6

Protagorean Relativisms

I

In the first part of the *Theaetetus* (151 E–186 E), Plato considers three theses: Theaetetus' claim that knowledge is perception (T) (151 E 1–3); Protagoras' measure doctrine (P), according to which 'man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are not that they are not' (*Tht.* 152 A 2–4);[1] and Heracleitus' claim (H) that 'all things change, like streams' (160 D 7–8).[2] These theses are not considered in isolation; on the contrary, Plato takes them to be intimately connected. There is considerable dispute, however, both about the precise content of each of the theses and about how they are connected (both in fact and in Plato's view). These two disputes are related. For we can know how the three theses are connected only if we know what each of them says. But at the same time, since they do not readily interpret themselves, Plato's indications about their connections impose some prima facie constraints on plausible interpretations; for we should aim to interpret each of the theses in a way that makes it intelligible that Plato connects them as he does. In this chapter I shall focus on Plato's account of Protagoras, asking what interpretation of him best fits the complex dialectical structure of the first part of the *Theaetetus*.[3]

Protagoras' measure doctrine is often thought to be one of the first formulations of relativism, and indeed the phrase 'Protagorean relativism'

[1] This is generally agreed to be a quotation from Protagoras. For further occurrences of the quotation, see Plato, *Cra.* 385 E 6–386 A 3; Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7. 60–1; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 9. 51.

[2] This is clearly an allusion to Heracleitus' alleged claim that 'one can't step into the same river twice'. There is dispute as to whether Heracleitus did say this. Plato thinks he did: *Cra.* 402A 8–10 (=DK A 6; cf. B 91).

[3] Though my focus is Plato's account of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, there may be implications for the interpretation of the historical Protagoras. At least, M. F. Burnyeat claims that Plato's account has 'by far the best claim to authenticity' ('Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', *Philosophical Review*, 85 (1976), 44–69 at 45). However, since Protagoras' own works are not extant, Burnyeat's claim is difficult to assess.

is common currency. But does Plato portray Protagoras as a relativist? A quick answer is 'yes, of course, he does': after all, relativism has been understood in a variety of ways, and no doubt an account of it can be found according to which Plato portrays Protagoras as a relativist. But this simple answer is unsatisfactory. For we want to know precisely what sort of relativist Plato takes Protagoras to be, if indeed that is how he describes him at all. And here matters become more difficult. For although Plato is often thought to portray Protagoras as a relativist, many different—indeed incompatible—doctrines have been made to shelter under this label.

In Section II I make some general remarks about Protagoras' measure doctrine. In Section III I say something about Protagoras' place in the *Theaetetus*, and suggest two criteria an adequate interpretation of Protagoras should satisfy.[4] In subsequent sections I consider two interpretations of Plato's Protagoras that have not been adequately distinguished from one another, and that fail the two criteria. I then propose an alternative account of Plato's Protagoras that satisfies them. On this interpretation, Plato's Protagoras is not best characterized as a relativist.

II

Plato tells us that Protagoras' measure doctrine (P) 'means [*legei*] something on these lines: everything is, for me, the way it appears to me, and is, for you, the way it appears to you' (*Tht.* 152 A 6–8).[5] In the context of the measure doctrine, to say how things *appear* to me is to say how I *believe* things are,[6] and to say how things *are* for me—to say, for example, that the wind is cold for me—is to say that it is true for me that the wind is

[4] An earlier version of sect. II and of part of sect. III may be found in my 'Conflicting Appearances: *Theatetus* 153 D–154 B' (ch. 7 below).

[5] There is some dispute as to whether this passage is a quotation from Protagoras, or Plato's own explanation of what Protagoras means. McDowell translates '*legei*' as 'means', which suggests he thinks that Plato is offering his own explanation (J. McDowell, *Plato:* Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973)); but in his notes ad loc. he says that *Cra.* 386 A 1–3 suggests that Plato is quoting Protagoras.

[6] 'Appears' (*phainesthai*) can be veridical or nonveridical: I can say 'It is apparent that the wind is cold', where this means that it obviously, evidently is cold; but I can also say 'The wind appears to be cold', where this means that I believe that it is cold. In Greek, the first use is indicated by an accusative plus participle, the second by an accusative plus infinitive. But sometimes, as in (P), the second verb is omitted and so one has to decide from the context which construction is intended. I take it that (P) involves the second use. In the present context, the usual terminology—veridical and nonveridical—is somewhat awkward: the second use is called nonveridical since it is normally supposed that one cannot infer from how one believes things are to how they are. Protagoras, of course, in some sense licenses the inference and so there is a sense in which, although 'appears' indicates belief in

cold. So Protagoras claims that if I believe the wind is cold, then it is true for me that the wind is cold. He also seems to accept the 'converse rule' that if it is true for me that the wind is cold, then I believe that it is.[7] If so, then (P) is a biconditional: it claims that p is true for A if and only if A believes p.

In discussing (P), Plato considers two different ranges of appearances or beliefs. 'Appears' statements can be used in statements about perceptual appearances, to say how one believes things are on the basis of perception (e.g. 'It appears red to me'). But they can also be used in statements about what one believes about any matter whatsoever (e.g. 'The argument appears sound to me').[8] So we need to distinguish between what I shall call *Narrow Protagoreanism* (NP) and *Broad Protagoreanism* (BP). According to Narrow Protagoreanism, each thing is, for any person, the way he perceives it as being. According to Broad Protagoreanism, each thing is, for any person, the way he believes it is. The distinction between Narrow and Broad Protagoreanism is that between two different substituends for 'each thing'. According to Narrow Protagoreanism, only perceptual predicates are appropriate substituends; according to Broad Protagoreanism, any term whatever is an appropriate substituend. The *Theaetetus* considers both Narrow and Broad Protagoreanism. In his initial discussion of Protagoras (152 A–169 D), for example, Plato focuses on Narrow Protagoreanism. But in the self-refutation argument (169 D–171 D), he focuses on

the measure doctrine, it is none the less used veridically. But that is not to say that 'appears' *means* 'obviously, evidently is'. Rather, to say how things appear to one is to say how one believes things are; Protagoras then insists that one can move from how one believes things are to how they really are (to one).

[7] For a defence of the claim that Protagoras accepts what Burnyeat calls the 'converse rule', see M. F. Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', *Philosophical Review*, 85 (1976), 172–95 at 178–9. The claim is criticized by R. Ketchum, 'Plato's "Refutation" of Protagorean Relativism: *Theaetetus* 170–171', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 10 (1992), 73–105 at 77–9, and by N. P. White, 'Plato on the Contents of Protagorean Relativism' (unpublished). I thank White for letting me read and refer to his paper. Although I find their criticisms persuasive, I am none the less inclined to accept Burnyeat's conclusion, if only because (as White remarks) it seems intuitively plausible to assume that it is a necessary condition of p's being true for A that A believe p.

[8] Of course, it is not easy to determine the range of perceptual predicates. The discussion that follows is indebted to McDowell, *Plato:* Theaetetus, 119–20. See also Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', 178 n. 9. (This note erroneously refers back to n. 2 of 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy'; however, I cannot find a note in the latter paper that makes the relevant point, though the point is made on p. 45, where n. 2 also occurs.) Although Burnyeat agrees that the measure doctrine sometimes uses 'appears' to cover all beliefs, he thinks that extending 'appears' beyond perceptual appearances 'may have little but bluff to support it' ('Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', 45).

Broad Protagoreanism.[9] In the present paper, I focus on Narrow Protagoreanism.

III

In interpreting Plato's Protagoras, it is vital to bear in mind that he is not discussed in isolation. Rather, as noted above, the first part of the *Theaetetus* is a complex and subtle dialectical investigation of the connections among three theses. Initially Theaetetus defines knowledge as perception; his definition is then quickly associated both with Protagoras' measure doctrine and with Heracleitus' claim that the world is in constant flux or change. At 160 D 6, Plato says that these three theses coincide.

There is considerable controversy about precisely how Plato takes the three theses to coincide. On the account I favour, Plato argues that Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception commits him to a Protagorean epistemology which, in turn, commits him to a Heracleitean ontology. He also argues that Theaetetus' definition is best supported by a Protagorean epistemology which, in turn, is best supported by a Heracleitean ontology.[10] (More precisely, Plato argues that (T), (H), and *Narrow* Protagoreanism

[9] For places where Plato adverts, at least implicitly, to the distinction between Narrow and Broad Protagoreanism, see 152 C 1–2 ('that which is hot and everything of that sort'), 171 E, and 178 B 5.

[10] This view has been well defended by M. F. Burnyeat, 'Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed', *Philosophical Review*, 91 (1982), 3–40, esp. 5–7; see also Burnyeat, *The* Theaetetus *of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990). Plato gives various 'stage-directions', as Burnyeat calls them, to indicate the connections he has in mind. Here are just a few of them. When Theaetetus proposes that knowledge is perception, Socrates tells him that 'what you've said about knowledge is no ordinary theory, but the one that Protagoras too used to state' (151 E 8–152 A 1). This suggests that Plato takes (T) and (P) to be equivalent. He then describes Protagoras' 'secret doctrine' (152 C 10), which, among other things, involves a Heracleitean flux ontology; the point of calling it a secret doctrine is presumably to indicate that it is an unnoticed implication of (P) (so McDowell, *Plato:* Theaetetus, 121–2), and so of (T). At 160 D 5–E 2, Plato says that since all things change (H), and since man is the measure of all things (P), knowledge is perception (T). So (H) and (P) jointly imply (T). We have already seen, however, that (P) implies (T) quite independently of (H). And that (H) implies (P) is suggested by, for example, 156 A 3–5, where Plato tells us that everything that's been said depends on the assumption that everything is change: so the defence of (P), among other things, depends on (H); that is, I assume, (H) is the basis for (P), and in that sense implies it. Cf. 183 A 2–3: (H) was introduced in order to establish (T); that is, it was taken to imply (T).

Despite my phrasing in the preceding paragraph, I do not think Plato takes the three theses literally to imply one another; rather, his idea is that each of them best supports and is best supported by the others. Even this overstates the case a bit; for the connections among the three theses are forged only with the aid of various ancillary premisses. So, for example, Plato doesn't argue that (T) and (NP), on their own, imply one another or are,

are connected in these ways. Obviously the claim that knowledge is perception, for example, is neither committed to nor best supported by Broad Protagoreanism, since the latter allows knowledge to range outside the perceptual sphere.[11]) Once the connections among the three theses have been established, Plato turns to the offensive, rejecting each in turn.[12]

On this account of the structure of the first part of the *Theaetetus*, Plato is not propounding his own views about knowledge and perception; rather, he is asking what Theaetetus, and then Protagoras, are committed to, and how they are best supported. His strategy is the same as that pursued in many of the Socratic dialogues: an interlocutor proposes a definition, which Socrates then tests against various principles and examples; eventually the interlocutor is caught in contradiction. Faced with contradiction, the interlocutor can reject his initial definition, or he can reject the principles or examples. In the Socratic dialogues, the definition is generally rejected; and in the *Theaetetus* too, this is the eventual outcome. First, however, a different strategy is pursued: Theaetetus holds on to his definition, and revises his beliefs about the nature of the world to suit.[13]

If Plato's dialectical strategy is to succeed, various criteria must be satis-

on their own, one another's best support. Rather, he secures their connection only with the aid of the additional assumption that for A to perceive x as F is for x to appear F to A (152 B 9–12).

Note that to say that each of the three theses best supports, and is best supported by, the others is not to say that any of the three theses provides very good support for any of the others: the best available support might not be very good, and I take it that in his refutations, Plato argues just this.

Though I believe Plato connects the three theses in the way just described, it is sufficient for my purposes in this chapter that he envisages some close connection between (NP) and (H).

[11] One might argue that (BP)'s claim that all beliefs are true (to the believer) does not imply that all beliefs constitute knowledge, on the ground that being true (to the believer) is not sufficient for being knowledge. However, being true is necessary for being knowledge, and this is the condition on knowledge that Plato focuses on in assessing (T). One might also argue that (BP) does not conflict with (T), on the ground that (BP) does not say that beliefs can range outside the perceptual sphere. But as Plato conceives (BP), it does have this broader scope. (McDowell, *Plato:* Theaetetus, 168, however, thinks that 167 A 8 might restrict beliefs to perceptual beliefs.)

[12] He criticizes (P) primarily in 169 D–171 D and in 177 C 6–179 D 2; (H) in 181–3; and (T) in 184–6. Plato also levels other criticisms; and his criticisms of each of the three theses has implications for all three. Moreover, although 151–60 is ostensibly aimed at supporting Theaetetus' suggestion, it also in effect contains various criticisms. For example, Plato makes it plain that Theaetetus is committed to a very strong sort of Heracleiteanism; to the extent that that sort of Heracleiteanism is implausible, it counts against Theaetetus' suggestion.

[13] Not that Theaetetus is deeply wedded either to the definition or to the beliefs about the world that he endorses: he seems simply to play along with Socrates' development of various views. Here I am indebted to Lesley Brown.

fied. Here I shall mention just two of them. The first is the *univocity criterion*: it says that each of the three theses must be interpreted in a univocal way both when it is connected to the other two and when it is refuted. (P), for example, must be interpreted in some one way, both when it is connected to (T) and (H) and when it is refuted. If Plato were to refute a version of (P) quite different from the version earlier connected to (T) and (H), he would commit the fallacy of irrelevance.[14]

The second criterion is the *connection criterion*: we should aim to interpret each of the three theses in a way that makes it plausible to suggest that each of them is committed to and best supported by the others. In particular, for our purposes here, we should aim to provide an interpretation of (NP) on which it is committed to and best supported by (T) and (H). If we find ourselves interpreting (NP) in such a way that (H), for example, is quite irrelevant to it, then we should think again.[15]

[14] There is a complication here. In connecting (P) to (T) and (H), Plato focuses on (NP); yet in refuting (P), he focuses on (BP). However, this does not show that univocity is violated. For although Plato's refutation of (P) focuses on (BP), I think he takes 181–6, coupled with the refutation of (BP), to constitute a refutation of (NP). If this is so, then univocity could be satisfied as follows: Protagoras holds (BP). In assessing (BP), Plato begins by considering a defence of an instance of it, namely (NP). He then returns to the original thesis, (BP), and refutes it. He realizes, however, that his argument leaves (NP) intact. Accordingly, he then returns to and criticizes it. Alternatively, Plato might think Protagoras believes (NP). In this case univocity could be satisfied as follows: Plato first defends (NP) by linking it to (T) and (H). He then considers and refutes a broader Protagorean doctrine, namely (BP). Having refuted it, he then returns to the original thesis, (NP), and refutes it. If Plato reasons in either of these ways—on both of which (NP) is a genuine instance of (BP)—then univocity is satisfied. If, however, (NP) is not an instance of (BP), if the two are quite different sorts of doctrine, then the structure of the first part of the *Theaetetus* would be very awkward at best. For in this case, Plato would have sandwiched a seemingly irrelevant discussion of (BP) in between his initial account of (NP) and its refutation. On the alternative account(s) I prefer, by contrast, the first part of the *Theaetetus* is quite smoothly organized. Of course, we cannot conclude that (NP) is an instance of (BP) without a full discussion of (BP) and its refutation. I take steps in this direction in ch. 8. See also my 'Relativism and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*: Plato, Protagoras, and Burnyeat', in J. Gentzler (ed.), *Method in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press), 138–63.

A further complication in deciding whether the univocity criterion is satisfied is that the account of Heracleiteanism develops in various ways. I discuss this below.

[15] One might argue that we do not need to find an account of (P) and (H) on which they are *in fact* related as Plato suggests; all we need to do is to find an account that makes it plausible to suggest that *Plato* takes them to be so related. If he holds misguided philosophical views, then he might take them to be related in ways in which they are not in fact related. However, I hope to provide an account of (P) and (H) on which they are in fact related as Plato takes them to be; this, in turn, makes it reasonable to suppose that that is why Plato so links them.

Alternatively, one might argue that *Protagoras* links (P) and (H) in a way in which they are not in fact related. However, it is not clear what grounds we have for assuming that the historical Protagoras actually linked his doctrine to (H) at all; and even if he did, it would

In what follows, my main focus will be on the connection criterion. But the univocity criterion will concern us at a couple of junctures.

IV

These preliminaries out of the way, we can now ask how Plato interprets the measure doctrine. Various accounts have been proposed. According to one familiar account, Plato takes Protagoras to be a relativist about truth. In 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy' and 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*',[16] for example, Myles Burnyeat argues that Plato portrays Protagoras as 'a relativist who maintained that every judgment is true *for* (in relation to) the person whose judgment it is' (p. 172). He contrasts this with a view he calls subjectivism, according to which 'every judgment is true *simpliciter*—true absolutely, not merely true for the person whose judgment it is' (p. 46). Burnyeat believes that 'Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, and the later sources generally' take the historical Protagoras to be a subjectivist; but he thinks that Plato—in his view correctly—takes Protagoras to be a relativist about truth instead (p. 46).[17]

Though many commentators claim that Plato portrays Protagoras as a

be reasonable to assume that, however the historical Protagoras defended himself, Plato is, perhaps among other things, aiming to provide what he sees as the best possible defence of Protagoras, whether or not the historical Protagoras offered it. If all he does is refute a weak defence offered by the historical Protagoras, without pointing out that a stronger one is available, we would have reason to be disappointed.

Note that even if one rejects my particular view of how Plato connects the three theses, one should still accept a version of the connection criterion. For it is clear that Plato envisages *some* fairly close connection between (NP) and (H).

Just as my account of the univocity criterion is limited (see previous note), so too is my account of the connection criterion. For to know that it is satisfied would require a full account not only of (P), but also of (T) and (H), whereas in this chapter I focus on (P), taking certain claims about the interpretation of (H) more or less for granted, and leaving (T) almost entirely to one side. (I am grateful to Gary Matthews for pointing this out to me.) But to the extent that the general picture I sketch allows us to satisfy the connnection criterion, that is some evidence in favour of the interpretations I suggest of the theses. Moreover, even if my account of (H) is not entirely uncontroversial, it is by no means idiosyncratic. I shall be content if I can show that on that account, we have reason to question the adequacy of some familiar interpretations of Protagoras.

[16] For references to these two articles, see nn. 3 and 7. Subsequent references to them will generally be given by page reference alone, and they will generally be given in the text.

[17] The view that Plato portrays Protagoras as a relativist about truth is also (independently) accepted by C. C. W. Taylor, who says that Protagoras 'held that in general what each man believes is true for him, which I take to imply that the notion of impersonal truth, according to which a belief is true or false *simpliciter*, is an empty one ... no one view can be said to be just true or false' (Taylor, *Plato:* Protagoras, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 83). (Though Taylor is discussing the *Protagoras* rather than the *Theaetetus*, he seems

relativist about truth, there are different accounts of precisely what this view amounts to. It is common ground that the view denies that there are any absolute truths—it denies, that is, that there are any propositions that are true *simpliciter*, just flat-out true.[18] But what does it mean to say that all beliefs are merely relatively true, that is, are true only for those who hold them?

It seems generally agreed that p's being true for A is equivalent to A's believing p. On the account I favour, there is an even stronger connection: 'true for A' means the same as 'believed by A'. This view is sometimes rejected on the ground that, as Burnyeat puts it, 'If the equivalence were mere synonymy, [(P)] would reduce to the bare tautology' that it appears to A that p if and only if it appears to A that p; but 'it is not likely that a clever man like Protagoras was merely waffling'.[19] But this is not a decisive reason for rejecting the synonymy interpretation. First, there can, of course, be informative synonymies, and perhaps this is one of them. Indeed, that the synonymy would have to be an informative, or deep, one is indicated

to believe that Plato describes Protagoras in the same way in both dialogues; see e.g. pp. 61, 101.) Unfortunately, Taylor sometimes calls this view subjectivism, sometimes relativism; contrast pp. 61 and 83 with p. 101. Further, Taylor speaks interchangeably of impersonal truth, truth *simpliciter*, and being just true. But if an impersonal truth is a truth that obtains independently of what anyone believes, then impersonal truth and truth *simpliciter* are not the same. For example, according to what Burnyeat calls subjectivism, if I believe p, then p is true *simpliciter*; but subjectivism does not countenance the existence of any impersonal truths in the sense of propositions that are true independently of being believed. Relativism about truth, on the other hand, denies not only that there are any impersonal truths but also that there are any propositions that are true *simpliciter*.

Or again, R. M. Dancy, 'Theaetetus' First Baby: *Theaetetus* 151e–160e', *Philosophical Topics*, 15 (1987), 61–108, says that he accepts Burnyeat's account of Plato's portrayal of Protagoras, which he describes as 'the doctrine that truth is relative to the individual' (103 n. 36). Though Dancy says that he accepts Burnyeat's view of how Plato portrays Protagoras, he calls this view subjectivism. This is unfortunate, given that Burnyeat claims that Plato's Protagoras (like the historical Protagoras, according to Burnyeat: see above with n. 3) is *not* a subjectivist.

D. Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 88–92, also seems to think that Plato takes Protagoras to be a relativist about truth, at least in the self-refutation argument.

[18] At least, it is relatively (!) common ground. Those who favour a relativist reading, however, disagree as to whether Plato's Protagoras takes the statement of relativism itself to be an absolute truth. If he does, then he allows the existence of at least one absolute truth. For the sake of simplicity, I shall generally assume here that relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths whatsoever. I do not think the substance of any of my arguments depends on this assumption. But if one takes the statement of relativism to be an absolute truth, then many of my claims would need to be rephrased.

[19] Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', 180–1; see Ketchum, 'Plato's "Refutation" of Protagorean Relativism', 82. Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 91 n. 6, notes the objection but responds to it in something like the way I do.

by the fact that there is dispute about what 'true for A' means.[20] Further, one might argue that the phrase 'true for A' is a technical one, and that as such it is reasonable to suppose that it is linked to 'believed by A' in order to provide a stipulative definition.[21] If there is a mere equivalence, we have not been given enough guidance for understanding what the novel locution means.[22] Moreover, even if the synonymy were uninformative, Protagoras would not be 'merely waffling' in offering it. For relativism about truth is a conjunctive thesis: it involves not only some connection between being true for A and being believed by A, but also the claim that there are no absolute truths; and this second claim is far from being a tautology.

So my own view is that relativism about truth should be construed as a conjunctive claim: that (i) 'true for A' means the same as 'believed by A', and that (ii) there are no absolute truths.[23] This particular explanation of relative truth would not be accepted by everyone. But however we interpret 'true for A', relativism about truth claims that there are no absolute truths; and this claim is often ascribed to Plato's Protagoras.[24]

[20] Here I am indebted to Nicholas Sturgeon and Lesley Brown.

[21] Even if 'believed by A' is a stipulative definition of 'true for A', there are, I think, constraints on what it could mean; in particular, the definition should make it clear why 'true' occurs in 'true for A'. I hope my account of relativism satisfies this constraint. J. Meiland, 'Concepts of Relative Truth', *Monist*, 60 (1977), 568–82 at 574, by contrast, does not seem to accept the constraint just mentioned. In his view, 'one can no more reasonably ask what "true" means in the expression "true-for-W" than one can ask what "cat" means in the word "cattle"'.

[22] One might argue that it is unreasonable to demand a definition of 'true for A'; after all, we often use terms quite well even when we cannot define them. But what is at issue here is not just whether we can use the phrase, but whether the claim that relative truth is the only sort of 'truth' there is is plausible; to be able to answer this question, we need to know what the claim amounts to, and here it is reasonable to suppose that we need to know what 'relative truth' means. But if (unlike me) one is moved by the objection, then I should still want to say that, in order to assess the view, we at least need to know what truth for a person consists in; on the account I favour, it consists in being believed by a person.

It is worth noting that at least some relativists accept the demand that 'true for A' be defined. Meiland, 'Concepts of Relative Truth', 580, for example, although he denies that 'true for A' means 'believed by A', agrees that he needs to provide an alternative account of what the phrase means. He suggests that 'true for A' means 'corresponds to reality for A'. He then imagines someone asking what 'corresponds to reality for A' means. He admits that this is an 'embarrassing question'; he replies only that nonrelativists, for their part, have found it difficult to explain their notion of truth.

[23] Again, one might exempt the statement of relativism, holding that it, at any rate, is an absolute truth.

[24] Nihilism is sometimes explained as the view that there are no absolute truths; so one might ask how, on my account, relativism differs from nihilism. The answer is that whereas the nihilist simply claims that there are no absolute truths, so that people who take themselves to be asserting them are simply making a mistake, the relativist about truth says that, though people do not succeed in asserting absolute truths (since there are none),

The claim that Protagoras believes that there are *no* absolute truths is a claim about how to interpret Broad Protagoreanism. Obviously Narrow Protagoreanism does not claim that there are *no* absolute truths. If Protagoras is a relativist about truth, then Narrow Protagoreanism should say that there are no absolute truths in the perceptual sphere; rather, propositions about what one perceives are merely relatively true.

V

Does Plato portray Protagoras as a relativist about truth, in the sense just explained? There is a good reason to hope that he does not do so. For relativism about truth violates the connection criterion: it is not committed to, nor does it best support, Heracleitus' claim that the world is in constant flux or change. This can be seen as follows.

Protagoreanism is initially explained as a possible solution to the problem of conflicting appearances: the wind seems cold to me, but not to you (152 B 1–7). What should we infer? Plato's Protagoras suggests we should infer that the wind is cold for me but not for you. On relativism about truth, this should mean that neither of our beliefs is absolutely true (or false), since there are no absolute truths (or falsehoods) (either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere); but they are both relatively true. Hence both of our beliefs are in a sense right, but not in a sense that involves contradiction. There might be a contradiction if our beliefs were both absolutely true.[25] But since relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths (in the perceptual sphere, or *tout court*), it can allow all (perceptual) beliefs to be true (for the one who believes them) without sanctioning contradictions. The problem of conflicting appearances is therefore dissolved by denying that any beliefs conflict, since none of them is absolutely true.

Having explained Protagoras' solution to the problem of conflicting appearances, Plato introduces Protagoras' 'secret doctrine' (152 C 8–E 10). Presumably it is called a secret doctrine to indicate that it is an unnoticed

still, they do succeed in asserting something—relative truths. (Or at least they succeed in uttering relative truths: it is not clear that relativists think people *assert* anything.) The relativist tries to make the denial of absolute truth more palatable by allowing that there are, at any rate, relative truths. Here I am indebted to comments by Nicholas Sturgeon; see also Sturgeon, 'Moral Disagreement and Moral Relativism', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 11 (1994), 80–115.

[25] Then again, there might not be. If, for example, we make our remarks at different times, and the wind changes between our utterances, then there would be no conflict even if both our beliefs were absolutely true.

consequence of Protagoras' view. The secret doctrine is, to say the least, complex, and its interpretation is controversial. However, one of its key components is the claim that 'nothing ever is, but all things are always coming to be' (152 D 8–E 1); 'all things are the result of flux and change' (152 E 8).

This suggests that the Protagorean solution to the problem of conflicting appearances implies something about change. But if Protagoras is a relativist about truth, he is not committed to an ontology of change; nor is he best supported by one. If Protagoras said that both our beliefs were *absolutely* true, so that the wind really is both cold and not cold, then we could see intuitively how Heracleitus might enter the picture. The idea (in this case) would be that Heracleitus supports Protagoras by showing how seemingly conflicting appearances that occur at different times can be absolutely true without contradiction. For if the wind changes from being cold when I believe it is, to being not cold when you believe it is not, then our beliefs can be absolutely true without conflicting. Similarly, if both our beliefs are absolutely true, then, if they occur at different times, and if we are pronouncing on the same wind, Protagoras is committed to Heracleiteanism, in so far as he would (in this case) have to say that the wind has changed from being cold to not cold.

But if Protagoras denies that there are any absolute truths, either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere, then there is no need for him to appeal to an ontology of change to resolve the problem of conflicting appearances. For denying that there are any absolute truths dissolves the problem all on its own: the seeming conflict disappears once it is explained that the seemingly conflicting utterances are merely relative truths. So the relativist about truth does not need to appeal to an ontology of change, or to any ontology, to solve the problem of conflicting appearances; relativizing truth solves the problem all by itself. Nor does relativism about truth carry with it a commitment to a Heracleitean ontology, or to any other ontology. Indeed, so far from being committed to a view about how the world is, relativism about truth denies that there is an absolute truth about how the world is.

Not only, then, does relativism about truth not imply (H), and not only does it not need to appeal to (H) in its support, but, more strongly, (H) actually seems to conflict with relativism about truth. For (H) takes it to be an absolute truth that the world is in constant change, whereas relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths.[26]

[26] At least, relativism about truth, as we are conceiving it, denies that there are any absolute truths except, perhaps, for the statement of relativism itself. But even if one takes the statement of relativism to be an absolute truth, that does not alleviate the conflict just

One might argue that although this shows that (H) conflicts with an *unrestricted* relativism about truth, it does not show that (H) conflicts with a version of relativism about truth that is restricted to the perceptual sphere; for it might be argued that although Heracleiteanism is a claim *about* the perceptual sphere, it is not itself a perceptual claim.[27] But even if this is so, (H) still conflicts with a relativism about truth that is restricted to the perceptual sphere. For this more limited version of relativism denies that any perceptual claims are absolutely true; rather, according to it, all such claims are merely relatively true. (H), by contrast, says that there are some absolute truths about particular changes in the world. If (H) says, but a restricted version of relativism about truth denies, that there are some absolute truths in the perceptual sphere, then the two views conflict.

If, as I have argued, relativism about truth (broad or narrow) actually conflicts with (H), then if Plato portrays Protagoras as a relativist about truth, he violates the connection criterion.

Now it is true that the account of Heracleiteanism develops; one version gives rise to another in the face of various objections. Initially Heracleitus posits intersubjectively available if changing objects. But he eventually replaces them with private changing objects. Indeed, in the end he argues that neither objects nor perceivers persist; rather, there is a series of momentary objects and perceivers. On this view, no two people ever see the same

mentioned. That relativism about truth conflicts with (H) in something like the way just mentioned is also suggested by R. Waterfield, *Plato:* Theaetetus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 151; see also Dancy, 'Theaetetus' First Baby', 62 and § 4. Dancy (p. 75) resolves the conflict by modifying (P) so that it says that 'everything is subjective [i.e. relative: cf. n. 17 above] *except* the changes that (H) alleges to be out there'. This resolution seems to abandon the view that (NP) involves relativism about truth. Hence although Dancy initially says that he agrees with Burnyeat that Plato's Protagoras is a relativist about truth, he eventually seems to reject this interpretation of (NP). But if he thinks that (BP) but not (NP) involves relativism about truth, then he violates the univocity criterion.

Gary Matthews and Lesley Brown have urged that (H) doesn't explicitly mention truth, absolute or otherwise, in which case the claim that (H) and relativism about truth conflict might seem too strong. I agree that (H) doesn't explicitly claim that it is an absolute truth that the world is in constant change; it simply says that the world is in constant change. But I take it that, though (H) doesn't explicitly say that it is intended as an absolute truth, that is how it should be understood: it purports to tell us how the world really is. And if it purports to tell us how the world really is, then it conflicts with relativism about truth, even if the conflict is not apparent at first glance.

One might argue that if the conflict is not apparent at first glance, perhaps it escaped Plato's notice. Of course, this possibility can't simply be ruled out without argument. But if we can provide an interpretation of (P) and (H) on which Plato is not confused, that is to be preferred; later I try to provide such an interpretation.

[27] I owe this suggestion to Sydney Shoemaker.

thing twice, nor can any one person ever see the same thing twice.[28] When public changing objects are replaced by private objects, Protagoras solves the problem of conflicting appearances as between different observers not by saying that some one wind has changed between our utterances, but by saying that we have not pronounced on the same wind: the wind I perceive is cold, whereas the one you perceive is not.

But neither is this solution to the problem of conflicting appearances appropriately related to relativism about truth, whether restricted to the perceptual sphere or not. First, just as relativism about truth's resolution of the problem of conflicting appearances does not commit it to an ontology of change, so it does not commit it to an ontology of private objects.

[28] So, for example, in the initial example of the wind at 152 B–C, it seems to be assumed that we are pronouncing on the same object. Then, in the development of the theory of perception at 153 D ff., various 'secondary' qualities such as the colour of a stone are said to be private (*idion*, 154 A 2) to each perceiver (so that what we strictly speaking see are not colours conceived as general properties but what are sometimes called tropes). It is then argued that no two perceivers can perceive the same object, e.g. a stone, nor can the same perceiver do so twice. I take this to be the upshot of the perplexing argument at 158 E 5–160 D. Though we differ on many points, my view is in this respect close to Burnyeat's; see Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', 181–3. In saying that Protagoras is eventually committed to the view that objects like stones are private to perceivers, I mean to leave open the possibility that there is some bare matter that 'isn't anything (in itself)' that is not thus private. Sextus may ascribe this view to Protagoras; see *PH* 1. 216–19. M. Matthen, 'Perception, Relativism, and Truth: Reflections on Plato's *Theaetetus* 152–60', *Dialogue*, 24 (1985), 33–58, denies that Protagoras endorses an ontology of private objects; see also L. Brown, 'Understanding the *Theaetetus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11 (1993), 199–224 at 206.

Although I think the account of Heracleiteanism develops, I do not think Plato is merely considering a family of loosely related Heracleitean doctrines, as is suggested by R. Bolton, 'Plato's Distinction between Being and Becoming', *Review of Metaphysics*, 29 (1975), 66–95 at 70 n. 15. Nor do I think Plato confuses the notion of an intersubjectively changing object with that of a private object, as is perhaps suggested by Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 47–8. Rather, Plato initially supports Protagoras with a moderate version of Heracleiteanism, according to which there are intersubjectively available objects that, however, change according to appearance. He then points out that this moderate Heracleiteanism does not allow Protagoras to provide a satisfactory account of seemingly conflicting appearances that occur at some one time. In an effort to provide him with a better account, the initial version of Heracleiteanism is replaced with a new one, according to which there are only private objects, each of which changes according to its perceiver's changing appearances. Plato then argues that Protagoras is committed to an even stronger version of Heracleiteanism, according to which neither objects nor perceivers persist. We begin, then, with a moderate version of Heracleiteanism, which is gradually refined and revised in the face of various objections; as befits a dialectical discussion, Protagoras' commitments are uncovered only gradually. On this interpretation, the account of Heracleiteanism satisfies univocity even though more than one Heracleitean doctrine is considered. For the task is to find an account of Heracleiteanism that plays its assigned role, of being the best support for (T) and (NP), and such that they, in turn, are committed to it. Naturally, enough, then, different doctrines are auditioned for the part, until the most satisfactory candidate is found.

Relativizing truth solves the problem of conflicting appearances without commitment to *any* ontology. Secondly, relativism about truth is not best supported by an ontology of private objects. Indeed, just as taking it to be absolutely true that there are changing objects conflicts with relativism about truth, so too does taking it to be absolutely true that there are private objects.[29]

One might argue that, contrary to what I have been assuming, an ontology of private objects is incompatible with absolute truth. Wittgenstein, for example, famously remarks that, given an ontology of private objects, 'whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right"' (*PI* 1. 258). I myself don't agree. But no one who agrees should think this makes advocating an ontology of private objects consistent with relativism about truth. For if Wittgenstein's argument succeeded, it would equally well show that there are no relative truths, for he is arguing that a private language is impossible; yet though the relativist about truth denies that there are absolute truths, she believes that there are meaningful relative truths. (Whether she is entitled to this claim is of course another question.) So if one argues along Wittgensteinian lines that an ontology of private objects is incompatible with absolute truths, one should concede that it is equally incompatible with relativism about truth.

Even if one at this point agrees that Protagoras is not portrayed as a relativist about truth when he is initially discussed in connection with Heracleitus, one might none the less wish to argue that he is so viewed in the self-refutation argument; and indeed, just this sometimes seems to be assumed.[30] However, if Plato portrays Protagoras as a relativist about truth in the self-refutation argument, but not in linking him to Heracleitus, then

[29] Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 91, also notes that the view that all beliefs are true about private objects is quite different from relativism about truth. None the less, he seems to think that Protagoras espouses both views. For, as we have seen (n. 17), he seems to view Protagoras as a relativist about truth in connection with the self-refutation argument; yet in discussing the 150s, he seems to suggest that Plato sometimes ascribes to Protagoras an ontology of private objects. See pp. 47–51; although in this passage the doctrine of private objects is suggested merely as a possible solution to the problem of conflicting appearances, Bostock appears to believe that Plato at some stages takes Protagoras to endorse it.

It is worth emphasizing that the contradiction I have alleged between relativism about truth and Heracleiteanism does not depend on the synonymy account of relativism. All my argument requires is the claim that relativism about truth denies the existence of absolute truths (either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere). But Heracleiteanism (whether about intersubjectively available changing objects or about private objects) claims that there are such truths. If one view denies the existence of absolute truths, but the other view claims that there are such truths, then the two views conflict. On whether (H) claims that there are such truths, see n. 26.

[30] This may be Bostock's view, though he does not say so explicitly (see previous note). It may also be Dancy's view; see nn. 17 and 26 above, with pp. 74 and 96 of his article.

he violates the univocity criterion.[31] So if I am right to say that Protagoras should not be viewed as a relativist about truth in the 150s, on the ground that that would violate the connection criterion, then we have reason to hope that he is not portrayed as a relativist about truth *anywhere* in the *Theaetetus*. For if he were so portrayed at some stage, either the connection or univocity criteria, or both, would be violated.

VI

Accordingly, I now turn to a second account of Plato's Protagoras that has also been proposed, to see whether it does a better job of satisfying our criteria. It is sometimes argued that Plato's Protagoras resolves the problem of conflicting appearances, at least in the perceptual sphere, by relativizing properties to perceivers. Burnyeat, for example, says that Protagoras 'allows the honey to be both sweet and bitter, subject to the qualification that it is sweet *for* (in relation to) some palates and bitter *for* others. By relativizing the attributions of sweet and bitter Protagoras avoids the contradictions embraced by Heraclitus.'[32] Or again, B. A. O. Williams says that what Protagoras 'relativized were the perceptual terms, such as "hot" '.[33] And David Bostock ascribes to Protagoras what he calls 'the solution by relativity', according to which 'our judgements do concern the same object, but say quite compatible things about it, for the predicate of the judgement should in each case be regarded as relativized to the person making it'.[34] Let us call this view *perceptual relativism*.[35]

According to perceptual relativism, 'There is no such thing as (being)

[31] I mentioned above that the account of Heracleiteanism develops, yet this does not violate univocity. One might then wonder: why can't Plato consider different Protagorean doctrines without violating univocity? The answer is that he can in principle do so (and does do so in so far as he considers both (NP) and (BP)), but that, given the structure of his discussion, univocity would be satisfied only if (NP) were an instance of (BP). See above, n. 14.

[32] M. F. Burnyeat, 'Conflicting Appearances', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979), 69–111 at 71. Burnyeat is here talking about the historical Heracleitus, not about Heracleitus as he is portrayed in the *Theaetetus*. It is interesting to note that although Burnyeat believes that Plato's account of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is historically accurate (see above, sect. 1), he does not seem to think that his account of Heracleitus in the *Theaetetus* is historically accurate.

[33] See his Introduction in *Plato:* Theaetetus (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), p. xiii.

[34] Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 47–8.

[35] Burnyeat uses this phrase for Protagoras' position in 'Conflicting Appearances', 71; see also Burnyeat, *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*, 15. For further discussion of his defence of the view that Protagoras is a perceptual relativist, see my 'Conflicting Appearances' (ch. 7 below). Burnyeat's account of what he calls perceptual relativism may not be identical in all its

white *simpliciter*, only white for you and white for me.'[36] That is, whiteness is a relational rather than an intrinsic property: objects are not white on their own, independently of perception; rather, they are white only in relation to perceivers.[37]

Now it is clear that Plato's Protagoras in some sense relativizes properties to perceivers. But perceptual relativism has a special account of the way in which he does so: it says that an object can appear different without itself genuinely changing. Suppose, for example, that the wind appears cold to me but not to you. As Bostock explains, it 'may very well be that this appearance has changed, not because there has been any change in the wind, but because there has been a change in me. (I have got colder.)'.[38] Or again, in 'Conflicting Appearances' Burnyeat discusses *Theaetetus* 153 D–154 B in some detail. He argues that this passage aims to establish perceptual relativism. And he claims that Plato makes 'absolutely explicit the important point that . . . the argument [on behalf of perceptual relativism] only applies on the assumption that the thing we are talking about remains unchanged'.[39]

According to perceptual relativism, then, 'change' of colour can be a mere Cambridge change in the object.[40] For perceptual relativism says that an

details with Bostock's account of what he calls the solution by relativity; but, so far as I can tell, the two views are the same on the points I discuss here. (Williams does not develop his suggestion in any detail.)

[36] Burnyeat, 'Conflicting Appearances', 78.

[37] As I have described perceptual relativism, it allows that objects are, for example, white, so long as this is correctly understood, as claiming that perceptual properties are relational. Burnyeat seems to suggest this view in the passage quoted from him just above, since he says there that Protagoras 'allows the honey to be both sweet and bitter', so long as we understand that it is so only in some relation or other. Sometimes, however, Burnyeat seems to say instead that, on perceptual relativism, objects are not really white. (He says, for example, that whiteness is 'not a distinct thing existing anywhere at all': 'Conflicting Appearances', 77, cf. 78.) When he speaks in this way, however, he seems to allow that whiteness-tokens, or what are sometimes called tropes, none the less exist. I discuss this further in ch. 7 below. In this chapter, I shall assume that on perceptual relativism objects can be, for example, white, though their whiteness is a relational rather than an intrinsic feature of them, and though the whiteness of an object is a trope rather than a general, shared property.

[38] Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 48; cf. 59.

[39] Burnyeat, 'Conflicting Appearances', 79. The claim that the passage assumes that the object does not change seems to be generally accepted. See e.g. McDowell, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 132; Dancy, 'Theaetetus' First Baby', 79; Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 59; F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The* Theaetetus *and the* Sophist *of Plato*, translated with a running commentary (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935), 40–1 n 1.

[40] P. T. Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 71. Geach introduces a criterion for change that he calls the 'Cambridge criterion': 'The thing called "x" has changed if we have "F(x) at time t" true and "F(x) at time t′" false, for some interpretations of "F", "t", and "t′".' On this criterion, I undergo a Cambridge change if I grow from being 5′1″ to 5′2″; I also undergo one if I come to be shorter than Theaetetus

object is red, in a given relation, if and only if it appears red to the perceiver in that relation. So if an object no longer appears red to that perceiver, it no longer is red in that relation. But an object can cease to appear red to me if I am suddenly struck blind. In this case, perceptual relativism says that the object ceases to be red, in relation to me, without itself genuinely changing; its ceasing to be red is a mere Cambridge change in it.

Perceptual relativism is obviously an account of Narrow rather than of Broad Protagoreanism—of the view, that is, that things are (to one), and are only (to one) however one believes them to be on the basis of perception. And it is usually offered as an interpretation of the early 150s, where private objects have not yet been introduced; at this point objects are still taken to be intersubjectively available.

I suspect that, like relativism about truth, perceptual relativism will appeal to many people. Certainly Locke sometimes seems attracted to it.[41] But is Protagoras a perceptual relativist?

VII

Before answering this question, I attempt to answer another, related question: what, if any, connection is there between perceptual relativism and relativism about truth? Burnyeat appears to believe that they are the same position.[42] In a passage part of which was quoted above, for example, he says:

in virtue of his growth. 'Mere Cambridge changes' are the subclass of Cambridge changes that are not intuitively taken to be genuine changes.

[41] Locke says, for example, that colours and so on are powers in objects to produce certain sorts of sensations in perceivers. (See e.g. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* II. viii. 10: secondary qualities 'are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us'.) This makes them relational: objects have the colours they do partly in virtue of their relation to perceivers. Locke also says that only a thing's primary qualities are its real qualities. (See e.g. *Essay*, II. viii. 17.) So Locke seems to hold that colours are in some sense not real properties of objects (perceptual relativism is sometimes taken to claim this: see n. 37). Locke also seems to be committed to the view that an object can change colour without itself undergoing a genuine change. For he takes it to be essential to an object's being red that it appear red to someone. (See *Essay*, IV. iii. 15. I owe this reference to Nicholas Sturgeon.) So if an object no longer appears red to someone because the person is struck blind, the object no longer is red (in that relation). Locke is then committed to the view that change of secondary qualities can be a mere Cambridge change in the object.

[42] The two views may also be assimilated by E. Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991): on e.g. p. 126 he speaks of Protagoras' relativism; on p. 128, of his view that perception is relational. (However, p. 130 suggests that he might view the attempt to be precise about Protagoras' view as anachronistic.) Williams, by contrast, seems to deny that the two views

Protagoras' doctrine that man is the measure of all things recommends a relativistic account of truth which allows the honey to be both sweet and bitter, subject to the qualification that it is sweet *for* (in relation to) some palates and bitter *for* others. By relativizing the attributions of sweet and bitter Protagoras avoids the contradictions embraced by Heraclitus. ('Conflicting Appearances', 71)

Burnyeat initially says that Protagoras is a relativist about *truth*; but he explains this by saying that Protagoras relativizes *perceptual properties*.[43] Is Burnyeat right to assimilate the two views?

Perceptual relativism is clearly quite different from a completely general relativism about truth. For the former view concerns only sensible qualities, whereas the latter view is more wide-ranging. But is perceptual relativism the same as a relativism about truth that is restricted to the perceptual sphere?

It is important to see that the mere view that perceptual properties are relational does not involve relativism about truth (restricted or unrestricted), as the latter notion has been explained. Consider, for example, the analogy of a good diet. No one diet is good for everyone, so we may say that there is no such thing as a good diet as such; there are only diets that are good for A, good for B, and so on. We can put this by saying that the notion of a good diet is relational. But this sort of *relationalism* (as we might call it) does not import *relativism* about truth. On the contrary, it is an absolute truth that (say) a high-fibre diet is good for Jane but not for Joe. Nor do facts about what constitute good diets for particular people have anything

are equivalent. For he says that 'Protagoras' formulae did not rely on deploying a relativized sense of "true"' (Introduction to *Plato:* Theaetetus, p. xii); and he then goes on to say, in the remark quoted from him above, that Protagoras relativized perceptual terms instead. This suggests that he views relativizing truth as an alternative to relativizing properties. (If this is his view, however, then I am not sure why he goes on to say that '"*It is hot* is true for me" got its content by meaning "It is hot for me".')

[43] Perhaps Burnyeat uses 'relativism about truth' differently in 'Conflicting Appearances' from how he uses it elsewhere, so I would not want to rely on the mere occurrence of the phrase here in order to argue that he takes relativism about truth (as I have explicated it) to be the same as perceptual relativism. However, we have seen that he sometimes understands relativism about truth as I have explicated that notion; and we have also seen that in 'Conflicting Appearances' he ascribes perceptual relativism to Protagoras. So even if the passage just cited does not by itself show that Burnyeat takes relativism about truth and perceptual relativism to be the same, I hope to have shown that he ascribes both views to Protagoras; nor do I know of any place where he suggests that the two views differ (except in so far as perceptual relativism is restricted to perceptual properties, whereas relativism about truth ranges more widely). Similarly, in *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*, 21, Burnyeat says that although initially the Protagorean formula 'x appears F to A' restricts substituends for 'x' and 'F' to sensible objects and perceptual properties, respectively, beliefs and truth eventually count as substituends. This too suggests that Burnyeat views perceptual relativism as an instance or type of relativism about truth.

to do with people's beliefs; a given diet is good for Jane quite independently of whether Jane or anyone else believes that it is.[44]

But even if relationalism as such does not involve relativism about truth, a given version of relationalism might involve it. So we need to ask more precisely what sort of relationalism is involved in perceptual relativism. If the claim is that an object is red if and only if a person's sense organs are stimulated in a certain way, then we still do not have relativism about truth. For this is not to say that there is no absolute truth, no truth *simpliciter*, as to when an object is red. Rather, the claim is that it is absolutely true that an object is red—if and only if a given perceiver's sense organs are stimulated in a given way. Moreover, that a perceiver's sense organs are stimulated in a given way is a wholly objective matter, in the sense that how one's sense organs are stimulated is independent of what anyone believes.[45]

But perceptual relativism claims more than that objects have perceptual properties if and only if a perceiver's sense organs are stimulated in a given way. It also claims that an object is red, in relation to a perceiver, if and only if it *appears* red to that perceiver; and, as we have seen (in Section II), as appearance is understood here it includes (or is a kind of) belief. So perceptual relativism claims that an object is red, in relation to a given perceiver, if and only if that person believes, on the basis of perception, that he is seeing something red. But not even this view involves relativism about truth. Relativism about truth says something about the nature of truth, in particular, that there are no absolute truths—either at all (BP) or in the perceptual domain (NP). So it says that it is not absolutely true, but is at best true for a given person, that an object is red (in relation to a given perceiver). Perceptual relativism, by contrast, says something about the nature of perceptual properties, in particular, that they are relational. According to perceptual relativism, when a perceiver believes, on the basis of perception, that he is seeing something red, it is absolutely true that he is doing so. This conflicts with the claim that it is merely relatively true that he is doing so. Of course, if perceptual relativism is true, then only certain claims are true. But this says that perceptual relativism has implications for which propositions are true. It does not say—and it is

[44] For these points, see Taylor, *Plato:* Protagoras, 133–4. Taylor says that those who find an allusion to Protagoreanism (which, as we saw in n. 17, he takes to be relativism about truth) in the view that 'good' is a relational predicate, such that things are good only in some relation or other, are involved in 'sheer confusion' (p. 134). See also P. Railton, 'Facts and Value', *Philosophical Topics*, 14 (1986), 5–31 at 10–11.

[45] We might, however, say that this account none the less makes perceptual properties subjective, in so far as perceivers are one of the relata. If this is right, then not every sort of objectivity excludes every sort of subjectivity.

not true—that perceptual relativism implies that any beliefs are merely relatively true.

Perhaps the conflict between the two views can be seen more clearly by contrasting the following two sentences:

(1) It is absolutely true that this apple is red, in relation to a given perceiver, if and only if it appears red to that perceiver.
(2) It is not absolutely true that this apple is red; rather, it is true only for the person who believes it.

Perceptual relativism asserts (1);[46] relativism about truth asserts (2). But (1) and (2) are incompatible, since (1) takes a given proposition to be absolutely true, whereas (2) denies that it is.[47]

Here it might be useful to distinguish between *objective* and *absolute* truth. Let us say that an objective truth is one that obtains independently of belief,[48] and that an absolute truth is one that is true *simpliciter*, that is simply flat-out true rather than being merely relatively true, i.e. merely

[46] Gary Matthews has objected to me that perceptual relativism doesn't explicitly say that it is absolutely true that objects have perceptual properties only in relation to perceivers; it doesn't explicitly make any claims about the nature of truth. Doesn't this show that it is less clear than I make it out to be that perceptual relativism conflicts with relativism about truth? I agree that perceptual relativism doesn't explicitly mention absolute (or any other sort of) truth. But I think that, as Burnyeat and others conceive it, perceptual relativism is intended to be a metaphysical thesis about the real nature of perceptual properties; it is intended to explain how things really are, even if it doesn't explicitly say that that is the status of its claims. (And that it doesn't say anything about the status of its claims is hardly surprising: when I say 'It's raining' (or whatever), I don't usually trouble to add: 'By the way, I think it's really true that it's raining'.) If this is right, then the two views do conflict in the way I suggest, even if perceptual relativism doesn't explicitly claim to be an absolute truth. See above, n. 26, for a parallel discussion in connection with (H). (In *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*, 16–17, Burnyeat contrasts what he calls a physical and a metaphysical interpretation of the theory of perception, and seems to endorse the latter. Later, however, he contrasts instead a literal and metaphorical interpretation (p. 48). These are not the same contrast. Nor do we need to choose between saying that the theory of perception provides a description of the physical process of perception and saying that it presents a certain metaphysical picture.)

[47] (1) and (2) are both different from:

(3) 'It is true for me that the apple is red' is absolutely (relatively) true.

(3) is a higher-order statement than (1) or (2). Perceptual relativism says nothing about the status of propositions like 'It is true for me that p'. Of course, unrestricted relativism about truth takes such propositions to be merely relatively true. I am not sure whether such higher-order propositions about perceptual appearances fall within the scope of relativism about truth when it is restricted to the perceptual sphere. But it doesn't matter, since it is only (1) and (2) that are relevant at this point.

[48] As Sydney Shoemaker has pointed out to me, this account of objectivity is not quite right, since some propositions about what people believe are objectively true. But I hope the account none the less suffices for present purposes.

believed true by someone. Perceptual relativism and relativism about truth both deny that there are any objective truths in the perceptual domain. But the two views none the less conflict, since relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths (in the perceptual domain, or *tout court*), whereas perceptual relativism claims that there are such truths. Perceptual relativism is a metaphysical thesis about the conditions that have to obtain in the world for it to be the case that an object has a perceptual property; it is a thesis about how the world really is. But relativism about truth denies that there is a way the world really is.[49]

One might argue that, contrary to what I have said, perceptual relativism does not countenance absolute truths, propositions that are true *simpliciter*. For, as we have seen, perceptual relativism says that there is no such thing as being white *simpliciter*. Does it not then follow that perceptual relativism denies the existence of absolute truths, at least in the perceptual sphere? No, it does not. For, as we have seen, to say that there is no such thing as being white *simpliciter* is to say that whiteness is a relational property. But to say that whiteness is a relational property does not imply that there are no absolute truths as to when an object is white in a given relation.[50]

One might also claim that perceptual relativism is tantamount to a restricted version of relativism about truth, on the ground that in making perceptual properties relative to perceivers, it makes them private: the redness that I perceive can be seen only by me; each person perceives numerically distinct perception tokens, indeed, as Plato makes clear (154 A 6–8), qualitatively different ones as well. But, as we have seen, privacy does not import relativism about truth.[51] Even if a given redness-token is accessible

[49] As I mentioned above (n. 37), perceptual relativism is sometimes described as the view that objects in some sense do not really have perceptual properties. On this characterization, perceptual relativism does deny that it is flat-out true that objects have perceptual properties, and this might make it seem closer to relativism about truth. But if perceptual relativism denies that it is flat-out true that objects have perceptual properties, it does not do so because it denies that there are absolute truths. Rather, it is because (on this interpretation) it claims that it is absolutely, flat-out false that objects have such properties. But such a claim is still incompatible with relativism about truth, since the latter denies that there are absolute falsehoods.

[50] As we have seen, to deny that anything is white *simpliciter* may also be to say that there is no general property whiteness, but only whiteness-tokens or tropes. But neither does this mean that there are no absolute truths as to when things have such tokens or, at least, as to when they exist: they exist when and only when they are perceived to exist.

[51] Earlier we saw that countenancing private objects doesn't get one to relativism about truth, either because, on my view, there are absolute truths about such objects or because, on a Wittgensteinian view, there can be neither absolute nor relative truths about such objects. Perceptual relativism doesn't introduce private objects. But it might seem to make perceptual properties private. My point then is that just as countenancing private objects

only to me, and even if its existence is dependent on my perceiving it, it might none the less be absolutely true that it exists.[52]

I have been arguing that perceptual relativism, so far from being a sort of relativism about truth, actually conflicts with it. For the former purports to tell us the real nature of perceptual properties—it is offered as an absolute truth about their nature—whereas the latter denies that there are any absolute truths. Even if one rejects my argument, one should none the less, I think, agree that the two views are at least different, in so far as relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths (*tout court* or in the perceptual sphere), whereas perceptual relativism does not deny this.

But suppose that even this weaker view is wrong, and that perceptual relativism is a sort of relativism about truth. Then we already have reason to hope that Plato does not portray Protagoras as a perceptual relativist. For if he does so, and if perceptual relativism is a sort of relativism about truth, and if I was right to argue that relativism about truth violates the connection criterion, then perceptual relativism would also violate it. If, however, I am right to say that perceptual relativism conflicts with (or at least differs from) relativism about truth, then we still need to ask whether it is adequate as an interpretation of Narrow Protagoreanism. So let us now turn to the adequacy of perceptual relativism on the assumption that it conflicts with (or at least differs from) relativism about truth in the way in which I have suggested.

VIII

Even if perceptual relativism is conceived as I have conceived it, so that it conflicts with (or at least differs from) relativism about truth, we still have reason to hope that Plato does not portray Protagoras as a perceptual relativist; for like relativism about truth, perceptual relativism violates the connection criterion. This can be seen as follows.

Perceptual relativism allows an object to appear different without changing. Indeed, we have seen that, according to Burnyeat, the argument on its behalf, in 153 D–154 B, depends on the assumption that an object remains the same when it appears different. So according to Burnyeat Plato supports Protagoras, at least at one stage, not with a Heracleitean ontology

does not import relativism about truth, neither does countenancing private properties do so.

[52] It would in this case not be objectively true that it exists; but we have seen that one can deny that there are any objective truths yet countenance absolute truths.

of changing objects, but with an ontology of stable objects. That sort of support would indeed be appropriate for perceptual relativism. But that very fact shows that perceptual relativism is the wrong sort of doctrine to import here. For Plato says that Protagoras is best supported by Heracleiteanism, yet perceptual relativism is not best so supported since in contrast to Heracleiteanism it allows objects to remain stable even when they appear different.

It is true, as we have noticed, that the relevant version of Heracleiteanism develops. Perhaps in 153–4 Heracleiteanism is weak enough to allow objects to remain the same when they appear different? This is, of course, in principle possible. But in Chapter 7 I argue that the text of 153–4 does not in fact assume that objects can remain the same when they appear different, and hence the requisite support for perceptual relativism is not in fact in place.[53] Nor is it invoked later. Indeed, as Heracleiteanism develops it becomes increasingly clear that it cannot support, but indeed conflicts with, perceptual relativism. At 156 A 1–3, for example, Plato says that 'everything that's been said depends on the assumption that the universe is change and *nothing else*'. The claim that the universe is change and nothing else conflicts with perceptual relativism, according to which objects are sometimes stable.

Not only is perceptual relativism not best supported by Heracleiteanism as it is described in the *Theaetetus*, but neither is it committed to it. Perceptual relativism can dissolve the problem of conflicting appearances by saying that perceivers have changed; it need not posit changes in objects and, in fact, it declines to do so in at least some cases, which it claims are mere Cambridge changes in objects. Yet positing genuine changes in objects is precisely what Heracleiteanism does.[54] As Bostock remarks, 'if one sticks firmly to the approach in terms of relativity, there is no obvious temptation

[53] Perceptual relativism has several components, and I think Plato's Protagoras accepts some of them. For example, he clearly thinks that perceptual properties are in some sense relational. But the crucial question here is whether he thinks they are relational in the particular way described by perceptual relativism, such that objects can remain unchanged when they appear different. My claim here is only that this particular aspect of perceptual relativism is not involved even in 153 D–154 B.

[54] Again, one might argue that the relevant version of Heracleiteanism develops. Perhaps at an early stage, changes in perceivers will do; one need not posit corresponding changes in objects. But see above. We have seen, of course, that at a later stage of discussion, seemingly conflicting appearances between different observers, or between a 'single' observer over time, are dissolved by appealing not to a single changing object but to different objects. But neither does this view fit with perceptual relativism since it does not allow objects to remain unchanged while appearing differently; on the contrary, each new occasion of perception (appearance) is the perception of a different object, which is only as it appears to be.

to be led from these considerations to anything resembling the doctrine of Heraclitean flux, as that appears in our dialogue'.[55]

IX

I have argued so far that Plato's Protagoras is not satisfactorily interpreted either as a perceptual relativist or as a relativist about truth; for both views violate the connection criterion. Nor should Plato attribute first one view, then the other, to Protagoras; for then the univocity criterion would be violated.[56] Fortunately, however, another and better interpretation of Plato's Protagoras is available—one that satisfies the connection criterion.[57]

We saw above that Burnyeat contrasts relativism about truth (the view he thinks Plato ascribes to Protagoras) with subjectivism (a view he thinks Plato does not ascribe to Protagoras, though he thinks that all ancient commentators aside from Plato interpret Protagoras in this way). According to subjectivism, again, all beliefs are true—true *simpliciter*, not merely true for the one who holds them. Though Burnyeat calls this view subjectivism, I shall call it *infallibilism*.[58]

[55] Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 49.

[56] At least, this is so if, as I have argued, perceptual relativism is not a version of relativism about truth.

[57] I believe that the view I go on to describe also satisfies the univocity criterion—that is, I believe that Plato construes both (NP) and (BP) along infallibilist lines. For a defence of the view that (BP) should be interpreted along infallibilist lines, see ch. 8; see also n. 14.

[58] I do so partly because 'subjectivism' is used in so many different ways that its use here would only add to the confusion. We saw above (n. 17), for example, that Taylor and Dancy use 'subjectivism' for the view that Burnyeat calls 'relativism'. Moreover, 'subjectivism' might misleadingly suggest that all objects and properties are mental entities. But infallibilism does not claim this. It claims that things are—really are—(and are only, since (P) is a biconditional: see sect. II) however they are believed to be, where at least many objects and their properties are extra-mental, though the existence of all objects and properties depends on their being perceived or believed to be as they are. (I say 'many' because infallibilism does not deny the existence of mental objects and properties.) The label 'infallibilism' avoids the difficulties the label 'subjectivism' gives rise to, and it also captures the fact that we are all infallible as to how things really are.

S. Waterlow, 'Protagoras and Inconsistency', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 59 (1977), 19–36, at e.g. 32, distinguishes between what she calls relativism about truth and relativism about fact; and she argues that Plato portrays Protagoras as a relativist about fact. So like me, she denies that Plato takes Protagoras to be a relativist about truth; and relativism about fact is in many ways like infallibilism. However, her article focuses on the self-refutation argument, which I do not discuss here; hence our defences of our alternative to relativism about truth likewise differ. We also differ in further ways, some of which I explore in ch. 8.

Just as we earlier distinguished between narrow and broad versions of relativism about truth, to correspond to the difference between Narrow and Broad Protagoreanism, so we need to distinguish between narrow and broad infallibilism. Narrow infallibilism says that all perceptual beliefs are absolutely true; broad infallibilism says that all beliefs whatever are absolutely true. Since (P) is a biconditional,[59] infallibilism says that objects are, and are only, as they appear to be; so, all (perceptual) beliefs are true, and there are no (perceptual) truths that are not believed.

Infallibilism differs from both perceptual relativism and relativism about truth. For example, infallibilism holds that all beliefs (either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere) are absolutely true, whereas relativism about truth denies the existence of absolute truths (either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere). And in contrast to perceptual relativism, infallibilism holds that objects cannot appear different without genuinely changing. For infallibilism says that objects are—really are—however they appear to be. But then, if an object appears first green, then not green, it was green, then not green—it was really green, then really not green—and so it must have changed. Even if the object no longer appears green to me because I have been struck blind, still, according to infallibilism the object none the less undergoes a genuine change, from being green to not being green.[60]

It might seem that infallibilism is so implausible that we should, if possible, avoid importing it into the text. Burnyeat, for example, claims that infallibilism 'is in clear violation of the law of contradiction'.[61] But this claim is too quick. It would be true if the world were populated by stable, intersubjectively available objects. But that is precisely why Plato has Protagoras reject this view of the world in favour of Heracleiteanism.

[59] See sect. II.

[60] Alternatively, when private momentary objects are on the scene, the object ceases to exist when there is a different case of perception. At this stage, every case of perception involves the perception of a numerically distinct object by a numerically distinct perceiver. But there is still constant change in so far as neither objects nor perceivers persist from one moment to the next; and each object is exactly as it is perceived. Hence at no stage do objects merely Cambridge change according to perception.

[61] Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', 46. One might also ask why, if Plato's Protagoras is an infallibilist, Plato uses the qualifier 'to one' in describing his position. I cannot provide a full reply here. But, briefly, if (P) is a biconditional, then one role the qualifiers play is to indicate that a proposition can be true only if it is believed true, and so in that sense every truth is true for someone. Secondly, we have seen that at least (NP) is eventually supported by means of, and is committed to, an ontology of private objects; such objects exist only for a particular person. So the qualifiers play at least two roles on infallibilism. It is also important to note that Plato does not consistently include the qualifier either in refuting or in reporting Protagoras; and when it is included, it does not always (or even usually) qualify truth.

This, in turn, shows that whatever the intrinsic implausibility of infallibilism, it has a big advantage over both relativism about truth and perceptual relativism, considered as an interpretation of Protagoras as he is portrayed in the *Theaetetus*: unlike these latter two views, infallibilism makes Protagoras' Heracleitean connections clear. Unlike relativism about truth and perceptual relativism, that is, infallibilism satisfies the connection criterion. For if objects are, and are only, as they appear, then, given that objects constantly appear different, objects are constantly changing; and so infallibilism is committed to Heracleiteanism.[62]

It is also clear how Heracleiteanism supports narrow infallibilism.[63] Narrow infallibilism says that all perceptual beliefs are true. But then suppose that at one time you believe the wind is cold, and at another time I believe it is not. Infallibilism says that both our beliefs are true; as we have seen, Heracleiteanism explains how this can be so without violating the law of noncontradiction. It describes a world in which Protagoras can maintain that at least many seemingly conflicting beliefs are all true without contradiction. Whether infallibilism in the end violates the law of non-

[62] I noted above (n. 10) that Plato does not argue that the three theses 'imply' one another all on their own; rather, their connections are secured only with the aid of additional assumptions. An additional assumption used in connecting (P) and (H) is the one just mentioned: that objects constantly appear different. Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus, 49, asks why we should assume this. There are at least two replies. One is that it is a plausible assumption given that, as Plato plausibly says at 154 A 3–8, conditions are never exactly the same. A second reply is that Protagoras must allow that it is at least possible that things never appear the same; and so Plato asks what the world would be like if something Protagoras takes to be possible were actual. In this latter case, his claim is that Protagoras must allow that the most extreme sort of Heracleiteanism is at least possible. If Plato can show that it is not possible (as he aims to do in 181–3), then this counts against Protagoreanism.

Gary Matthews has objected to me that since infallibilism on its own does not 'imply' (H) (since we need the additional assumption that objects constantly appear different), it does not satisfy the connection criterion. I agree that infallibilism on its own does not 'imply' (H); but neither does relativism about truth or perceptual relativism do so. But, as I have said, Plato connects the three theses only with the aid of additional assumptions. Hence, to see whether the connection criterion is satisfied, we need to see whether (P) and (H) are appropriately connected once these additional assumptions are made clear. I am suggesting that the crucial assumption used in order to link (P) and (H) is that objects always appear different. I think that when this assumption is coupled with infallibilism, we get an appropriate connection to (H); but coupling it with relativism about truth or perceptual relativism does not yield an appropriate connection.

[63] In 181–3 Plato agues that an extreme Heracleiteanism cannot be sustained, and so there is clearly a sense in which it does not support Protagoras. But there is an intuitive sense in which Heracleiteanism is the sort of doctrine Protagoras needs to appeal to to support his position, to allow all seemingly conflicting beliefs to be absolutely true without conflict. We again need to bear the dialectical context in mind. Plato initially shows how Heracleiteanism supports Protagoras; he then goes on to argue that, though this is the best support available to Protagoras, it isn't good enough.

contradiction, especially when it strays outside the perceptual sphere, or for seemingly conflicting beliefs that occur at some one time, is another question.[64] The present point is that even if it violates the law of noncontradiction at some stage, Heracleiteanism is introduced to show that it is not as vulnerable on this score as it initially seems to be. Once we bear the dialectical structure of this part of the dialogue firmly in mind, and keep the connection criterion in view, we can see how Heracleitus allows Protagoras to hold on to the law of noncontradiction in at least many cases.

An account of Protagoras is available, then, on which the connection criterion is satisfied; and that, in turn, gives us some reason to favour the account.[65] Of course, a full defence of the claim that Plato portrays Protagoras as an infallibilist would require a more detailed account than I have provided both of Plato's complicated arguments linking the three theses and of his characterization of each of them. Nor have I asked whether infallibilism satisfies the univocity criterion. Some of these gaps are filled in the next two chapters. In Chapter 7 I argue that infallibilism fits the text of the 150s better than perceptual relativism does. And in Chapter 8 I argue that Plato's refutation of Protagoras is aimed against infallibilism.[66]

Suppose that Plato does portray Protagoras as an infallibilist. Does he, in so doing, portray him as relativist as well—that is, is infallibilism a kind of relativism? It depends, as I said in the beginning, on how we choose to use the term 'relativism'. If we reserve it for views that deny the existence of absolute truths in some domain, as I should like to do, then Plato does

[64] Note that when Protagoras moves to private objects, he eliminates further seeming conflicts between different people: if at t_1 we both say 'The wind is cold', we do not contradict one another, since we are speaking about different winds. This is, of course, part of the reason the move is made, to allow more seemingly conflicting beliefs all to be true without contradiction. Infallibilism therefore also does a good job of explaining why the first version of Heracleiteanism—which posits changes in intersubjectively available objects—gives way to another version, according to which there are private objects. Further, making the private objects and perceivers momentary eliminates the possibility of a single person contradicting herself over time. See n. 28.

[65] Note that if Plato portrays Protagoras as an infallibilist, then his account meshes with that of other ancient commentators, for, as Burnyeat notes ('Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', 46; the relevant passage is quoted above), that is how they portray Protagoras. That might give us yet another reason to suppose that Plato so portrays Protagoras. For example, Aristotle's account of Protagoras in *Metaphysics Γ* is so deeply indebted to Plato's that I cannot believe that they have fundamentally different interpretations of Protagoras. Burnyeat, by contrast, views their allegedly different accounts of Protagoras as a 'historical puzzle' ('Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', 46).

[66] Further, in 'Relativism and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*' I argue that if Plato's refutation of Protagoras were aimed against relativism about truth, it would fail.

not portray Protagoras as a relativist.[67] But however we use the word, we need to be clear what position Plato ascribes to Protagoras. We also need to distinguish among different views that have been misleadingly assimilated. In this chapter, I hope to have taken some preliminary steps in this direction.[68]

[67] On this account, perceptual relativism is not a version of relativism either. R. Bett, 'The Sophists and Relativism', *Phronesis*, 34 (1989), 139–69, argues that, with the possible exception of Protagoras, none of the sophists was a relativist in any deep or interesting sense. If my argument in this chapter is correct, and if Burnyeat is right to say that Plato's account of Protagoras is the most authoritative, then the historical Protagoras is not an exception. But (see n. 3) it is difficult to be sure whether Plato's account is accurate. One might think that it is more likely to be correct if, as on my account, it meshes with that given by other ancient commentators, than if, as on Burnyeat's, it diverges from them. But, on the other hand, one might argue that other ancient commentators are indebted to Plato's, possibly erroneous, account; or perhaps the historical Protagoras did not hold a view as determinate as the view Plato makes it out to be. So even if ancient commentators are unanimous in their interpretation of Protagoras, we could not infer that they are all correct.

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