assumed that political truth was dialectical [...]. Athenian political culture was based on collective opinion rather than on certain knowledge, and on the assumption that opinion could be translated into practical reality through democratic political process. The enactment formula of the Athenian Assembly – *edoxê tô(i) demô(i)* – 'it appeared right to the citizenry' – defines the relationship between democratic knowledge and political action. What the demos collectively opined was given, through the act of voting, the status of fact [...]. Athenian political practice and policy remained flexible because in frequent meetings of the assembly and the people's court contrasting views were publicly aired. Through the process of open debate, the democratic way of knowing, speaking, and acting evolved in response to changing external circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

Ober's words look like a perfect historical comment on Protagoras' ethical relativism. As seen, when Socrates formulates such relativism, he says: '[Protagoras'] theory

---

40 As Burnyeat remarks (Burnyeat 1990: p. 246), 'I know of no sustained philosophical analysis of the extremely important argument about the future'. To my knowledge too, there is no article that convincingly explains why Plato makes Socrates consider, in the context of the discussion of Protagoras' relativism in the *Theaetetus*, the case of those things that are going to happen in the future. The hypothesis I will sketch emerged in a discussion with Christopher Rowe some time ago. For the classical treatment of future cases in ancient philosophy, see Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, chapter 9.

41 See mainly Foucault (1980) and Austin (1962).

42 Ober (1993: pp. 82–83).

may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city.’ Or he says: ‘It is in those other questions I am talking about – just and unjust, religious and irreligious – that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems.’<sup>43</sup> The resemblance between what Socrates says and Ober’s analysis of democratic procedures in classical fifth and fourth century BC Athens is striking and will become still more so, if we understand the two main features that Ober ascribes to democratic knowledge, namely that democratic knowledge seeks the most advantageous for the city and is forward-looking.

Ober examines one of the most striking cases of political discussion we can find in Ancient Greek literature, the Corcyrean/Corinthian debate held in the Athenian Assembly, reported in Thucydides’ *Histories*.<sup>44</sup> From the reading of that debate, we understand how democratic knowledge aimed at reaching what was taken to be most advantageous for the city in the future. That is, the decisions taken in public assemblies and during public discussion among the members of a community had as their goal that of establishing what seemed to be the most advantageous for their community in the future.<sup>45</sup> In delivering their speech, the Corcyreans try to convince Athens to become their allies, on the grounds that it would be very advantageous for the Athenians.<sup>46</sup> The focus on the concern about the future that political discussion inevitably carries with it may be found in the middle of the speech. As Ober puts it:

---

43 Respectively 172a1–5 and 172b1–6.

44 See Thucydides book I, 31–44.

45 The modalities of the discussion and thus the practical features of democratic knowledge (how it is formed and gained) are expounded, in Ober’s opinion, in Pericles’ Funeral Oration (Thucydides, 2.35.1–2.45.1). The core of the passage (2.40.2–3) runs: ‘We ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider words (*logous*) to be an impediment to actions (*ergois*), but rather [regard it] as essential to be previously instructed [...] by speech (*logoi*) before embarking on necessary actions (*ergoi*). We are peculiar also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who debate what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance (*amathia*) leads to rashness, while reasoned debate (*logismos*) just bogs them down’ [Ober’s translation]. Ober’s analysis of this passage (‘virtually a definition of democratic knowledge and its relation to enactment and action’) is found in Ober (1993: pp. 90–96).

46 Ober writes (Ober 1993, 87): ‘The first word in the Corcyreans’ speech is the abstraction *dikaion*, “just”, but their appeal is explicitly aimed at Athenian self-interest. The Corcyreans state (1.32.1) that they know they will fail in their goal if they do not clearly establish [...] that the alliance will be advantageous (*sumphora*) for Athens and that the gratitude (*charis*) of the Corcyreans will be secure [...]. The key to the Corcyrean argument is that the addition of Corcyra’s *dynamis* (specifically her naval force) to that of Athens will make Athens more powerful and better able to resist enemies (esp. 1.33.2, 1.35.5). Thus the Corcyrean argument is explicitly based on precisely those factors that Thucydides’ history attempts to elucidate – power and human nature as motivated by self-interest.’

In order to make their interest and power-based argument, the Corcyreans must instruct the audience on several general principles that determine advantage in interstate conduct: [...] allying with a state whose enemies are the same as one's own will bring great advantage (1.35.5) [...]. The Corcyreans also discuss the effects making or not making the alliance will have on the probable course of the future. They confidently predict that there will be a war [...]. If the Athenians do ally with Corcyra, this show of strength 'will cause your enemies to be more fearful' [...] and correspondingly less eager to launch an attack [...].<sup>47</sup>

Democratic knowledge was therefore a kind of knowledge (since it is a way by which human beings understood and made sense of events) that may be called 'democratic', for it had its birth in assemblies, where political decisions for an advantageous future were to be taken. This type of knowledge may be seen as one of the (theoretical) features of classical fifth and fourth century Greece and of its culture. More precisely, the idea of democratic knowledge may be thought of as fully operative in the Athens of Pericles, whose philosophical mentor was, possibly, Protagoras.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in formulating his objection against Protagoras' ethical relativism about the advantageous and linking such an objection with a philosophical treatment of cases that concern the future, Plato may be regarded as concentrating his critical effort (in his attempt to refute Protagoras) on a key ethical category that was so essential in the political debate of that time. It seems as though Plato wanted to show the implausibility of Protagoras' ethical relativism by considering the ethical category such as that of the advantageous/useful in the future that was so crucial in the political discussion of fifth-century BC Athens. On the basis of this interpretation, with his objection about the advantageous, Plato wants to reveal the weaknesses of Protagoras' ethical relativism in the key area of its application, that is, on what will be advantageous in the future. This is a clear sign that, in elaborating his critique against Protagoras' ethical doctrine, Plato has in mind the political interest of the idea of the advantageous. This makes his attempt to refute Protagoras' ethical relativism more grounded in terms of historical plausibility but not, as we have seen, more cogent in term of philosophical consistency.<sup>49</sup>

## **Illusory Wisdom**

Plato considers the application of Protagoras' doctrine to cases that concern the future not only because he (possibly) aims at criticizing Protagoras' relativism in the key area of its ethical application, but also, as I have briefly suggested earlier at p. 129, because he aims to show that the kind of wisdom the sophist claims to have is only apparent. Real experts are those who are able to say what is going to happen in the future (in their area of expertise), since they are equipped with an objective knowledge in their own field. As seen earlier, in the context of this argument about the future 178b–179b, Socrates restates the kind of critique of Protagoras'

---

47 Ober (1993: 87).

48 On Pericles and Protagoras, see above, p. 20.

49 If my hypothesis is plausible, the decision to portray the figure of the worldly man as the alternative to the real philosopher in the Digression, i.e. in the section exactly preceding 177d–179b, will make more sense.

perceptual and ethical relativism he initially sets forth at 172a-b: the healthy and the advantageous/useful are objectively determinable and, hence, constitute an exception for Protagoras' relativism. But Plato's overall aim in *Theaetetus* 178b–179b is to argue against the legitimacy of Protagoras' wisdom by considering cases, such as future ones, which inevitably show how illusory Protagoras' wisdom is. I will now briefly analyse the argument with which Plato concludes his argument about the future against the legitimacy of Protagoras' wisdom. The skeleton of Plato's argument in 178b–179b is this. According to Protagoras' doctrine, Socrates says, each man is the measure of what is going to happen in the future; by contrast, Socrates believes that only the expert is the fair measure of what is going to happen in the future. To make his point, Socrates illustrates one example, that of the doctor and the feverish heat,<sup>50</sup> and alludes very summarily to other cases, such as that of a grower (judging the sweetness of the next vintage), a musician (judging what will be in tune), of a cook (judging the pleasantness of a soon-to-be dinner) (178c9–d6). Since they are experts in their own field and ground their expertise on an objective basis, their judgements on what is going to happen in the future will turn out to be the correct ones. The list of Socrates' example is concluded with a reference to Protagoras, who, on the basis of his alleged wisdom, should 'predict better than any layman about the persuasive effect that speeches in a law court will have upon [people]' (178e3–6). Protagoras' wisdom in fact rests upon the assumption that 'he was a better judge than any fortune-teller – or anyone else – about what was going to be and seem to be in the future' (179a2–3). As seen earlier, 'what is useful' is concerned with the future; hence, Protagoras should be good in predicting what will turn out to be useful for a city. Since it 'would be generally admitted to be inevitable that a city when it legislates often fails to achieve what is most useful' (179a6–8), Protagoras is not the best judge of what will be in the future. His wisdom is thus only apparent.

A preliminary remark on Plato's argument is this: to claim that Protagoras' wisdom (in political matters) is ineffective since most cities (possibly adopting a relativistic standpoint) fail to achieve what is most useful amounts to holding that those claiming to possess objective knowledge in political matters and failing to predict what is going to be really most useful in the future are also deficient in any respectable wisdom. History is full of examples of politicians who believe that they have an objective grasp of the truth and act in accordance with this. Popper believes Plato is among these people.<sup>51</sup> If Protagoras' wisdom in political matters is illusory, the same remark will thus apply to Plato's wisdom. A more substantial point about the philosophical weakness of Plato's argument against the legitimacy of Protagoras' wisdom is this. On the basis of this argument about the future, Plato assumes that real experts are those who, by possessing an objective knowledge in their own area of expertise, are able to predict successfully how things will turn out to be in the future. Protagoras' relativism maintains, however, that there is no objective knowledge, of any kind, either of the past, or present or even future, available in human science.

As seen earlier, in the Defence Protagoras openly recognizes that there are real experts and wise men. His point is that such experts do not possess any objective

---

50 See above, pp. 121–2.

51 See Popper (1963).

wisdom (on my interpretation, Protagoras' wisdom originates from the wise man having experienced a variety of different situations).<sup>52</sup> What the Protagorean wise man does is to suggest to people and cities a new way of looking at things so that these would appear and be more satisfying. In adopting a new perspective on the world, people and cities remain the measures of, respectively, their own apprehensions and ethical conventions. (Suggestions have then been made to explain the kind of wisdom that Protagoras is made to defend in the Defence in terms of current debates about incommensurability and forms of life.)<sup>53</sup> From Protagoras' relativistic standpoint, there is no objective knowledge on the basis of which the wise man can predict what is going to happen in the future.

In the context of Protagoras' conception of wisdom as expounded in the Defence, each individual and city not only are, but always will be, the correct measure of, respectively, their new perceptual apprehensions and ethical conventions; in Protagoras' view, no objective expertise is needed to proclaim what will be the correct perception to have or the ethical convention to adopt in a given situation. As the case of the feverish heat demonstrates, the common individual will be the measure of how hot he feels to be at the moment or he will feel in the future, no matter what the doctor says about his feverish heat. The particular perception of the heat that the common man has will be the fundamental element on which the doctor will construct his own understanding of the illness of the patient and, hence, his diagnosis and prognosis. The same considerations apply to the case of the cook: the cook will never be able to say how pleasant the dinner he is cooking will be for the one who will eat it; the person eating the dinner will be the measure of its pleasantness. It makes no sense, at least for Protagoras, to speak of the pleasantness of a future dinner without any reference to the person eating it. On the basis of Protagoras' relativism, as often seen in the course of this book, nothing is if not in relation to somebody or something. This will (possibly) be the case also for situations that concern the future. An object will be perceived as hot and will be hot only in relation to the person who will perceive it as hot and for whom that object will be an hot object; it makes no sense to conceive that object in reference to itself (as Plato would want) and without any reference to the people experiencing it in the future. If, by Protagoras' relativism, things are such only for the people experiencing them as such and if reality is relative to somebody, it will make no sense to conceive of an (objective) expertise that is such as long as it pretends to assess (objectively) a reality that is not objectively determined, but only specified from a relativistic standpoint.<sup>54</sup>

This will also apply to cases that concern the future. With this remark, we go back to the question already debated about the availability of an objective standard of measurement through which we should conceive of the world and judge it. As seen

---

52 See 167d–168d, and above, pp. 64–6.

53 See above, pp. 80–1; 112.

54 On this point, see Lee (2005: p. 171): '[Plato's] argument [*sc.* the argument about the future] works against Protagoras if he not only allows comparison of different predictions, those of the expert vs. the layman, but also admits that there is a correct answer concerning whether the prediction comes true.' On my account, Protagoras does not need to concede any of these two points.

earlier, relativism claims that there is a non-objective way of conceiving reality and of making our judgements on it; hence, it has been argued, there is a non-objective way of comparing incommensurable realities.<sup>55</sup> This is possible, it is added, since there is no objectively determinable reality and no objective standard of judgement available to us. With his examples concerning future cases, Plato wants instead to show that there is indeed an objective (future) reality to assess and that there is an objective expertise, that is, something scientifically grounded, for assessing that reality. But Protagoras' (relativistic) conception of reality and of (non-objective) wisdom makes good sense without him being committed to any ontological or epistemological form of objectivism. The attempt to commit Protagoras' relativism to a form of epistemological objectivism is also what characterizes Plato's self-refutation argument.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Self-Refutation Argument**

The interpretation I have sketched of Plato's objections to Protagoras' relativism, as well as my own interpretation of such relativism, requires that I conceive of the self-refutation argument as a philosophical objection that one could hardly raise against Protagoras' relativism. The self-refutation argument in fact treats Protagoras' relativism as a purely epistemological doctrine while, on my account, it is something more complex and subtler, a doctrine involving alethic, epistemological and ontological issues. With this remark, I do not intend to say that any form of relativism is immune from the kind of objection that Plato raises in the self-refutation argument of the *Theaetetus* (or, indeed, of the modern counterpart of this argument, namely the inconsistency charge). What I want to stress is that Protagoras' robust relativism, together with the indirect way through which such relativism is formulated (that is, through the oracular style of the maxim), is immune from the charge of being self-refuting.<sup>57</sup> But, since Plato's self-refutation argument has been widely studied, it needs to be considered here, at least by identifying the logical pattern of Plato's argument and the related discussion aroused by it.

To begin with a preliminary linguistic remark, Socrates never qualifies his own attempt to refute Protagoras relativism in the course of the self-refutation argument (that is, *Theaetetus* 171a-c) as 'subtlest'. What is referred to as 'subtlest' (171a6) is a consequence of Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the Measure of All Things, namely the fact that, on Plato's grounds, Protagoras can be forced into disputing

---

55 See above, pp. 78–82; 110–12.

56 For opposite analyses and assessments of Plato's argument about the future, based on the acceptance of the two philosophical assumptions listed in the footnote n. 58 (assumptions that, on my account, Protagoras is not forced in any way to accept), see Burnyeat (1990: pp. 40–41); Chappell (2005: p. 132). For another account of Plato's argument about the future sympathetic with Protagoras, see Farrar (1988: p. 70); for an ingenious relativistic account of the problem of future contingents (demolishing most of Plato's assumptions), see MacFarlane (2003).

57 See above, p. 118.

his own doctrine.<sup>58</sup> Let us tackle the heart of the matter by seeing what Plato says at *Theaetetus* 170e7–171c7. The passage runs:

[SOC.]: It [Protagoras' doctrine] has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing that all men judge what it is.

[THEOD.]: Undoubtedly.

[SOC.]: And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion?

[THEOD.]: Yes, inevitably.

[SOC.]: But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong?

[THEOD.]: No.

[SOC.]: But Protagoras again admits that this judgement to be true, according to his own written doctrine?

[THEOD.]: So it appears.

[SOC.]: It will be disputed, then, by everyone, beginning with Protagoras – or rather, it will be admitted by him, when he grants to the person who contradicts him that he judges truly – when he does that, even Protagoras himself will be granting that neither a dog nor the 'man in the street' is the measure of anything at all which he has not learned. Isn't that so?

[THEOD.]: It is so.

[SOC.]: Then since it is disputed by everyone, the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all, not even for himself?

[THEOD.]: Socrates, we are running my friend too hard.

Before assessing the logical consistency of the argument, one preliminary remark to make concerns again terminological issues. In the passage, Socrates always speaks of 'judgement' (*doxa*) in connection with Protagoras' doctrine.<sup>59</sup> But this is hardly allowed by the preceding treatment of Protagoras' theory, that is, by the terms that Plato uses in connection with Protagoras' relativism in *Theaetetus* 152a ff (where the key word for Protagoras' relativism is perception, *aisthêsis*). In using 'judgement' when he takes Protagoras' maxim as expressing a theory of truth, Plato interprets the relativism of the sophist through his own 'conceptual scheme' (to use Davidson's expression),<sup>60</sup> for which a judgement is something objectively decided (whether to be true or false). In so doing, Plato takes Protagoras' doctrine as enunciating a theory of truth in an objectivist language. We have seen earlier reasons for supposing that,

---

<sup>58</sup> On the charge of self-refutation levelled by Plato against Protagoras' relativism, see also *Euthd.* 285e–288a.

<sup>59</sup> In the passage, Plato uses both the word '*doxa*' (judgement) and the verb '*doxazein*' (to judge).

<sup>60</sup> See Davidson (1984).

when it is meant to enunciate a relativistic doctrine, Protagoras' maxim does so in an indirect mode, which does not imply any objectivist commitment at all.<sup>61</sup>

On a more substantial level, that of the logic of the argument, the skeleton of Plato's argument is the following one:

- (1) On the basis of Protagoras' doctrine, every judgement is true (171a9).
- (2) Protagoras admits, however, that there are people who judge that his doctrine is false.
- (3) Protagoras must admit that it is true that his doctrine is false (171a6–8, inferring from 1 and 2).
- (4) Protagoras must admit that his doctrine is false (171b1, inferring from 3).

Sketched in this way, Plato's argument is logically valid. If every judgement is taken to be true (on the basis of Protagoras' doctrine), the judgement of those who hold that Protagoras' doctrine is false will be true as well; Protagoras' doctrine is thus shown to be false on the basis of its own application. The trouble, however, is that such an argument is inconsistent with the way in which Plato has sketched Protagoras' relativism in the preceding part of the *Theaetetus* and thus does not state Protagoras' doctrine correctly. In particular, the premise (1), namely 'On the basis of Protagoras' doctrine, every judgement is true' should be replaced by 'On the basis of Protagoras' doctrine, every judgement is true for the one whose judgement it is' (1\*). If (1) is replaced by (1\*), the conclusion (4) must be reformulated as follows: 'Protagoras must admit that his doctrine is false for those who judge it false' (4\*). The conclusion (4\*) is hardly a refutation of Protagoras' relativism, when this is understood in the way that Plato himself sketches in the *Theaetetus* (and *Protagoras*). In constructing the self-refutation argument against Protagoras, Socrates is thus guilty of *ignoratio elenchi* in (1), since he drops the qualifier 'true for' that is so essential to Protagoras' relativism.

This line of interpretation of Plato's self-refutation argument was first enunciated by George Grote more than a century ago, and later adopted and further developed by other influential scholars such as Kerferd, Vlastos, Runciman, Sayre, McDowell, Boston, Polansky and Chappell.<sup>62</sup> The self-refutation argument is not, on my interpretation, a suitable objection to be raised against Protagoras' relativism, and it is also a logically faulty argument, according to the majority of interpreters. Why is such an argument so (wrongly) celebrated? This is so because some believe that the real problem for relativism (the one about inconsistency I have earlier illustrated),<sup>63</sup> that of finding a coherent formulation without referring to an objective conception of truth, is first to be found in the kind of objection that Plato raises against Protagoras in the self-refutation argument.<sup>64</sup> The alternative line of interpretation of Plato's argument in fact assumes that, at least in formulating his relativism, Protagoras is

61 Against this point, see Lee's distinction between first and second-order beliefs, in Lee (2005: pp. 46–47; 56–57).

62 See Grote (1875), Kerferd (1949), Vlastos (1956), Runciman (1962), Sayre (1969); see also McDowell (1973), Polansky (1992), Chappell (1995).

63 See above, pp. 115–6.

64 On this point, see McDowell (1973: p. 171); Chappell (2005: p. 114).

committed to using an objective conception of truth.<sup>65</sup> Although being in a minority, the scholars believing that Plato is not faulty in the logic of his self-refutation argument against Protagoras include Myles Burnyeat, whose opinions and detailed analyses are highly influential in the field of ancient philosophy.<sup>66</sup>

In an important article, entitled 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*' that appeared in the *Philosophical Review* almost thirty years ago,<sup>67</sup> Burnyeat claims that, although he actually drops the qualifiers in arguing against Protagoras, Socrates is not guilty of *ignoratio elenchi*, since a correct interpretation of his argument requires that the reader restores the missing qualifiers. This is so because, on Burnyeat's interpretation, Protagoras cannot concede that the sentence 'Protagoras' doctrine is false for those who judge it false' (4\* above) and, at the same time, refuse to admit that his doctrine is false *simpliciter*, that is, in an objective sense. Luca Castagnoli, who has critically scrutinized all the most debated interpretations of the self-refutation argument of the *Theaetetus* in one of the most recent articles on the topic, has summed up Burnyeat's reconstruction of Plato's argument against Protagoras (and of the context of such an argument, that is, *Tht.* 170 ff) in the following way:

- (B1) Protagoras believes that all men judge what is the case (for them: qualifier supplied).
- (B2) Protagoras admits that his opponents judge that his MD (Measure Doctrine) is false.
- (B3) Protagoras must concede that it is true (for his opponents) that his MD is false (from (B1) and (B2)).
- (B4) Protagoras must concede that his MD is false (for his opponents) (from (B3)).
- (B5) Protagoras' opponents do not concede that their own judgement about MD is false.
- (B6) Protagoras must admit that his opponents' judgement that their own judgement about MD is not false is true (for them) (from (B1) and (B5)).
- (B7) Since (a) Protagoras has conceded that it is true (for his opponents) that his MD is false, (b) he must admit that his MD is false (*simpliciter*).<sup>68</sup>

There are two philosophical moves on which Burnyeat's interpretation rests: first, he restores the qualifiers in crucial points of Plato's argument, suggesting that this

---

65 A third possibility is that, in this section of the *Theaetetus*, Plato actually argues against infallibilism and not relativism: see Lee (2005: pp. 48–55).

66 For other scholars who believe Protagoras' relativism to be self-refuting, see Denyer (1991), Gottlieb (1992), Emilsson (1994) and Castagnoli (2004, although he maintains that Protagoras is self-refuted in a dialectical context, not absolutely). See also Lee (2005: pp. 52–56).

67 See also Burnyeat (1976a) and Burnyeat (1990: p. 30, where he seems to be more cautious as far as the success of Plato's self-refutation argument is concerned).

68 Castagnoli (2004: 16). I owe much to this article for my own understanding of the logic of the self-refutation argument.

is what Plato wants us do. This is highly disputable. Burnyeat is well aware of this when he remarks that his exegetical interpretation has been sketched ‘with more in view than that it should carry convictions as an account of Plato’s procedure [among others as respectable as his]: it embodies a philosophical claim which [...] should stand in its own right’.<sup>69</sup> The second move that allows Burnyeat to supply the qualifiers and to derive (B7b) from (B7a), that is, an objective claim from a relativistic one,<sup>70</sup> is, more fundamentally, the following one. Burnyeat interprets Protagoras’ maxim by adopting an objective conception of reality and truth. Burnyeat says: ‘Protagoras’ theory is, after all, a theory of truth and a theory of truth must link judgements to something else – the world.’<sup>71</sup> On this interpretation, something is true for X if and only if something is true in the world of X. I accept that, in the context of Protagoras’ doctrine and to bring out its substantive character, a link needs to be established between the epistemological and the ontological level. But this has to be done by referring to a relativistic conception of reality, of that very world in which a relativist is taken to live, not by recurring to an objective conception of truth and reality (indeed, my own understanding of Protagoras’ robust relativism as sketched in the previous chapters has, I hope, brought out this point).

Although he uses the metaphor of ‘private world’ to describe Protagoras’ theory,<sup>72</sup> in his analysis of Protagoras’ relativism Burnyeat adopts an objective conception of reality and truth; the beliefs that reality is one and truth is objective are what allows him to commit (wrongly) Protagoras to an objective conception of truth, that is, the notion of ‘true *simpliciter*’. Burnyeat openly says: ‘a proposition of the form “x is F” is true (relatively) for a person a, if and only if “x is F for a” is true (absolutely)’.<sup>73</sup> As David Bostock has remarked in his study on the *Theaetetus*, ‘[Burnyeat’s] way of interpreting “true for x” as meaning “true of x’s world” does not in fact treat the notion of truth as a relative notion, in an important way. On his account, a claim is taken to be “true for x” if and only if it is a description of x’s world which is true (of that world) in an absolute and objective way’.<sup>74</sup> But this is not true for Protagoras and his relativistic world, where truth and reality are all relative to the individual. To use an objective conception of truth and reality to argue against Protagoras can be easily charged with begging the question against Protagoras’ doctrine.<sup>75</sup>

69 Burnyeat (1976b: 189).

70 When there is nothing in the text that allows the derivation.

71 Burnyeat (1976b: 181). See also p. 195 where Burnyeat argues that Protagoras is thwarted by the ‘commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion’. This point is forcefully and, I believe, successfully denied by MacFarlane (2005).

72 The use of such a metaphor may be fully consistent with Protagoras’ relativism. On the point, see Matthen (1985: 34–42); see also above, pp. 00.

73 Burnyeat (1976b: 189, 193).

74 Bostock (1988: p. 91). See also Farrar (1988: p. 55 and 61–62); Mendelson (2002: pp. 12–23); Margolis (2003: p. 66); Lee (2005: p. 69).

75 More recently, David Sedley has claimed textual support for Burnyeat’s argument by opting at 170c2 for a dative ‘for Protagoras’ in place of the vocative ‘O Protagoras’ (Sedley 2004: p. 58). As he himself remarks (*ibidem*), Sedley’s textual choice is disputable: all modern editions adopt the vocative and just one codex has the dative. But, even if one is willing to accept Sedley’s choice, what is left to the reader to supply in Plato’s argument is, as in

Objectivists such as Burnyeat assume that there must be something objective on the basis of which we can measure and compare the incommensurable worlds of which the relativist speaks. Robust relativism shows its philosophical strength at this very point. By showing that there is an inextricable link between the epistemological and the ontological aspects of his doctrine, the robust relativist such as Protagoras is able to speak of ‘worlds’, that is, of entities each one with its own (incommensurable) ontology and epistemology. Although being incommensurable, these relativistic worlds are then seen as comparable. Once the relativist has provided a credible explanation of how incommensurable worlds can be compared even in the absence of an objective standard of commensuration, relativism becomes a more credible option to look at. This will not be the case if relativism shows itself to be only an epistemological position. If it is one, there will always be someone who will say relativism to be self-refuting on the basis of an objective ontology, of what is out there to know. In short, if there is one objective world to assess and live in, there will be also something objective, it could be argued, on the basis of which we can compare our incommensurable perceptions, judgements and ethical beliefs. If it is not robust, relativism will be thus fragile.

To go back to Burnyeat’s argument, in his own understanding of Plato’s self-refutation argument, Burnyeat thus believes that, in advocating his relativism, Protagoras has to be somehow committed to using, at some point, an objective conception of truth and reality, to enunciate and argue for his relativism. This has to be so because, as objectivists believe, the only way in which a relativist can formulate his relativism is by adopting an objective standpoint; relativism is thus self-refuting since its very formulation shows its inconsistency. What Burnyeat claims is another form in which the ‘Objective Standard’ objection could be presented.<sup>76</sup> The discomfort that Burnyeat seems to feel when he thinks of a relative conception of truth and reality is the same one Plato betrays for instance in the *Cratylus*, at 385e–386a. By making Protagoras’ relativistic conception of reality and knowledge alternative to his objective one, in the *Cratylus* Plato makes Socrates remark: ‘If it isn’t the case that [...] each thing has a being or essence privately for each person then it is clear that things have some fixed being or essence of their own. They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature.’ Plato cannot accept a philosophical conception on the basis of which things are made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. Why can one not maintain such a conception? Is that so incredibly weak? Or is it threatening?

In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Bernstein speaks of ‘Cartesian Anxiety’, that is, the kind of anxiety that Descartes describes himself as suffering from in his *Meditations* when he believes he can hardly find an Archimedean point on which to

---

Burnyeat’s case, a bit too much (see pp. 58–62. For instance, I do not see why Protagoras should concede that there are false beliefs in his world – p. 59).

76 On this objection, see above, pp. 74–7; on the ontological assumptions that Burnyeat analysis entails, see Margolis (1991: pp. 150–153).

ground objective knowledge.<sup>77</sup> Plato and Burnyeat may suffer from the same anxiety when they argue against the consistency of Protagoras' relativism by supposing that the sophist has to adopt an objective conception of truth and reality to formulate and maintain his relativism. Of course, there is no need to put the whole matter in a psychological light. The important point is that to refute relativism by suggesting that, at some point, relativism need to adopt an objective conception of reality and knowledge has the same logical consistency of the argument on the basis of which objectivism is inevitably formulated from a relativistic standpoint. In *Adversus Mathematicos*, Sextus formulates the latter charge when he deals with Protagoras' relativism. He says: 'At the opening of his book *The Down-Throwers* he [Protagoras] has proclaimed:

'Of all things the measure is man, of existing things that they exist and of non-existing things that they exist not'. And to this statement also even the opposite statement appears to bear witness. For if anyone shall assert that man is not the criterion of all things he will be confirming the statement that man is the criterion of all things; since the very person who makes the assertion is himself a man, and in affirming what appears relatively to himself he confesses that this very assertion of his is one the appearances relative to himself (7.60–61).<sup>78</sup>

If relativism can be consistently charged to be self-refuting, on similar grounds the same charge will consistently be levelled against objectivism. This makes clear that the dispute between relativism and objectivism cannot be solved with appealing to logic.<sup>79</sup> If this could be done, something more cogent than the self-refutation argument of the *Theaetetus* for refuting relativism should be found.

---

<sup>77</sup> See Bernstein (1983: pp. 16–20). For the part of his *Meditations*, where he describes his sense of fear and anxiety, see the first meditation (for a famous dispute about the role of madness in Descartes' *Meditations*, see Foucault 2001).

<sup>78</sup> In arguing against objectivism, Feyerabend repeats the same argument: see Feyerabend (1987: p. 46). A similar argument is offered by Lee: 'Relativists about truth bear no special burden of argument to explain what relative truth consists of – [...] non relativists will find it no easier to explain what a non-relativized concept of truth consists of' (Lee 2005: p. 68). See also Farrar (1988: p. 63).

<sup>79</sup> On the over evaluation of logic in arguing against relativism, see what Feyerabend says in Feyerabend (1975: chapter 17, paragraph 9).

## Conclusions

# The Tools of Relativism

This book has provided an account of Protagoras' relativism in the context of Plato's dialogues, together with a philosophical assessment of that relativism. In so doing, it has offered a close analysis of Plato's texts as well as reasons for making the doctrine of Protagoras that has emerged from such an analysis more coherent in terms of philosophical consistency. I have tried to do so by calling into question some philosophical assumptions on knowledge and reality and by relying on the exegetical power of the ideas of some authors (Kuhn, Feyerabend and Wittgenstein), whose names are associated, more or less adequately, with contemporary discussions on relativism. Throughout the book, I have adopted what I call a defensive approach towards Protagoras' relativism, since I believe that Plato is, at the same time, the best source for reconstructing Protagorean relativism but also its fiercest enemy. I think that this is the case because the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which Protagoras' relativism rests are extraordinarily challenging for many of Plato's objectivist assumptions about what counts as knowledge, reality and ethics. The relativism of Protagoras represents a real philosophical challenge for Plato (one could say the challenge), in so far as I take relativism to be the more wide-ranging and appealing alternative to objectivism and realism nowadays. The conviction that Protagoras' relativism is a real philosophical danger for Plato (and the related belief that relativism is also the most captivating philosophical alternative to objectivism in contemporary philosophy) is what has caused reference to Protagoras as Plato's Subtlest Enemy.

In the book I have offered a reconstruction of Protagoras' relativism in the context of Plato's dialogues, mainly in the context of the *Theaetetus*, by far the richest source available to us for identifying the core of Protagoras' philosophical doctrine. Together with exploring the philosophical content of Protagoras' relativism, in the light of the philosophical opposition just described between relativism and objectivism, in that dialogue Plato skilfully presents the philosophical doctrine of the sophist by focusing on its possible weaknesses (or, rather, he presents it in such a way that relativism looks a relatively weak philosophical position). This is the reason why I have taken a defensive approach towards Protagoras' relativism in the course of this book, since I have aimed to focus on the philosophical strength that (Protagoras') relativism is well able to display. This is also the reason why modern interpreters of the *Theaetetus* tend to follow Plato's approach towards Protagoras' relativism in seeing it as a less interesting or coherent philosophical position than I do. This may be inevitable if one focuses only on reconstructing Plato's own reasoning, its cogency or logical faults. In their detailed commentaries on the *Theaetetus*, philosophers such as McDowell, Burnyeat and Chappell mainly aim at analysing Plato's own arguments in that dialogue. They are sympathetic to Plato's attempt to find out what knowledge

is and have little interest in Protagoras' relativism in itself, but only in relation to the role that its discussion plays in the context of Plato's arguments aimed at finding out what knowledge is.

Protagoras' relativism, however, can be the philosophical focus of the *Theaetetus* for someone who is interested in relativism *per se*, and thus in the first sustained discussion of relativism that we can find in the history of philosophy. If it is understood only in conjunction with Theaetetus' first definition that knowledge is perception, the discussion of Protagoras' relativism in the *Theaetetus* will be seen only as the first attempt to define knowledge, and one that is soon to be scrutinized and refuted as implausible. However, if the lengthy treatment that Plato devotes to Protagoras' doctrine in the *Theaetetus* is analysed in its own right, on the basis of the kind of relativism thus attributed to Protagoras a picture of the world alternative to Plato's objectivist one can be obtained (together with an account of ethics, knowledge and reality). The real question that this book aims to answer is thus not how one can define Plato's own views on reality, knowledge, ethics and so on in the *Theaetetus* (and *Protagoras*). The real question I wish to answer is how one can conceive of the world of the relativist on the basis of Protagoras' doctrine as this is described in Plato's dialogues (or, rather, on the basis of a sympathetic interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine as described in Plato's dialogues).

In the world as Protagoras imagines it, each individual gains his own private and peculiar knowledge of events and things (the word 'knowledge' in this context does not express any super-concept to be elucidated by philosophers, but it refers to the way by which individuals make sense of the kind of reality they happen to be confronted with in the course of their lives). Each individual takes some things and events to be real and knows them on the basis of his own attitudes at the time in which he is faced with those things and events. Each individual thus lives in his own peculiar world, where some things and events are taken by him to be real. In the world of the individual as one may conceive it on the basis of Protagoras' doctrine, there is a strict link between what is real and what is known. By assuming that there is always an inevitable connection between what is taken to be real and what is known, Protagoras' (robust) relativism is philosophically strong in so far as it is able to expel any objectivist criteria from its own domain of application. In the world of the Protagorean individual, there is nothing objectively determinable, since knowledge and reality are decided on the basis of the relativist relation that things and events happen to have with a given individual, at a certain time and on the basis of his disposition towards the world at that time. Like all Greek philosophers, Protagoras believes that the world is 'out there', but he also maintains that its ontological structure cannot be determined objectively but is to be defined only in relation to the dispositions of the people knowing it. The combination of epistemological and ontological claims is what makes Protagoras' relativism an appealing doctrine and rescues it from a possible charge of self-refutation.

Although each individual has his own epistemological and ontological world to live in and no objective criteria are available to him for deciding what is objectively true and real, this does not mean that he is doomed to live in his own solipsistic world. The different worlds in which different individuals live their lives are comparable on the basis of a patient work of observation and confrontation that is possible without

reference to an objective and neutral criterion of measurement and commensuration. Through such a patient work of observation and confrontation, the individual is able to make better sense of his own world as well as making good sense of those of others. On the basis of this argument, the wise man is not the one who is objectively able to know how things are; rather, the wise man is the one who has the widest experience of the worlds where other people live. The same discourse applies to society. On the basis of Protagoras' relativism, each society is perfectly legitimate in adopting the ethical conventions that it prefers to adopt. Each society takes some matters to be ethical matters and thus legislates on them. What one society takes to be ethical is decided on the basis of purely relativist criteria, with no reference to objective standard of ethical measurement and evaluation. But this, again, does not mean that different societies are unable to compare their different ethical outlooks whenever they happen to be confronted one with the other. This is possible through the patient work of observation and confrontation of which I have just now referred to. By relying on such subtle work, societies are able to avoid applying their own ethical codes when they judge cultures and forms of life that are initially foreign and alien to them.

The patient work of subtle observation and careful confrontation that makes the comparison between the incommensurable realities of individuals and societies a rational matter in the relativist world of Protagoras and in the absence of an objective standard of commensuration will be even more comprehensible if one realizes that Protagorean individuals and societies perform the same basic epistemological and ethical activities. Although different individuals have different perceptual, emotional and cognitive apprehensions that are incommensurable, these individuals are equipped with the same epistemological capacity, namely that of having perceptions, emotions, beliefs. The same discourse applies to societies. Although different societies have different and incommensurable ethical codes, they are all ethical societies, that is, they all need to have an ethical agreement between their members on the basis of which they construct the peaceful cohabitation of these members. The point about the common sharing of the same basic epistemological or ethical activities between incommensurable individuals and societies is what one may grasp from an interpretation of Protagoras' Myth in the *Protagoras*. If this interpretation is plausible, Protagoras' relativism is philosophically stronger than some contemporary forms of relativism, since Protagoras' relativism makes the comparison of incommensurables in the absence of an objective standard of measurement and commensuration a more credible matter by suggesting that people with incommensurable standpoints at least perform some basic epistemological and ethical activities.

Besides providing Protagoras' relativism with more secure foundations, with its genealogical account of the birth and development of human society, the Myth of the *Protagoras* suggests that Protagoras sees both the epistemological and ethical activities that human beings perform as two tools by means of which they are better equipped for the living of their lives.<sup>1</sup> The kind of knowledge of which man is the

---

1 See *Prt.* 322a3–b8 (for the origin and scope of language) and d1–5 (for the origin and scope of ethics).

measure is best described as a tool by means of which the individual is able to make sense of the events of his own life. A child on an airplane is frightened at first by the noise of the engine of the craft; after having flown, he knows how things work for him and is thus able to make sense of the event of flying (to do so, he does not need to have any scientific knowledge of how the engine of the aircraft works or to assess whether what he feels corresponds to what other people feels when they are faced with the same situation). The child will not be frightened any more when boarding the next flight. This means that the kind of knowledge he is able to obtain when he is faced with the events of his life is just a tool by means of which he can make sense of what happens in his life and by means of which he is able to live a reasoned life (although one different from the kind of reasoned life that Socrates aimed to live).<sup>2</sup>

Without the capacity of knowing, human beings would be much less equipped to live their lives in full. As for ethics, the ethics of which societies are the criterion are best seen as a tool by means of which human beings are able to leave together peacefully. To agree between the members of a community that it is forbidden to kill another human being is just a way by means of which the members of that community have their life guaranteed to be safe. Without the existence of ethical values to be shared between members of a community, human beings would be doomed to live a much harder life.

If it conceives of knowledge and ethics as two tools of which human beings became equipped in the course of the development of their history, Protagoras' relativism will also be taken to display a certain empiricist and anti-idealist tone. Knowledge (and reality, truth and so on) and ethics are not super-concepts that, in the performing of their activities, philosophers need to clarify.<sup>3</sup> Rather, knowledge and ethics are two ways through which human beings can organize the events of their lives so to live better. If this is the case, knowledge and ethics will be understood in relation to the lives of those people employing them, that is, in relation to the cultural context of the societies defining them in the particular way that it is peculiar to such societies. Far from being super-concepts, knowledge and ethics can be easily defined in a relative way. What we can do in philosophy is to compare different concepts of knowledge and ethics, always culturally and relatively determined, to get a more adequate understanding of ourselves and of the society we live in (together with a better way of proceeding).<sup>4</sup> Seen in this light, Protagoras and his relativism side with all those thinkers, such as Feyerabend, Kuhn and Foucault, who, by propounding a conception of rationality and ethics always historically determined, refuse to accept any objective criteria for determining what is rational or ethical.

2 On Socrates' reasoned life, see Plato, *Apology* 38a.

3 On this point, see Wittgenstein (1953, §97): 'We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a *super-order* between – so to speak – *super-concepts*. Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door".'

4 On philosophy as history of ideas, see Rorty (1979: pp. 33–34).

If (Protagoras') relativism is the kind of philosophical position that I have been describing in the course of the book, why should one not take it seriously? I believe it is a serious and coherent philosophical position that has the same dignity of many other philosophical positions. Relativism also shows that we may be rational and ethical without accepting any objectivity of reason and values. This may frighten some people who, on the contrary, believe that to be such, reason and ethics have to be objective and objectively determined. In pretending their claim to be true, these people hardly realize that they put objectivism in an uneasy position. Objectivism has in fact to explain how it may be combined with the variety of epistemological and ethical practices, with which we are often confronted, without becoming an unpleasant imposition. If ethics are objectively determined, how can we make sense of all those ethical practices that are foreign to us without thinking they are ethically wrong (while ours are right)? How can we make sense of an objective reason if we do not conceive of that reason as our reason, that is, the kind of reason that grows out from our rational practices? Although it may be tempting (and also calming) to conceive of reason and ethics as something clearly identifiable on the basis of an objectivity valid in every context and circumstance, objectivism runs the risk of being highly insensitive to the variety of rational and ethical practices that is so important a feature of our contemporary world (and I believe of any world populated by human beings).

By contrast, relativism seems to be a philosophical option more suitable for the complexity of our world. Relativism is well compatible with the diversity of what different individuals and societies take to be rational and ethical, since it explains what is (taken) to be rational and ethical only in relation to the cultural context of the people experiencing those kinds of rationality and ethics. In relativism there seems to be little risk of an insensitive application of one's standard of rationality and ethics to foreign cultures and forms of life. Relativism is in fact respectful of other forms of life and societies, since the method of careful observation and commensuration it employs when two incommensurable cultures are confronted has to be employed only in the full respect of the cultural peculiarity of those incommensurable entities under comparison. In short, a society and culture adopting a relativist standpoint may well be able to make sense of another society and culture adopting an objectivist standpoint; the vice versa does not however apply. In short, relativism is more democratic than objectivism and, hence, more in consonance with the needs of a plural society as ours is.<sup>5</sup>

It may be questionable to contrast objectivism and relativism without referring to all other intermediate philosophical positions that try to be a compromise between these two.<sup>6</sup> But it is also true that objectivism and relativism represent the two philosophical polarities between which our thought keeps moving and defining itself. It is thus worth getting a philosophical grasp of relativism and objectivism and of their contrast. In this book I have tried to do so by relying on the first complete presentation of relativistic views in the history of thought. If my reconstruction and philosophical defence of it is a plausible one, Protagoras' relativism will work as a

---

5 On the relationship between relativism and liberalism, see Long (2004).

6 On this compromising effort, see Nagel (1986).

powerful antagonist of Plato's objectivism in Greek philosophy and may allow it to be employed in a modern perspective, so to give relativism a fairer chance in current philosophical debates. This will be even more the case if it is true that, as Margolis says, 'there has never been such a Protagorean age as our own'.<sup>7</sup>

---

7 Margolis (1991: p. 119).

# Bibliography

## Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations

- Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon 1924).  
— *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- Decleva Caizzi, F., *Pirrone. Testimonianze* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1981).
- Diels, Hermann, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edition, revised by W. Kranz, 2 vols (Zürich and Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1951–2).
- Dillon, J. and Gergel, T. (eds), *The Greek Sophists* (London: Penguin, 1999).
- Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).  
— *Vitae Philosophorum*, ed. M. Marcovich (Leipzig: Teubner, 1999).
- Jones, W.H.S. (ed.), *Hippocrates. Works: Ancient Medicine*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).
- Jouanna, J. (1990) (ed.), *Hippocrate. Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Belles Lettres).
- Long, A. and Sedley, D. (eds), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Müller, C. and T. (eds), *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, 5 vols (Paris: A. Firmin-Didot, 1841–1870).
- Plato, *Opera*, I, ed. J. Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900).  
— *Opera*, III, ed. J. Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905).  
— *Theaetetus*, trans. with notes by J. McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).  
— *The Theaetetus of Plato*, trans. M.J. Levett, revised by M. Burnyeat, with an introduction by M. Burnyeat (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990).  
— *Protagoras*, trans. with notes by C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).  
— *Opera*, I, Duke, Hicken, Nicoll, Robinson and Strachan (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).  
— *Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997).  
— *Cratylus*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).  
— *Protagoras*, trans. K. Bell and S. Lombardo, with an introduction by M. Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett 1997).  
— *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*, trans. with notes by T. Chappell (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005).
- Sextus Empiricus, *Works*, trans. R.G. Bury, 4 vols, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933–1935).

- Opera*, ed. H. Mutschmann, J. Mau, 4 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912–1954). Indices, vol. IV, ed. K. Janacek (Leipzig: Teubner, 1962).
- *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- *Against the Logicians*, trans. R. Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Sprague, R.K. (ed.), *The Older Sophists* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972).
- Waterfield, R. (ed.), *The First Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

### Modern Works

- Feyerabend, P.K., *Against Method*, 2nd edition (London: New Left Books, 1975).
- Kuhn, T., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).
- Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, German text and English translation by C.K. Ogden, with an introduction by B. Russell (London: Kegan Paul, 1922).
- *Philosophical Investigations*, German text and English translation by G.E. Anscombe and G.H. Von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).
- *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translation by David Pears and Brian McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001).

### References

- Adkins, A.W.H. (1973), 'Arete, Techne, Democracy, and Sophists: *Protagoras* 316b–328b', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93: 3–12.
- Alline, H. (1915), *Historie du texte du Platon* (Paris).
- Anscombe, G.E.M. (1963), *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson).
- Annas, J and Rowe, C.J. (eds) (2002), *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (Harvard: Harvard University Press).
- Austin, J.L. (1962), *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Ayer, A.J. (1936), *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz); 2nd edition with a Postscript (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946).
- (1956), *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- (1985), *Wittgenstein* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson).
- Baghramian, M. (2004), *Relativism* (London: Routledge).
- Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. (1980), *Understanding and Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (1984), *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Barker, A. (1976), 'The Digression in the *Theaetetus*', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14: 457–62.

- Barnes, J. and Mignucci, M. (eds) (1988), *Matter and Metaphysics* (Naples: Bibliopolis).
- Barry, D. (1996), *Forms of Life and Following Rules. A Wittgensteinian Defence of Relativism* (Leiden: Brill).
- Bastianini, G. and Sedley, D. (eds) (1995), *Commentarium in Platonis Theaetetus*, in *Corpus dei Papiri filosofici greci e latini. Testo e lessico nei papiri di cultura greca e latina. Parte III: Commentari* (Firenze: Olschki).
- Baxter, T.M.S (1992), *The Cratylus. Plato's Critique of Naming* (Leiden: Brill).
- Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin).
- Bernstein, R. (1983), *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Bett, R. (1989), 'The Sophists and Relativism', *Phronesis* 34: 135–170.
- Black, M. (1978), "'Lebensform" and "Sprachspiel" in Wittgenstein's Later Work', in Kirchberg (1978): 413–471.
- Block, I. (1975), 'Showing in the *Tractatus*: The Root of Wittgenstein and Russell's Basic Incompatibility', *The Journal of Bertrand Russell Archives* 13: 4–22.
- Bradshaw, D. (1998), 'The Argument of the Digression in the *Theaetetus*', *Ancient Philosophy* 18: 45–67.
- Broadie, S. (2003), 'The Sophists', in Sedley (2003): 73–97.
- Brown, L. (1993), 'Understanding the *Theaetetus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11: 199–224.
- Boghossian, P. (2006), *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Bostock, D. (1988), *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Brisson, L. (1975), 'Le mythe de Protagoras. Essai d'analyse structurale', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 20: 7–37.
- (1994), *Platon, les mots et les mythes* (Paris: La Découverte).
- Burnyeat, M.F. (1976a), 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', *Philosophical Review* 85: 44–69.
- (1976b), 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', *Philosophical Review* 85: 172–195.
- (1977), 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 24: 7–16.
- (1979), 'Conflicting Appearances', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65: 69–111.
- (1982), 'Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed', *Philosophical Review* 90: 3–40.
- (1990), see *Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations, Plato's Theaetetus*.
- Cairns, D. (1992), *Aidos. The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Cambiano, G. (1991), *Platone e le tecniche* (Roma-Bari: Laterza).
- Canguilhem, G. (1978), *The Normal and the Pathological* (Dordrecht: Reidel); second revised edition in French, Paris 1966.
- Campbell, L. (1883) (ed.), *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Carroll, L. (1982), *Through the Looking-Glass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Casterano, G. (ed.) (2002), *Il Teeteto di Platone* (Naples: Loffredo).
- Castagnoli, L. (2004), 'Protagoras Refuted. How Clever is Socrates' "most clever" Argument at *Theaetetus* 171a-c?', *Topoi* 23: 3–32.
- Chappell, T. (1995), 'Does Plato Refute Himself?', *Classical Quarterly* 45: 333–338.
- (2005), see *Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations, Plato's Theaetetus*.
- Chomsky, N. and Foucault, M. (1994), *De la nature humaine: justice contre pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Cole, A.T. (1966), 'The Apology of Protagoras', *Yale Classical Studies* 19: 101–118.
- (1972), 'The Relativism of Protagoras', *Yale Classical Studies* 22: 19–45.
- Colli, G. (1975), *La nascita della filosofia* (Milano: Adelphi).
- Cooper, J.M. (1970), 'Plato on Sense Perception and Knowledge', *Phronesis* 15: 123–146.
- Cornford, F.M. (1935), *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Davidson, D. (1984), 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Davison, J.A. (1953), 'Protagoras, Democritus and Anaxagoras', *Classical Quarterly* 47: 33–45.
- Decleva Caizzi, F. (2002), 'Da Protagora al Discorso Maggiore: *Teeteto* 171d5–172c1', in Caserano (2002): 63–85.
- Demont, P. 'L'efficacité en politique selon le *Protagoras* de Platon', unpublished.
- Denyer, N. (1991), *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (London: Routledge).
- Diamond, C. (1988), 'Throwing Away the Ladder', *Philosophy* 63: 5–27.
- Doppelt, G. (1982), 'Kuhn's Epistemological Relativism: An Interpretation and Defense', in Krausz and Meiland (1982): 113–146.
- Dover, K.J. (1976), 'The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society', *TALANTA* 7: 34–41.
- Emilsson, E.K. (1994), 'Plato's Self-Refutation Argument in *Theaetetus* 171A-C Revisited', *Phronesis* 39: 136–149.
- Farrar, C. (1988), *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Feyerabend, P. (1962), 'Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism', in *Scientific Explanation, Space and Time*, vol. 3 of Minnesota Studies in *The Philosophy of Science*, H. Feigl and G. Maxwell (eds) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- (1978), *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books).
- (1987), *Farewell to Reason* (London: Verso).
- Fine, G. (1996a), 'Protagorean Relativisms', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 10: 211–243.
- (1996b), 'Conflicting Appearances: *Theaetetus* 153d–154b', in Gill and McCabe (1996): 105–131.
- (1998), 'Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*', *Apeiron* 31: 201–233.

- (1999) (ed.), *Plato 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2006), *Plato on Knowledge and Forms. Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Foot, P. (1982), 'Moral Relativism', in Krausz and Meiland (1982): 152–166.
- Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: The Harvester Press).
- (1985), 'La vie: l'expérience et la science', in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 40: 3–14.
- (2001), *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge); original edition, Paris 1961.
- (2002), *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge); original edition, Paris 1969.
- Gallese V. and Stamenov, M. (2002), *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company).
- Geach, P. (1976), 'Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein', *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 12: 54–70.
- Geertz, C. (1979), 'From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding', in Rabinow and Sullivan (1979): 144–171.
- Giannantoni, G. (1997), 'Il concetto di ΑΙΣΘΣΙΣ nella filosofia cirenaica', in Giannantoni and Narcy (1997): 181–203.
- Giannantoni, G. and Narcy, M. (1997), *Lezioni Socratiche* (Naples: Bibilopolis).
- Gill, C. (2002), 'Dialectic and the Dialogue Form', in Annas and Rowe (2002): 145–170.
- (2006), *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Gill, C. and McCabe, M.M. (eds) (1996), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Goldschmidt, V. (1986), *Essai sur le Cratyle* (Paris: Vrin).
- Goodman, N. (1978), *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- Gottlieb, P. (1992), 'The Principle of Non-Contradiction and Protagoras: The strategy of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* IV 4', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 8: 183–198.
- Gronewald, M. (ed.), *Didymos der Blinde, Psalmenkommentar*, Teil III: 29–34 (Bonn 1969).
- Grote, G. (1875), *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: John Murray).
- (1888), *A History of Greece*, vol. VII, chapter 67 (London: John Murray).
- Guthrie, W.K.C. (1957), *In the Beginning. Some Greek Views on the Origin of Life and the Early State of Man* (London: Methuen).
- (1969), *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hadot, P. (2002), *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); original edition, Paris, 1995.
- Harman, G. (1982), 'Moral Relativism Defended', in Krausz and Meiland (1982): 189–204.
- (1989), 'Is There a Single True Morality?', in Krausz (1989): 363–386.
- Havelock, E.A. (1957), *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

- Herodotus (1998), *The Histories*, translation by R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Holland, A.J. (1973), 'An Argument in Plato's *Theaetetus*: 184–186', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 91: 97–116.
- Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (eds) (1982), *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Hoyningen-Huene, P. (1993), *Reconstructing Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Hume, D. (1978), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, P.H. Nidditch (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Irwin, T.H. (1977), 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *Philosophical Quarterly* 27: 1–13.
- Jaeger, W. (1948), 'On the Origin and Cycle of the Philosophic Ideal of Life', in *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development* (Oxford 1948): 426–61.
- Janik, A. and Toulmin, S. (1973), *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster).
- Jones, W.H.S (1946), *Philosophy and Medicine in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press).
- Kahn, C. (2002), 'On Platonic Chronology', in Annas and Rowe (2002): 93–127.
- Kennedy, G. (1985), 'Sophists and Doctors in Greek Enlightenment', in Easterling, P. and Knox B.M.W. (eds), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), vol. I: 421–431.
- Kenny, A. (1973), *Wittgenstein* (London: Penguin).
- Kerferd, G.B. (1949), 'Plato's Account of the Relativism of Protagoras', *Durham University Journal* 42: 20–26.
- (1967), 'Protagoras', in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. IV, 732–741.
- (1981), *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Kethcum, R.J. (1992), 'Plato's Refutation of Protagorean Relativism: *Theaetetus* 170–171', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10: 73–105.
- Kirchberg, L. (1978), *Wittgenstein und sein Einfluss die gegenwärtige Philosophie* (Wien: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky).
- Kirk, R. (1999), *Relativism and Reality* (London: Routledge).
- Klagge, J.C. and Smith, N.D. (1992) (eds), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kölbel, M. (2003), *Truth Without Objectivity* (London: Routledge).
- Krausz, M. and Meiland, J.W. (eds) (1982), *Relativism. Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).
- Krausz, M. (1989) (ed.), *Relativism. Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).
- Kripke, S. (1982), *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Kube, J. (1967), 'TEXNH und APETH. Sophistisches und Platonisches Tugendwissen', *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie* 12: 9–78.
- Kuhn, T. (1970), 'Theory-Change as Structure-Change: Comments on the Sneed Formalism', *Erkenntnis* 10: 179–199.

- Lakatos, I. and Musgrave, A. (eds) (1970), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lee, M. (2000), 'The Secret Doctrine: Plato's Defence of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19: 47–86.
- (2005), *Epistemology after Protagoras. Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Levi, A. (1940), 'The Ethical and Social Thought of Protagoras', *Mind* 49: 281–299.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1952), *Race et Histoire* (Paris: Flammarion).
- Long, G. (2004), *Relativism and the Foundations of Liberalism* (Exeter: Imprint Academic).
- Longrigg, J. (1980), *Greek Medicine from the Heroic to the Hellenistic Age: A Sourcebook* (London: Duckworth).
- Luce, A.A. and Jessop, T.E. (eds) (1949), *The Works of George Berkeley* (London: Thomas Nelson, vol. II).
- MacFarlane, J. (2003), 'Future Contingents and Relative Truth', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 321–336.
- (2005), 'Making Sense of Relative Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 109: 321–39.
- MacIntyre, A., 'Relativism, Power and Philosophy', in Krausz (1989): 181–204.
- McCabe, M.M. (1994), *Plato's Individuals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- McDowell, J. (1973), see *Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations, Plato's Theaetetus*.
- Mackenzie, M.M. (1986), 'Putting the *Cratylus* in its place', *Classical Quarterly* 36: 124–150.
- Malcolm, N. (1958), *Dreaming* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Margolis, J. (1991), *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2003), *The Unraveling of Scientism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Maguire, J. (1977), 'Protagoras or Plato? II: the *Protagoras*', *Phronesis* 22: 104–122.
- Matthen, M. (1985), 'Perception, Relativism and Truth: Reflections on Plato's *Theaetetus* 152–160', *Dialogue* 24: 33–58.
- Mejer, J. (1968), 'Plato, Protagoras and the Heracliteans: Some Suggestions concerning *Theaetetus* 151d–186e', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 29: 40–60.
- Mendelson, M. (2002), *Many Sides. A Protagorean Approach to the Theory Practice, and Pedagogy of Argument* (Dordrecht: Kluwer).
- Morrison, J.S. (1941), 'The Place of Protagoras in Athenian Public Life (460–415 BC)', *Classical Quarterly* 35: 1–16.
- Muir, J.V. (1982), 'Protagoras and Education at Thurioi', *Greece and Rome* 29: 17–24.
- Nagel, T. (1996), *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Nannini, S. (2007) (ed.), *Il Teeteto di Platone* (Milan: Rizzoli, forthcoming).
- Narcy, M. (1995) (ed.), *Platon: Théétète* (Paris: Flammarion).
- Nestle, W. (1942), *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (Leipzig: Teubner).
- Nietzsche, F. (2000), *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); original edition, Leipzig 1872.
- Nill, J.M. (1985), *Morality and Self-Interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus* (Leiden: Brill).

- Nordmann, A. (2005), *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Nozick, R. (2001), *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Nutton, V. (2004), *Ancient Medicine* (London: Routledge).
- Ober, J. (1993), 'Thucydides' Criticism of Democratic Knowledge', in Rosen, R.M. and Farrell, J., (eds), *Nomodeiktēs: Greek Studies in Honour of Martin Ostwald*, Ann Arbor 1993, 81–98.
- (1998), *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens. Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- O'Sullivan, N. (1995), 'Pericles and Protagoras', *Greece & Rome* 42: 45–50.
- Palmer, J.A. (1999), *Plato's Reception of Parmenides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Passmore, J. (1961), *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth).
- Perry, J. (ed.), (1975), *Personal Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Piaget, J. (1999) *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (London: Routledge), original edition, Paris 1923.
- Piccirilli, L. (1997), 'Il primo caso di autodafé letterario: il rogo dei libri di Protagora', *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica*, n.s. 15: 17–23.
- Polansky, R. (1992), *Philosophy and Knowledge: A Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press).
- Politis, V. (2004), *Aristotle and the Metaphysics* (London: Routledge).
- Popper, K.R. (1963), *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I: *The Spell of Plato* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- (1970), 'Normal Science and Its Dangers', in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970).
- Price, A.W. (1997), *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, revised edition with appendices (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Putnam, H. (1983), 'Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized', in H. Putnam, *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 229–247.
- (1992), 'Wittgenstein on Reference and Relativism', in *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Quine, W.V.O. (1969), *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Rabinow, P. and Sullivan, W.M. (eds) (1979), *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Reed, N.H. (1972), 'Plato on Flux, Perception and Language', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 18: 65–77.
- Rhees, R. (2004), *In Dialogue with the Greeks* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- Rorty, R. (1979), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Rowe, C. (2003), 'Plato', in Sedley (2003): 98–124.
- (2007), *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Rue, R. (1993), 'The Philosopher in Flight: the Digression (172c–177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11: 71–100.

- Runciman, W.G. (1962), *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Russell, B. (1912), *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Ryle, G. (1966), *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Sankey, H. (1993), 'Kuhn's Changing Concept of Incommensurability', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 44: 775–791.
- (1997), 'Incommensurability: The Current State of Play', *Theoria* 12: 425–445.
- (1999), 'Incommensurability – An Overview', *Divinatio* 10: 1–13.
- Sayre, K.M. (1969), *Plato's Analytic Method* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- Schiappa, E. (1991), *Protagoras and Logos* (Austin: University of South Carolina Press). Second edition, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 2003.
- Schiller, C.S. (1907), *Studies in Humanism* (London: Macmillan).
- (1908), *Plato or Protagoras? Being a Critical Examination of the Protagoras Speech in the Theaetetus with Some Remarks upon Error* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Schirren, T. (1999), *Aisthesis vor Platon. Ein semantisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Problem der Wahrnehmung* (Leipzig: Teubner).
- Schofield, M. (1972), 'A Displacement in the Text of the *Cratylus*', *Classical Quarterly* 22: 246–253.
- (1986), 'Euboulia in the Iliad', *Classical Quarterly* 36: 6–31.
- Sedley, D. (1982), 'The Stoic Criterion of Identity', *Phronesis* 27: 255–275.
- (1996), 'Three Platonist Interpretation of the *Theaetetus*', in Gill and McCabe (1996): 79–103.
- (1999), 'The ideal of Godlikeness', in Fine (1999): 309–328.
- (2002a), 'Socratic Irony in the Platonist Commentators', in Annas and Rowe (2002): 37–57.
- (2002b), 'The Collapse of Language? *Theaetetus* 179c–183c', in *Plato. Online Journal of Philosophy* (<http://www.nd.edu/~plato/>), issue 3.
- (2003a), *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (2003b) (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (2004), *The Midwife of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Snell, B. (1953), *The Discovery of the Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell); original edition, Hamburg 1946.
- Swoyer, C., 'Relativism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2003 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2003/entries/relativism/>>.
- Szlezàk, T. (1993), *Reading Plato* (London: Routledge).
- Taylor, A.E. (1926), *Plato. The Man and His Work* (London: Macmillan).
- Taylor, C.C.W. (1991), see *Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations, Plato's Protagoras*.
- Toth, I. (1997), *Aristotele e i fondamenti assiomatici della matematica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero).
- Unger, P. (1984), *Philosophical Relativity* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Untersteiner, M. (1996), *I Sofisti* (Milan: Mondadori).
- Versenyi, L. (1963), *Socratic Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

- Von Wright, G.H. (1963), *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Vlastos, G. (1956), *Introduction to Plato's Protagoras* (New York: Liberal Arts Press).
- Waterfield (2000); see *Ancient Works: Texts, Collections and Translations*.
- Waterlow, S. (1977), 'Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171a6–c7', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59: 19–36.
- White, N. (2002), *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2003), 'Plato: Epistemology', in Shields, C. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell): 100–117.
- Winch, P. (1958), *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- (1972), *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958), *The Blue and Brown Books*, ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (1969), *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. Von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (1977), *Culture and Value*, ed. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Woodruff, P. (1985), 'Didymus on Protagoras and the Protagoreans', *Journal of History of Philosophy* 23: 484–485.

# Index

- advantage/usefulness 124–9, 130–1  
Alcibiades 21, 94  
analytical approach 12–13  
*Ancient Medicine* (Hippocrates) 102,  
122–3  
anthropological approach 9, 74, 75, 76,  
77–81  
anti-idealist and empiricist accounts 83–5  
Apology of Protagoras *see* Defence  
Aristotle 39–40, 42, 50–1, 53, 67, 68, 83,  
86, 87  
Athenian Assembly 99, 129, 130–1  
Athens 17, 19–21, 23–4, 27, 131  
Austin, J.L. 129
- Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. 108–9  
Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. 41  
Bernstein, R. 9–10, 72, 84, 139–40  
Bett, R. 10, 11  
Bostock, D. 138  
Broadie, S. 49, 85  
Burnyeat, M. 30–1, 39, 51–2, 53, 77, 93,  
137–8, 139, 140
- Callias 27, 94  
Canguilhem, G. 124  
cities  
    ethical relativism 90, 91–2, 103, 124–5  
    stages of development 96, 99, 100–1  
    *see also* societies  
codification/categorization 101–2  
cognitive activities 69, 70, 82  
cognitive relativism 8, 10, 89, 113  
Conflicting Appearances 46  
conventionalism vs relativism 56–7  
Cornford, F.M. 1  
'Cosmic Porridge' ontological view 40–1  
*Cratylus* (Plato) 2, 4, 43, 51, 55–8, 82, 139  
Critias 94  
deceptive wisdom 24, 28  
Defence 29, 59–66, 86–7  
    incommensurability 75, 76, 77, 79–80  
    vs two fragments 66–9, 97–8  
    the wise man 90, 112, 132–3  
'defensive' approach 12  
democratic knowledge 129–31  
democratic societies 99–100  
Democritus 17, 53, 86, 87, 114, 115  
dialogues (Plato) 12–14  
Digression, *Theaetetus* (Plato) 25–8, 84  
Diogenes Laertius 5, 19, 20, 21, 67, 93
- education/teaching 3–4, 21–5, 27–8  
    Defence 59–60, 61–2, 63–4, 65–6  
    Myth 94–5, 96–8  
    Socratic midwifery 22–3, 24–5, 31  
emotivism 104–5  
empiricist and anti-idealist accounts 83–5  
Epimetheus (stage of social development)  
    95, 98  
epistemological relativism 93  
epistemology 4, 10, 11, 31–3, 82–7 *passim*  
    Defence 60–1, 62–3  
    *see also* incommensurability; knowledge  
ethical judgements 29, 89, 103  
ethical objectivism 100  
ethical relativism 89–93, 100–6 *passim*,  
111–12, 125–6  
    *see also* objections  
ethics and knowledge 143–4  
*Euthydemus* (Plato) 4, 64  
excellence *see* virtue  
'experience-near' and 'experience-distance'  
    concepts 78  
'falsehoods' 24  
Feyerabend, P. 8, 9, 65, 70, 72–3, 74–5, 76,  
77–81, 106, 107, 110, 111, 112, 124

- flux, doctrine of 2–3, 29, 30–1, 39, 40, 41, 42–3  
 and differing dispositions 44–53
- Foot, P. 103
- forms of life 105–9, 124  
 radical use 109–12
- forms, metaphysics of 3, 35–6
- Foucault, M. 124, 129
- Geertz, C. 78
- God as Measure of All Things 26
- goodness 127–8
- ‘Greek Enlightenment’ 85
- Harman, G. 90
- health 118–24
- Heraclitus 2–3, 29, 30–1, 39, 42, 48, 51–2, 116
- Hermes 96, 99, 100
- Hermogenes 55–8
- Hippocrates 23–4, 94  
*Ancient Medicine* 102, 122–3
- historical plausibility of Plato’s  
 reconstruction 5–12, 42–4, 93–4
- historical Protagoras 19–22
- historical-anthropological approach *see*  
 anthropological approach
- ‘Humpty-Dumpty’ thesis 55–6
- illusory wisdom 131–4
- ‘imitations’ 24
- incommensurability 9, 69–74, 143  
 ‘objective standard’ objection 74–7,  
 106, 133–4, 139  
 possible answer 77–82  
 social/cultural differences 105, 106–7,  
 110, 111–12
- inconsistency 24–5, 44, 115–16, 118
- indeterminacy, ontological *see* ontological  
 indeterminacy
- individual/community dichotomy 56, 103–5,  
 119–20
- judgement 59–61, 62, 81–2, 127–8, 135,  
 136, 137–8  
 ethical 29, 89, 103  
 perceptual 60–1
- justice and respect 96, 99–100, 101, 102
- Kahn, C. 14
- Kerferd, G.B. 68
- Kirk, R. 40–1
- knowledge 4, 82–3, 142–4  
 and ethics 143–4  
 as perception 29, 30–1, 33, 34–5, 38, 41,  
 42, 47–8  
 Sophist approaches to 22, 23, 24, 32, 35  
*see also* epistemology
- Kuhn, T. 9, 70, 71–2, 74, 75, 76, 106, 107, 110
- language 30, 31–2, 55  
 historical-anthropological approach  
 77–8  
 ‘Humpty-Dumpty’ thesis 55–6  
 names 55–6  
 political virtue and technique 100, 101  
 private 76–7  
 saying and showing 116–18  
 semantic conventionalism vs relativism  
 56–7
- language games 107–9
- Lee, M. 52, 53, 85, 86, 87, 93
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 9
- logic and ethics 116–17
- logos* 67, 68–9, 94, 95
- MacIntyre, A. 9
- Man is the Measure of All Things  
 (Protagoras’ maxim) *see*  
 Measurement Doctrine
- Margolis, J. 10–11, 70–1, 86, 113–14
- Mathen, M. 8
- Measurement Doctrine 1, 4, 5, 10–11, 114  
 advantage/usefulness 128–9  
 and *Cratylus* 56, 57–8  
 and differing dispositions 44–53  
 education/teaching 24–5  
 ethical relativism 89, 91  
 gnomic/oracular statement 34, 115–16,  
 118  
 historical plausibility 42–3, 44  
 inconsistency 24–5, 44, 115–16  
 ontological indeterminacy 39, 41  
 ontological relativism 33–8  
 perceptual relativism 120  
 philosophical importance 29–31  
 self-refutation argument 134–6, 138  
*see also* Defence

- medicine 102, 122–4  
   *see also* health  
*Meno* (Plato) 20  
 midwifery metaphor of education 22–3,  
   24–5, 31  
 Morrison, J.S. 19–20, 20–1  
 Myth, *Protagoras* (Plato) 93–8, 99–100,  
   101–2, 112  
  
 names 55–6  
 Nozick, R. 115  
  
 Ober, J. 129–31  
 objections 113–14, 118, 121–2, 124, 131,  
   134–7  
   ‘objective standard’ 74–7, 106, 133–4, 139  
 objectivism  
   ontological 58, 91  
   vs relativism 1, 2, 4, 9–10, 145–6  
 ontological indeterminacy 38–41, 42–3,  
   57–8, 59  
   and differing dispositions 44–53  
 ontological objectivism 58, 91  
 ontological relativism 31–8, 51, 58, 59, 91  
 ontology 10, 11  
*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Sextus) 36–7, 50  
  
 Parmenides 2, 3, 5, 38, 84, 85  
 perception 1–2, 9, 24  
   childhood development 73–4  
   Defence 59–66  
   knowledge as 29, 30–1, 33, 34–5, 38,  
   41, 42, 47–8  
   visual 44–7  
   *see also* incommensurability  
 perceptual conditions 49–50  
 perceptual infallibility 59–60  
 perceptual judgements 60–1  
 perceptual privacy 48–9, 57  
 perceptual relativism 35, 36–7, 39, 50–1, 59,  
   89, 92–3, 103, 120, 121  
 Pericles 19, 20, 95, 99, 131  
*Phaedo* (Plato) 3  
*Philebus* (Plato) 1, 2, 32  
 philosopher vs worldly thinker 26–8  
 philosophical importance of Measurement  
   Doctrine 29–31  
 ‘philosophical relativism’ 9, 10  
   *see also* relativism  
  
 Philostratus 19  
 Piaget, J. 73–4  
 Plato  
   approaches to 12–14  
   historical plausibility of reconstruction  
     5–12, 42–4, 93–4  
   objections 113–14, 118, 121–2, 124,  
     131, 134–7  
   *see also specific works*  
   pleasure 1–2, 4, 32  
 Plutarch 20  
 polis *see* Athens; cities  
 political virtue  
   and technique 100–1, 102  
   and wisdom 90, 94–8, 102  
 Popper, K. 75, 77, 132  
 practical wisdom 95, 98  
 Presocratic philosophy 34, 61, 67, 83–4,  
   116, 118  
 privacy, perceptual 48–9, 57  
 private language 76–7  
 Prometheus (stage of social development)  
   95, 98–9, 100, 111  
 Protagoras  
   biographical details 19–22  
   writings 5  
*Protagoras* (Plato) 1, 4, 5, 8, 13–14  
   biographical details 20, 21  
   Diels-Kranz (DK) edition 5–7  
   ethical relativism 93, 103, 111–12  
   Myth 93–8, 99–100, 101–2, 112  
 punishment 96–7  
 Pythagoras 3  
  
 radical use of forms of life 109–12  
 relativism 8–12  
   cognitive 8, 10, 89, 113  
   ethical 89–93, 100–6 *passim*, 111–12,  
     125–6  
   ontological 31–8, 51, 58, 59, 91  
   perceptual 35, 36–7, 39, 50–1, 59, 89,  
     92–3, 103, 120, 121  
   robust 10–11, 15–16, 86, 113–14, 134,  
     139  
   scope of Protagoras’ 82–7  
   tools of 141–6  
   vs conventionalism 56–7  
   vs objectivism 1, 2, 4, 9–10, 145–6  
   ‘relativism of fact’ 85, 86

- relativist epistemology 93  
 respect and justice 96, 99–100, 101, 102  
 robust relativism 10–11, 15–16, 86, 113–14, 134, 139  
 Ryle, G. 25
- saying and showing 116–18  
 Secret Doctrine 29, 38–9, 48, 49, 51–3  
 self-refutation argument 29–30, 114, 115, 134–40  
 semantic conventionalism vs relativism 56–7  
 sense perception 60–1, 65  
 Sextus 34, 36–7, 42, 49–50, 51, 114, 140  
 showing and saying 116–18  
 Simonides' poem 94  
 'social construction of reality' 41  
 societies  
   democratic 99–100  
   development stages 95, 96, 98–9, 100, 101–2, 111  
   different 92, 105–7, 110–12  
   individual/community dichotomy 56, 103–5, 119–20  
   *see also* cities  
 Socrates 1–2, 3–4, 21–2, 83–4, 113, 131–2  
   advantage 124–6, 128  
   approaches to knowledge 31–2, 34–5, 36, 41, 42  
   *Cratylus* 55, 139  
   Defence 59–60, 61, 65–6, 68–9, 76, 90  
   democratic knowledge 129–30  
   education/teaching 22–5, 94–5, 96–7  
   ethical relativism 90, 91, 92, 125–6  
   health 118–21, 122  
   and Hermogenes 55–8  
   Measurement Doctrine 29–30, 44  
   Secret Doctrine 29, 38–9  
   self-refutation argument 134–5  
   theory of perception 38, 44–7, 48, 49, 57  
   virtue 94–5  
   worldly thinkers vs philosophers 27–8  
 Socratic midwifery 22–3, 24–5, 31  
 Sophists 3, 20  
   approaches to knowledge 22, 23, 24, 32, 35  
   training and philosophical education 22–5  
   as worldly thinkers vs philosophers 27–8
- subjectivism  
   definition 103  
   and emotivism 103–5  
 subtle thinkers 1, 2  
 Swoyer, C. 10, 11
- teaching *see* education/teaching  
 technique 101–2, 111, 112  
 virtue and 98–102, ?0  
*Theaetetus* (Plato) 1–2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10–11, 13–14, 141–2  
   approaches to knowledge 22, 23, 24  
   Digression 25–8, 84  
   education 28  
   ethical relativism 89–93, 100, 102, 103  
   illusory wisdom 132  
   incommensurability 75–6, 77, 82  
   self-refutation 135, 136, 137  
   wisdom 24–6  
   *see also* Defence; Measurement  
   Doctrine; Socrates  
 Theodorus 44, 91, 120–1, 128, 135  
 Thucydides 130  
*Truth* (Protagoras) 34
- usefulness/advantage 124–9, 130–1
- virtue 4, 23–4, 94  
   and technique 98–102
- visual perception theory 44–7, 57
- Williams, B. 30  
 Winch, P. 9  
 wisdom 24–6, 28, 32, 76, 79–81, 119–20  
   deceptive 24, 28  
   Defence 59–60, 61, 62–4  
   illusory 131–4  
   political virtue and 90, 94–8, 102  
   practical 95, 98  
 wise and efficient politician 90  
 wise man 90, 105, 112, 132–3, 143  
 Wittgenstein, L. 9, 31, 55–6, 76–7, 107–10, 116–17  
 worldly thinker vs philosopher 26–8  
 Wright, G. Von 127–8
- Zeus (stage of social development) 96, 98, 99, 100, 111