

## Is Knowledge Perception? An Examination of Plato's *Theaetetus* 151d-186e

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### Introduction

In this paper I want to examine the discussion between Socrates and Theaetetus concerning Protagoras' proposal that knowledge is perception. To this end, I will summarize the various arguments that Socrates and Theaetetus pose against the Protagorian proposal and their eventual rejection of it. Next I will offer several responses one might make to defend Protagoras' position. Finally, I will try to show why even these proposed solutions fail to save Protagoras' view.

### The Protagorian Proposal: Knowledge is Perception

Plato's *Theaetetus* is concerned with the question "What is knowledge?" Though the dialogue never fully answers the question, it does deal with several interesting proposals along the way. One such proposal, proffered by the youth Theaetetus is a revisiting of a view of Protagoras, viz. that knowledge is perception. At the encouragement of Socrates, Theaetetus begins the discussion with the following proposal: "It seems to me that one who knows something is perceiving the thing he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge is nothing but perception." (151d)<sup>1</sup> Socrates quickly points out that this suggestion is not without a prestigious heritage, for the proposal is a re-wording of one held by Protagoras when he said that "man is the measure of all things." (152a) Scholars over the years have differed as to whether Protagoras meant that the individual person is the measure of all things or whether he meant that humans collectively, such as in cities or cultures (or even humans as such) are the measure of all things. This division by the scholars is due in part by the fact that the Greek language does not

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<sup>1</sup>All translations are by F. M. Cornford in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

have an indefinite pronoun, and thus a noun like ἄνθρωπος (man) without any article could be either definite or indefinite. Further, there are other things that Protagoras says that suggests both.<sup>2</sup>

### The Discussion of Socrates and Theaetetus

The initial discussion here between Socrates and Theaetetus seemingly takes Protagoras in the former sense, while points made elsewhere about Protagoras suggest the latter sense. Socrates summarizes the notion, "that any given thing 'is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you,' you and I being men." (152a) The example he gives is when one person feels the wind is chilly and the other does not, or one feels the wind slightly chilly and the other feels it quite cold. (152b) Presumably Protagoras did not mean that the wind was both chilly and not chilly. Rather, his point here is more epistemological. In fact, some suggest that Protagoras' point is an epistemological view that corresponds to Heraclitus' metaphysical view of reality being in flux. In this sense, the metaphysical model of Heraclitus might make the relativism of Protagoras plausible. Socrates suggests as much and more when he says "In this matter let us take it that, with the exception of Parmenides, the whole series of philosophers agree—Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles ..." (152e)

### *Socrates' Objections*

But Socrates wants to raise several objections against this proposal that man is the measure, that knowledge is perception. Socrates raises problems for any theory of perception by pointing out how perceptions vary in one when one is in health and when one is ill. Further, Socrates prompts from Theaetetus that surely when one is mad or one is dreaming, one can perceive what is not the case. But if this is so, then this seems to conflict with the Protagorian

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<sup>2</sup>The former sense will be how Socrates and Theaetetus take it in their initial discussion. The latter sense is suggested by Protagoras' discussion about morals being relative to the individual city-state (172a).

dictum that whatever one perceives is knowledge. However, having introduced these points which seemingly weaken the proposal, Socrates goes on to remedy the situation by suggesting what some have come to refer to as "splitting the subject."<sup>3</sup> Socrates argues that the Socrates who is healthy and the Socrates who is ill are two different subjects. In like manner, the Socrates who is awake and the Socrates who is asleep are also two different subjects. Thus, the wine tasting sweet to the healthy Socrates and the wine tasting bitter to the ill Socrates can both be true. Given this, "since what acts upon me is for me and for no one else, I, and no one else, am actually perceiving it. ... Then my perception is true for me, for its object at any moment is my reality, and I am, as Protagoras says, a judge of what is for me, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not. ... If then, I am infallible and make no mistake in my state of mind about what is or becomes, how can I fail to have knowledge of the things of which I have perception?" (160c) To this the young Theaetetus concludes "You cannot possibly fail."

Having dispensed with the first objection and having established the *prima facie* truth of Protagoras' proposal, Socrates begins to systematically levy further objections to the position. First, Socrates wonders why one should think that man is the measure, as opposed to, for example, a pig or a baboon, or some other creature. (161c) Second, Socrates wonders that if it is the case that what anyone thinks is true for him, "where is the wisdom of Protagoras, to justify his setting up to teach others and to be handsomely paid for it, and where is our comparative ignorance or the need for us to go and sit at his feet, when each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom?" (161e)

But perhaps the most important objection to Protagoras' proposal is what has come to be known as "the table-turning argument." In short, this objection states that, since whatever

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<sup>3</sup>Lynne Spellman, class lecture, University of Arkansas, October 14, 2002.

anyone thinks is true, then for those who think that Protagoras' own view is false, it follows that it is true that Protagoras' proposal is false. "Protagoras, for his part, admitting as he does that everybody's opinion is true, must acknowledge the truth of his opponents' belief about his own belief, where they think he is wrong. ... That is to say, he would acknowledge his own belief to be false, if he admits that the belief of those who think him wrong is true." (171b)

### ***Some Modest Proposals***

#### Perceptual Relativism vs. Philosophical Relativism

What might one say about Protagoras' theory? Has Socrates shown that the theory is entirely implausible? Several comments are in order. First, one might suggest that Socrates has attacked a straw man. If one maintained that Protagoras' original dictum was confined to perceptual, moral, and aesthetic judgments, as opposed to philosophical or second-order judgments, can the position be immune to the above criticisms, especially the table-turning argument? Indeed, Socrates' discussion that eventuates in the table-turning argument seems quite far from the original example Socrates uses of what Protagoras was talking about, viz., the example of how the wind feels different to different people. As I suggested earlier, presumably Protagoras did not mean that the wind *really* was both chilly and not chilly. Rather, he was referring to the relativity of perceptual, or if you will, empirical observations. Even Socrates admits that the wind might feel chilly to one and not chilly to another. But to take this modest relativism to mean that anything that anyone says *is* true for them, is to take the proposal far beyond the bounds within which it was originally intend to reside. As G. B. Kerferd claims, "Indeed, there is no actual evidence in any ancient author that Protagoras himself ever applied

his doctrine to statements other than those about perceived qualities and moral and aesthetic qualities treated on the same plane as visually perceived qualities."<sup>4</sup>

However, it seems to me that even taking Protagoras in this more modest way still entails a self-referential problem no less serious than the table-turning argument. It would not be enough for Protagoras that every perceptual judgment is true for the one making it, for Protagoras' own proposal purports to be a universal truth though it itself is Protagoras' own perceptual judgment. This is to say, when Protagoras himself observes that one claims that the wind feels chilly to him and another claims that the wind does not feel chilly, Protagoras himself comes to know this by his own observation. But surely Protagoras wants to say more than that it is true for Protagoras that the wind feels differently for these two. He wants so to say that it *really* is the case that the wind feels differently for the two people. But if Protagoras' observations are just his observations, then he cannot gainsay anyone who would deny that the wind ever feels differently to different people. Thus, to make his claim, even confining it to empirical observations, he would have to have the ability to make an objective or universal empirical claim, which would tacitly contradict his original proposal. The only option here would be to qualify the proposal even further to be a claim only about certain empirical observations, but not all. But this further qualification seems to me to fall short of what Protagoras was saying.

#### Forms of Life and Correspondence vs. Coherence

Another response one might make in this regard is to try to construe Protagoras' claim within a sort of Wittgensteinian "forms of life" scenario together with a coherence theory of truth rather than a correspondence theory. Admittedly this is somewhat anachronistic, but perhaps the modern Wittgensteinians would find solace in Protagoras' proposal. If one opted for a coherence

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<sup>4</sup>G. B. Kerferd, in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967), s.v., "Protagoras of Abdera," vol. 6, p. 506.

theory of truth, then one would no longer be obligated to answer the table-turning argument, since the argument itself utilizes a correspondence theory. The "Neo-Protagorean" might maintain that such truth-claims are to be understood in terms of their coherence with other truth-claims made within a given "form of life." Since any given claim derives its truth from its relation to other claims within the form of life, then it is misplaced to try to defeat a given claim from outside the form of life. Further, if one relegates the boundaries of the forms of life to the individual (which, admittedly, is not usually what a Wittgensteinian would do) then no individual is in a privileged position to adjudicate claims by another individual.

While it is beyond the scope of this short analysis to examine the subtleties and technicalities of the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, a brief response is in order. It seems to me that even so grand an attempt to save Protagoras here stills fall short and does not avoid the fatal table-turning argument. For the same reasons why one could not deny at least some objective empirical observations, one cannot deny some objective philosophical claims either. In this context, 'objective' means claims that would transcend all forms of life in that they would be true of every form of life, and thus not themselves be a function of any form of life. It seems clear to me that the very philosophical analysis that would give rise to a theory of the forms of life is an analysis of how one thinks things *really* are, that is, how forms of life *really* are. Otherwise, the critic could dismiss the analysis as merely being the product of the Wittgensteinian's own form of life. In other words, the Wittgensteinian is either claiming that these forms of life are really the way everyone relates to the world (epistemologically speaking) or they are not. If they are, then that claim purports to be an objective claim about how the world is. If not, then the claim itself is nothing but a claim stemming from a particular form of life (the

Wittgensteinian form of life) and thus cannot maintain that anyone else *really* is relating to the world from within his own form of life too.

A similar problem arises when one tries to deny a correspondence theory of truth. For presumably if one were trying to defend the Protagorean thesis, then surely that one would be making claims about how the world is. But to make a claim as to how the world is, is to utilize a correspondence theory of truth, not a coherence. No denial can be made about the correspondence theory of truth without using the correspondence theory of truth in the denial.

### Conclusion

I have tried to summarize several criticisms against Protagoras' claim that "man is the measure." To this end I looked at Socrates' and Theaetetus' discussion of the matter, and their ultimate rejection of Protagoras. I then attempted to defend the proposal by suggesting several ways that one might construe his original proposal to circumvent the most serious objection, the table-turning argument. My conclusion of the matter is that the proposal of Protagoras is untenable in all but its most modest form as a statement that only some, but not all, of our empirical observations are relative to the individual. But once this qualification is opted for, it seems no longer the claim of Protagoras.