

PROTAGOREAN RELATIVISM IN THE THEAETETUS OF PLATO

By Sverre Hertzberg

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates meets the young and promising mathematician Theaetetus, and the conversation quickly becomes an investigation into the nature of knowledge. When first asked what he thinks knowledge is, Theaetetus answers, after a couple of failed attempts and a brief lecture about the nature of definitions, that knowledge is perception (K=P) (151e). This leads to a long conversation about the assumptions behind this definition, tied up to Heraclitean ontology (HO) and Protagorean epistemology, or the Measure Doctrine (MD). In order to give a good account of Theaetetus' definition, Socrates combines these three views, such that K=P is understood in terms of HO and MD.

Later on, Socrates attempts to disprove K=P, and provides us with several arguments against this understanding of knowledge. Perhaps the most famous argument comes towards the end, and is often referred to as the "self-refutation argument". This passage has been subject to much debate in recent years, particularly the question of whether this is a good argument.

In this paper, I will start by presenting Protagorean relativism as it is presented in the dialogue, and the connection between the epistemology and the ontological framework, inspired by the interpretation of Myles Burnyeat. Secondly, I will present the self-refutation argument and consider some different ways of understanding the passage associated with it. The aim of this paper is to explore one interpretation of the argument which holds that the argument is not intended by Plato to be an absolute refutation, but rather to point out how it is unable to hold its ground when put under scrutiny. I want to suggest that, although this leads to a somewhat weaker conclusion, this

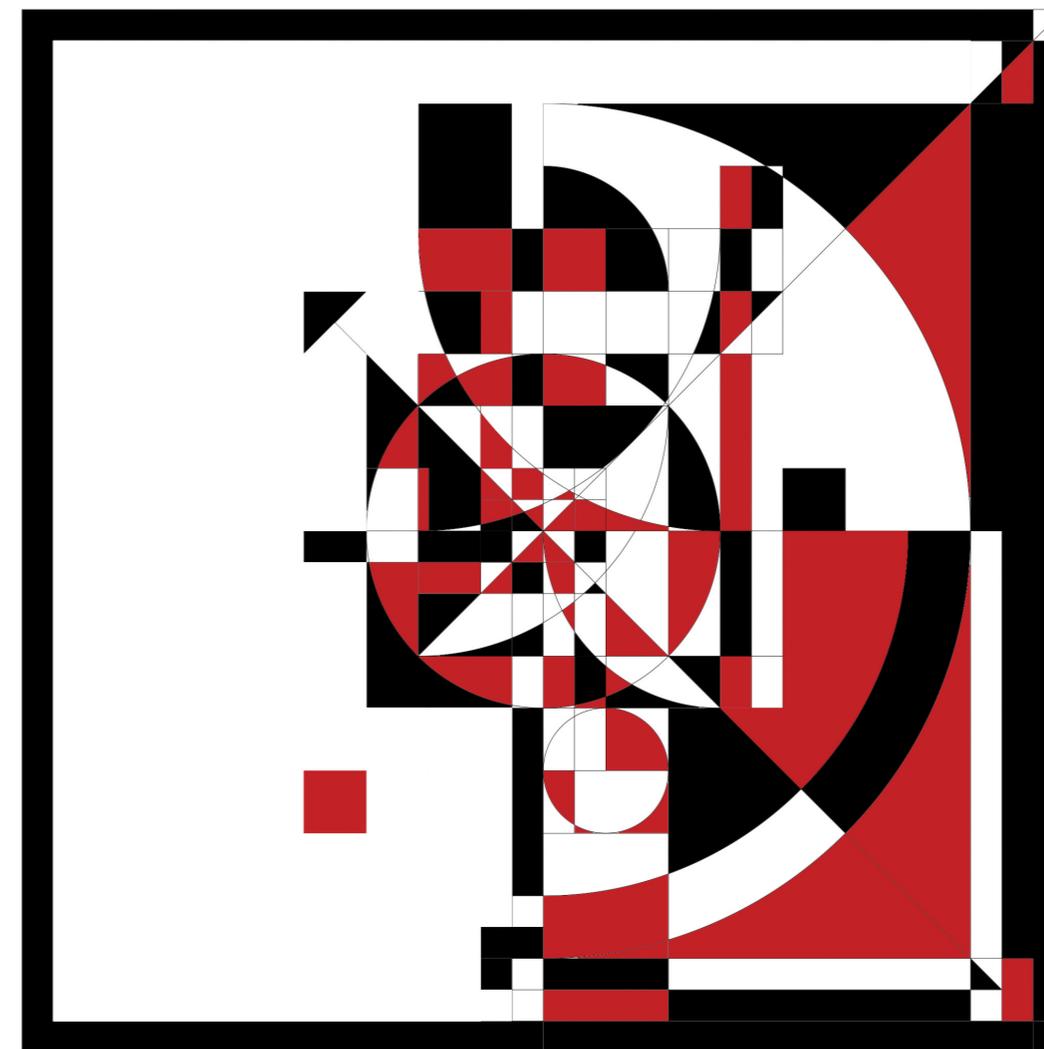
is the most charitable reading of Plato, and a good way of solving the puzzle at hand. In the end, I want to briefly discuss the importance of dialectics and debates in the Academy, and attempt to use this as a possible reason for believing the interpretation I am defending.

Protagorean Relativism

(i) *The Measure Doctrine (MD)*

Protagoras has in recent times been referred to as the father of relativism (Baghrarian, Carter 2017: Sec. 3), and is credited with the thesis that 'Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are and of the things which are not, that they are not' (152^a). Although only fragments survive from Protagoras' book "The Truth," the discussion in *Theaetetus* reveals at least how he was interpreted in Plato's time. The doctrine is formulated by Plato in many ways: "As each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you – you and I each being a man" (152a); "What seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so" (170a). These different formulations are supposed to capture the same phenomenon, and for the time being, we can define MD as "if it seems to x that p, then it is true for x that p" (Burnyeat 1976:178).

In order for this theory to fit the definition of knowledge in question (Knowledge=Perception), Socrates claims that the term "appears" captures the same phenomenon as "is perceived" (152c1–2). It follows, if you accept both MD and that appears=is perceived, that when something is perceived, it is also known. He thus establishes a connection between Protagorean epistemology and the definition of knowledge as perception. Later on, it is also established



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that perception not only refers to sensory experience, but can also be of “pleasures and pains, desires and fears; and there are other besides, a great number which have names, an infinite number which have not” (156b). Moreover, the theory is also supposed to account for conceptual knowledge e.g. knowledge of justice or virtue, meaning that it also entails a form of moral relativism.¹

(ii) *The ontological framework and a theory of perception*

In addition to this Protagorean epistemology, Socrates adds an ontological framework in order to support $K=P$, to which he refers to as “the secret doctrine” of Protagoras’ theory.² The basic claim of this ontology, highly influenced by pre-Socratic philosophers like Heraclitus and Empedocles, is presented in the following way:

What really is true, is this: the things of which we naturally say that they “are,” are in process of coming to be, as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say that they ‘are,’ since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be. (152e)

In other words, what we perceive are not objects themselves, but processes. This can be illustrated by an example: Imagine someone planting a sunflower in his or her living room, and decides to film the entire process, from the first sprout until the fading away of the last leaf. This person decides it would be interesting to make a time lapse video of the footage, and creates a 2-minute edit entitled “sunflower”. When looking at a photo of the flower, any person would be quick to point out that “that’s a sunflower”. However, when watching time lapses like this, it becomes clear that what you are looking at is not a flower, but rather, the coming-to-be and fading-away of something. The stability we seemingly perceive is an illusion, caused by the slow motion of the changes that actually governs all things in the world.

This is supposed to give justification to MD, in the sense that it allows perception of the world to be something that belongs entirely to the perceiver. There is no objective world, and each individual world arises in relation to the person perceiving (Castagnoli 2004:5). The fact that what I perceive can never be the same as what you perceive supports the thesis that what appears to me is true of the world, not in itself, but in relation to me. This leads to the sort of relativism that Plato seems to be ascribing to Protagoras:

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

Socrates goes on to claim that, in order to better describe the world, we should change our vocabulary, so that verbs like “being” should be replaced by phrases like “coming-to-be” etc (157b–c). The exact relation between MD and this ontology is a controversial subject-matter, and for the purposes of this paper it will suffice to use one of the more common interpretations, namely that it helps MD resist problems like the principle of non-contradiction and explains the plurality of subjective worlds (Castagnoli 2004:8).

So far, we have seen that MD holds that there is a direct link between a person’s perception of the world and his knowledge, so that whatever seems true to someone, it is true *for them*. This view is backed up by an ontology, which posits that everything is in a constant flux and that nothing really is, but is rather coming-to-be. This ontological framework is supposed to show that every perception of the world is personal and demonstrates that we should not talk of anything as existing in itself, which in turn supports the thesis that all perceptions are true for you (in your world).

However, after spending some time sketching out the position in question, Socrates tries to show how this theory of knowledge fails. He gives a number of arguments, but the one I find most interesting, and the one who has received most attention in the past decades, is the self-refutation argument.

The Self-refutation Argument

Arguments based on self-refutation are a common strategy against relativistic claims. Their basic structure is, very roughly, something like: if everything is relative, there are no truths. But then the claim that “everything is relative” cannot be true. It seems, then, that if you accept the theory, you implicitly also accept its falsity, and the theory refutes itself. (Baggini, Fosl 2010:130–31) However, the argument presented by Socrates in the Theaetetus is more complicated than this. As we have seen, Protagoras seems to think that what appears to be true to a person P, is in fact true for P. In other words, truth does exist in MD, ac-

ording to some interpretations, which means that an argument against it cannot be along the lines of the example of a self-refutation argument above. In order to examine the argument itself, it can be useful to consider the passage from which it emerges:³

(1) SOC. Secondly, it [MD] 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, since he agrees that all men judge what is.

(2) THEOD. Undoubtedly.

(3) 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?

(4) THEOD. Yes, inevitably.

(5) SOC. But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong?

(6) THEOD. No.

(7) SOC. But Protagoras again admits this judgement to be true, according to his written doctrine?

(8) THEOD. So it appears.

(9) 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? (171a6–c4)

As Eyjólfur Emilsson has observed, what Plato does here is to create a hypothetical dialog within the dialogue, between Protagoras and his opponents (Emilsson 1994:138). When confronted with the accusation that he must agree with the fact that his opponent is right in asserting the falsity of his own thesis, Protagoras has no other option than to agree. The argument can be reconstructed in the following way:

1. According to MD, every judgment is true.

2. Protagoras agrees that there are people who believe that MD is false.

3. Protagoras must, from (1) and (2), admit that it is true that MD is false.

4. Protagoras must, from (3), admit that MD is false.⁴

The first thing that one is struck by when analyzing this argument is the lack of qualifiers essential to Protagoras’ thesis, a problem identified by most scholars today. It seems that in both the passage above, and the reconstruction of the argument, the word “truth” is not being used relative to something, but as an absolute. However, the reconstruction seems to be consistent with the passage.⁵ Surely, Protagoras would not agree to the first premise, unless it specified that every judgment is true, for the person judging. This changes the conclusion entirely, and Protagoras need only admit that MD is false, *for the people denying it*. The argument is thus guilty of the strawman fallacy; it is only able to refute a position Protagoras would not accept.

One might respond to this objection by saying that, while this argument does not successfully demonstrate that MD refutes itself, it does lead to a contradiction, in the sense that MD is both true and false. However, as Sarah Waterlow has demonstrated, Protagoras can easily deny the principle of non-contradiction (Waterlow 2009:20). In addition to this, it seems clear that with the proper qualifiers in place, there is no contradiction in the first place. It seems then, that the self-refutation argument is not in any way proving that MD is false in any absolute sense. If this is the case, as some have argued, Plato has reached an *ignoratio elenchi*, i.e. an irrelevant conclusion, and fails to address MD properly. It seems unlikely, as many have pointed out before me (for example Castagnoli 2004:8), that Socrates is unaware of the lack of qualifiers in his argumentation, especially since he seems to be fully aware of them elsewhere in the text. Why would Plato include this argument if he were aware of these issues? What is its function?

The Self-Refutation Argument as a Demonstration of MDs Dialectical Inconsistency

There have been many attempts to solve this puzzle, but I will focus on the one I find most plausible, which denies that the argument proves the falsity of MD, but still raises a serious problem about its nature. This interpretation, defended by both Waterlow, Castagnoli and Emilsson, holds that Plato is neither attempting to demonstrate that MD

is inconsistent or that accepting it logically leads to rejecting it, but that “those who reject it can have no reason to even consider accepting it” (Castagnoli 2004:35). In other words, it is a useless position in any debate, since it follows from MD that an opponent’s belief in its falsity is true for them. The argument, then, is supposed to show us the difficulties of convincing others of such a thesis, and that in a debate, he “does not have anything plausible to say in return” (Emilsson 1994:137). Castagnoli summarizes what he believes to be Socrates’ real intention with the argument in a clear and concise way:

What Socrates does show is that MD turns out to be utterly indefensible, and thus untenable, as soon as put under scrutiny in a dialectical context, and therefore there is no real possibility for one to believe in it. (Castagnoli 2004:24)

As mentioned above, Emilsson observed that the self-refutation argument takes the form of a hypothetical debate between Protagoras and his opponents. His way of reconstructing the debate

demonstrates the indefensibility of MD, and gives us good reason to think of the argument in this way.

When confronted with the fact that it is true for him that the doctrine is false for his opponent, his only option is to go on relativizing, saying something along the lines of: “Even if it is true for you that the Measure doctrine is false for me, that view of yours is nevertheless false for me” (Emilsson 1994:145). This could potentially go on endlessly, and Protagoras would never be able to “say anything which is intended as an objection to the claim that the Measure doctrine is false (simpliciter)” (Emilsson 1994:145).

Waterlow, Castagnoli and Emilsson reach this conclusion by means of entirely different interpretations of MD. While Waterlow argues that MD is a “factual relativism” (Waterlow 1977:34), Emilsson seems to hold that it is a relativism about truth. Castagnoli on the other hand, claims that it is a relativism of both truth and fact (Castagnoli 2004:5). And while Emilsson believes that the qualifiers can be read implicitly in the argument, Waterlow argues that they are left out on purpose. This reading of the argument is consistent with a number of different interpretations of MD, but given the scope of this paper, I will not attempt to defend one or the other here.

Based on this reading, however, Plato is not able to

show that MD is self-refuting. It seems to me that the only way to provide a successful self-refutation argument against MD is to accept the lack of qualifiers in the passage, and embrace an interpretation of Protagoras where truths are not qualified. This, however, given the many formulation of MD in the text, seems absurd. Especially considering the passage I quoted earlier, where Socrates clearly states that we must always add the phrase “relative to something” when applying the term “being” to something.

Even though MD is not self-refuting in an absolute sense, I would still claim that it is not a strong position, based on its inability to answer opponents and partake in a dialectical discussion. Second of all, if a Protagorean wants to apply his epistemology to his or her own discourse, he or she would have to begin every claim with “it appears to me that,” so that the entire theory will be presented as a belief, without any objective claims. In other words, any theory within this framework will be true, and the only way to be convinced of its truth would be to already accept it.

One might argue that a theory’s ability to hold up in a dialectical exercise is not at all relevant to its truth. And

although this is a fair objection to the argument itself, it may seem that the importance of dialectics was more valued in Plato’s time, which

in turn might support the interpretation. According to Pierre Hadot, dialectical exercise was the main method of teaching at the Academy, and remained a central part of the education until the 1st century B.C. It consisted of two participants engaging in a back and forth discussion over a thesis, one attempting to defend it while the other attacked it (Hadot 2002:62). Neither of the participants necessarily agreed to the thesis in question, and the aim was not to emerge as a victor. Rather, it was seen as a spiritual exercise wherein both would “undergo an askesis, or self-transformation” (Hadot 2002:62).

The importance of dialectical practice in the Academy seems to me to be one more reason to believe that Plato was in fact just demonstrating Protagoras’ inability to partake in such discussions. As we have seen, the argument takes the form of a hypothetical dialogue, where the thesis is tested out by an opponent. It is shown that Protagoras is unable to defend MD against his opponent, and he is thus defeated in this context. Given the importance of the dialectical method of education in the Academy, and more generally, in all of Plato’s works, it seems reasonable to claim that Plato thought the ability to withstand scrutiny is an important aspect of any good philosophical theory.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the “self-refutation argument” was not able to refute MD in any absolute sense. However, if read in a certain way, it can be understood an attempt to demonstrate its inability to partake in dialectical exercise. This seems to me to be the best interpretation available, and we have seen that there are many reasons for believing it. First of all, the fact that the argument is presented as a hypothetical debate between Protagoras and his opponents indicates that it should be read in this context. Second of all, we have seen that the importance of dialectics for Plato might also support it.

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NOTES

¹ Exactly how this is done is beyond the scope of this paper, but for the discussion see 172a–c. A similar view can also be found in 166b–168c.

² 152c. Burnyeat points out that it is highly unlikely that Protagoras did endorse HO, and this is not meant to be taken seriously. (1990:12). The Protagoras of this paper will therefore be somewhat historically inaccurate, and is more of a platonic construct than an accurate representation of Protagoras and his philosophy.

³ Note: In this part of the dialogue Theodorus (Theaetetus’ teacher) assumes Theaetetus’ role.

⁴ This way of presenting the argument is borrowed from Castagnoli (2004:1).

⁵ Socrates clearly states that Protagoras holds that “all men judge what is”, and not “all men judge what is, to them”.