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Author(s): Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson

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Plato's Self-Refutation Argument in *Theaetetus* 171A-C Revisited

EYJÓLFUR KJALAR EMILSSON

The last of a sequence of arguments Plato advances against Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the measure of all things in the *Theaetetus* is the argument that has come to be known as the Self-Refutation Argument (171A6-C3). Commentators have correctly pointed out that in this passage Plato is applying to itself Protagoras' Measure doctrine – understood as the doctrine that what seems to someone, or what someone judges, is true for that person. It is uncontroversial that the ostensible result of applying the doctrine to itself is Protagoras' confession – which Socrates and Theodorus obtain in his absence – that the doctrine is false: he is made to agree that the doctrine is false because it is supposed to imply that those who judge it to be false are right. But there is little agreement on precisely how the argument is supposed to work, on its function in the context of the dialogue as a whole or on its soundness.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the argument is the absence of the qualifiers indicating for whom the various propositions are true. It has seemed to many that this omission is illegitimate and that Protagoras could rightly insist that the qualifiers be respected. If this were done, no confession could be forced from him as to the falsity of the Measure doctrine: Protagoras might admit that his doctrine is false for his opponents, but he could plausibly insist that their view is false for him.¹ Yet, as Plato shows himself to be perfectly aware of the importance of the qualifiers elsewhere in the dialogue, it is hard to believe that their omission is a simple error. For such reasons some interpreters regard the argument as not fully serious.²

¹ Cf. George Grote, *Plato and the other Companions of Sokrates*, vol. II (London, 1875), 347ff.; Gregory Vlastos, *Plato's Protagoras* (Indianapolis and New York, 1956), xiv, n. 29; W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1962), 16; Kenneth M. Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method* (Chicago and London, 1969), 87-88; David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford, 1988), 90-1.

² Edward N. Lee, "'Hoist with His Own Petard': Ironic and Comic Elements in Plato's Critique of Protagoras (*Tht.* 161-171)" in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument, Studies in Greek Philosophy presented to Gregory Vlastos* (*Phronesis*, supp. vol. I [1973]).

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It is clear and in fact taken for granted by most interpreters that *Theaetetus* 171A6-B8 reports in a dialogue between Socrates and Theodorus another hypothetical dialogue between Protagoras and opponents of his doctrine that Man is the measure of all things. That is to say, these lines report a hypothetical exchange between Protagoras and his opponents as a result of which Protagoras is supposed to admit the falsity of his doctrine. My main concern in this paper is to provide a plausible reconstruction of this original hypothetical dialogue. In particular, this involves explaining what is going on in lines B4-B8, whose function in the argument has generally been left unexplained. I come to the conclusion that a plausible reconstruction must suppose the qualifiers to be used in Protagoras' hypothetical words. I contend that 171B4 must be understood as the opponents' refusal to let Protagoras escape by means of qualification. Secondly, I evaluate Plato's argument so reconstructed. My conclusion is that even if Plato does not prove Protagoras inconsistent here, he succeeds in silencing him in the sense that the opponents can claim to have obtained everything they wished for from Protagoras who does not have anything plausible to say in return.

In his "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*" Myles Burnyeat undertakes to defend Plato's argument.³ I agree with Burnyeat on most of the philosophical background issues. In particular, I agree that on Protagoras' theory the propositions "It seems to Socrates that *p*" and "It is true for Socrates that *p*" are intended to be equivalent but different in meaning and that Protagoras' Measure Doctrine is best construed as a doctrine of personal worlds, as it were, in which everything really is as it seems to the person whose world is being described. A crucial step in Protagoras' undoing is the consequence of the Measure doctrine that those who do not believe in it live in a world where truth is not relative.⁴ Furthermore, it seems to me that Burnyeat gives compelling reasons for believing that the argument is quite seriously meant and for interpreting it in such a way that the qualifiers are understood in the relevant places.⁵ However, as Burnyeat's interpretation of the argument itself is unsatisfactory, I shall propose a new interpretation of it.

Here is the text of the passage itself (171A6-C5), numbering the steps for convenience in later references.

³ M. F. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *The Philosophical Review* 85 (1976), 172-95 (hereafter referred to as "Burnyeat").

⁴ Burnyeat, 179-83.

⁵ Burnyeat, 174-7. S. S. Tigner, in "The 'Exquisite' Argument at *Th.* 171A", *Mnemosyne* 24 (1971), 366-9 and S. Waterlow, in "Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171A6-C7," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977), 19-36, both argue, using different strategies, that Plato's argument works even if the qualifiers are not understood.

(1) SOCRATES: Secondly, it [Protagoras' *Truth*] has this most exquisite feature: He [Protagoras], agreeing that everyone judges what is the case, presumably agrees with the view of those who contradict his own doctrine [i.e. the Measure doctrine] thinking that he is wrong.

THEODORUS: Certainly.

(2) SOCRATES: So wouldn't he concede that his own view is false, if he agrees that the view of those who believe that he is wrong is true?

THEODORUS: Necessarily.

(3) SOCRATES: But the others, for their part, don't concede that they are wrong.

THEODORUS: No.

(4) SOCRATES: And he [Protagoras], again, admits that this judgement too is true, according to what he has written.

THEODORUS: Evidently.

(5) SOCRATES: So Protagoras' doctrine will be disputed by everyone, starting with Protagoras – or rather it is admitted by him, when he concedes to the person who maintains the opposite that he judges truly – Protagoras himself concedes that neither a dog nor anyone you happen to meet is a measure of anything he has not learnt. Isn't that so?

THEODORUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So, since it is disputed by everyone, Protagoras' *Truth* would not be true for anyone, neither for someone else nor for himself.

The passage has a rather peculiar form: as is shown by the frequent use of "he admits", "they do not admit" and the like, it is a dialogue between Socrates and Theodorus about an imaginary dialogue between Protagoras and some unnamed opponents of his Measure doctrine. The propositions Theodorus is supposed to admit or refuse to admit are the moves in that other dialogue. It may be worthwhile to attempt to reconstruct in its direct form the subordinate dialogue that is being produced within the main dialogue, for unless we are absolutely clear about the moves in the former we cannot understand the moves in the latter. In the reconstruction I insert the qualifiers at the relevant places. For the general reasons given by Burnyeat and for other reasons as well that will become evident shortly, I believe Plato intended his readers to understand the qualifiers as included. The reconstruction of the subordinate dialogue within (1) and (2) is relatively straightforward. It must be along the following lines:

(1S) OPPONENTS: Protagoras! We judge that you are wrong in holding the Measure doctrine. You must agree that we are right in this, since you agree,⁶ by this very

⁶ Earlier in the discussion, at 170A3-4, it has been established that Protagoras actually says that what seems to a person is so for that person. As pointed out by McDowell, Plato uses "judge" (δοξάζειν) and "seem to" (δοχεῖν) interchangeably in this section of the discussion (*Plato, Theaetetus*, Translated with Notes by John McDowell, [Oxford, 1973] 69). In fact ἡγεῖσθαι ("believe," "hold") and κρίνειν ("judge") are also used as equivalents of these, cf. e.g. 170C7, 171A8 and 170D4ff.

doctrine, that what a person judges is so for that person.

PROTAGORAS: Yes, I concede that so it is for you.

(2S) OPPONENTS: Then you must admit that your view is false.

PROTAGORAS: Yes, it is false for you.

The reconstruction of the internal dialogue of (3) and (4) is more difficult. It is unclear what the point of these lines is and no interpreter I am aware of has given a satisfactory account of them. If no qualifiers are inserted or understood in the argument Plato has in (2) all he needs, even if illegitimately obtained, where he has Protagoras admit that the Measure doctrine is false. (He may even be said to have all he needs in (1) as (2) is a very obvious move from (1) involving the inference “false that *p*” from “true that *p* is false.”) For Burnyeat, on the other hand, who locates the culmination of the argument in 171B9-C3, i.e. in our (5), and takes the qualifiers to be understood, steps (3) and (4) are merely “a small but perfectly correct point . . . an extra turn of the screw.”⁷ As these are the last steps before what is the general conclusion of the argument in (5) one would expect that these steps were somehow instrumental in reaching that conclusion. I will later argue that indeed they are. But how do Protagoras and his opponents continue their dialogue in such a way that their admissions and rejections are reported by (3) and (4)? Without a plausible account of that exchange we do not even know what is being said in these steps of the argument.⁸

Burnyeat suggests that the point of (3) and (4) is the following: “Protagoras must concede that his opponents’ judgment that their opinion that his

⁷ Burnyeat, 186-7.

⁸ The difficulties of interpreting (3) and (4) are increased by a textual problem in (3). All other manuscripts have *ἑαυτοῖς*, “to themselves,” but W has the accusative *ἑαυτούς*, “themselves.” If the W reading is adopted, the construction of the sentence is simple and, hence, so is its translation: “But the others, for their part, don’t admit that they are wrong.” Most translators, even if they read the dative, translate in this way and I shall proceed as if this is the meaning of the sentence. There are two possibilities of extracting a different meaning from the dative reading, neither of which gives good sense. (a) The dative *ἑαυτοῖς* stands with *ψεύδεσθαι*, “to be wrong.” This would give something like: “But they, for their part, do not admit that they are wrong for themselves.” The dative would presumably have to be taken as some sort of a Protagorean qualifier. But not even in Protagorean language does there seem to be anything describable as “being wrong for oneself.” (b) The dative *ἑαυτοῖς* is governed by *συγχωροῦσιν*, and the subject of the infinitive, if stated, would be *ἑαυτούς*: “But they, for their part, do not admit to themselves that they are wrong.” This too is peculiar, if the admission is understood to be specifically to the opponents themselves. As we noted above the use of verbs meaning “to admit” throughout 171A6-171C3 shows that Plato is thinking in terms of a dialogue between Protagoras and his opponents. One should expect that any mention of admission or refusal to admit on the opponents’ part would be to Protagoras rather than to the opponents themselves.

theory is false (*simpliciter*) is not false but true (*simpliciter*) is itself true – for the opponents whose judgement it is.”⁹ In other words, Protagoras admits in (4) that it is true for the opponents that it is true (*simpliciter*) that the Measure doctrine is false (*simpliciter*). Thus, according to Burnyeat, (3) presumably reports some statement of the opponents such as the following: “We, on the other hand,¹⁰ judge that we are not wrong, but on the contrary right (*simpliciter*), in holding your view to be false (*simpliciter*).” And to this Protagoras is thought to respond: “Yes, that is true for you.” There are several difficulties in this interpretation. First, if the opponents are stating their *judgement* that the Measure doctrine is false, as Burnyeat supposes, it is unnatural to report that by saying that the opponents refuse to admit something or other. In a dialogue context as here, “don’t admit” indeed suggests that Protagoras is supposed to have said something to which the opponents refuse to give their assent, not merely that the opponents assert something. I shall return to this point in a little while. Secondly, why should the opponents’ insistence on the *unqualified truth* of their view of the Measure doctrine be reported by (3), which merely says something about the opponents not admitting that they are wrong? The sentence, “We do not admit that we are wrong” is an inappropriate report of a statement the main point of which is to affirm the opponents’ judgement that they are right.¹¹ Thirdly, as I remarked above, given their position just before the conclusion of the argument, introduced by “then” (ἄρα), these steps ought not to be just an idle turn of the screw. So a more satisfactory account of (3) and (4) than the one Burnyeat offers is required.

As I noted above, the phrase “they do not admit” in (3) suggests that Plato imagines Protagoras to have said something which the opponents do not accept. Plato is claiming that there is a disparity in what Protagoras, on the one hand, and his opponents, on the other, are compelled to admit to each other. Such contrast is in fact evident in Plato’s choice of particles where οἱ δέ γε in (3) (171B4) picks up ἐκείνους μὲν in 171A6. So what might Protagoras have said such that it is appropriate to report his opponents’ response by (3)? Clearly he said something about his opponents being wrong. But what can Protagoras, who according to Plato is committed to holding that nobody thinks what is false have said about somebody’s being wrong? Plato cannot have supposed him to have said “You are wrong

⁹ Burnyeat, 187.

¹⁰ Here the opponents contrast themselves with Protagoras, who in (2) concedes his own view to be false for the opponents.

¹¹ If the point was the one Burnyeat suggests, this part of the subordinate dialogue would have been reported in (3): “But the others judge that they hold what is [about his view]” or something equivalent.

(*simpliciter*),” since thereby he would be granting his opponents’ claim, that some people are wrong *simpliciter*. If Protagoras says something about the falsity of some view, he must be supposed to qualify his statement by “for me”. This fact provides a strong reason for thinking that Plato meant the qualifiers to be understood in Protagoras’ contentions implicit in the report. So Protagoras must be supposed to have retorted after his admission in (2S):

(3S) PROTAGORAS: But you must admit that your view is false *for me*.
OPPONENTS: No, we do not admit that.

This is immediately followed by (4), where the opponents add:

(4S) Moreover, you must admit that that judgement of ours [i.e. that our view of the Measure doctrine isn’t false for you] is true.
PROTAGORAS: I admit that so it is for you.

By this last step the opponents, still speaking on the assumption that Protagoras believes in his doctrine, establish that so far as they are concerned truth is not relative even for Protagoras. Hence, they take themselves to have Protagoras’ assent to a refusal on their part to accept any relative statement: they will regard no such statement as true and Protagoras cannot dispute that nor expect them to take him seriously if he attempts to escape by means of “but for me you are wrong about this”.

Let us now see the whole internal dialogue in context along with Plato’s account of it:

(1S) OPPONENTS: Protagoras! We judge that you are wrong in holding the Measure doctrine. You must agree that we are right in this, since you agree, by this very doctrine, that what a person judges is so for that person.
PROTAGORAS: Yes, I concede that so it is for you.
(2S) OPPONENTS: Then you must admit that your view is false.
PROTAGORAS: Yes, it is false for you. (3S) But you must admit that your view is false *for me*.
OPPONENTS: No, we do not admit that. (4S) Moreover, you must admit that that judgement of ours [i.e. that our view of the Measure doctrine isn’t false for you] is true.
PROTAGORAS: I admit that so it is for you.

From this Plato concludes in (5) that the Measure doctrine is disputed by everyone including Protagoras, a claim he then immediately modifies by saying that Protagoras concedes that the Measure doctrine is false and that nobody is a measure of anything he has not acquired knowledge of, which is of course what his opponents maintain.

Steps (3) and (4) interpreted in this way make extremely good sense. It would be natural for Protagoras at this stage to claim that the view of those

who deny his doctrine is false for him. Such a remark is exactly what the critics who find fault with the omission of the qualifiers have missed. It is also quite natural for the opponents to refuse to admit this. On this reading the opponents' position reported in (3) is contrasted with Protagoras' position in (2): (2) says that Protagoras will admit his own view to be false for his opponents and (3) says, by contrast, that the opponents will not give a parallel admission to Protagoras. Finally (4) forces from Protagoras the admission that the opponents' view in (3S) is warranted.

It is correct to contrast, as Plato does here, what Protagoras, on the one hand, and his opponents, on the other, are committed to admitting: Protagoras is really compelled to confess that his doctrine is false for his opponents, whereas they are not committed to a parallel admission to him. For why should the opponents admit that their own view is false for Protagoras? Of course, if the phrase "*p* is true for A" is simply synonymous with "A judges that *p*" or "It seems to A that *p*," the opponents will have to admit that on Protagoras' premisses their own view is false for him, if they are willing to grant him that he believes in his doctrine. However, as Burnyeat points out, if the Measure doctrine amounts just to this tautology, it is in no way an interesting or challenging thesis.¹² When Protagoras says that his opponents' view is false for him, he cannot merely be stating his own belief; he must be making a claim about what in some sense or other is the case for him, about what holds in his world as it were. But in that case the opponents are justified in refusing to give their admission: they believe that the Measure doctrine is false. That belief is incompatible with the belief that their own view is false for Protagoras, because by admitting this they would be admitting that the same thing can be true for one person and false for another. To deny the Measure doctrine just is to hold that such relativity of truth is not the case.

Thus, according to my interpretation the exact function of (3) and (4) in the argument is to disarm Protagoras of the qualifiers: in the internal dialogue that is reported here Protagoras tries to use the qualifier to defend himself in 3S, saying that his opponents' view of his own view is false for him. The opponents refuse to grant him this defense and again Protagoras has to admit that in this they are right. Plato in these steps blocks any statement of Protagoras that says or implies that things are different for him from what they are for his opponents. The opponents deny any such statement and Protagoras has to comply. Even if I have charitably allowed him in my reconstruction of the internal dialogue to qualify the last admission in

¹² Burnyeat, 180-2.

S4 by “for you”, we shall see later on this does not affect the force of the argument.

If the interpretation of (1) – (4) which has been set forth here is correct, the objection that Plato’s argument depends on ignoring the qualifiers is misplaced. On the contrary, the function of (3) is precisely to show that Protagoras’ opponents will not accept the answer which the critics have thought available to him. I confess that on the present reading the sentences in (1) – (4) are considerably more complex than they seem to be on the surface and that this is probably the most questionable aspect of my account. There are in fact two kinds of complexities involved. First, it may seem questionable to supply in the reconstructed dialogue between Protagoras and his opponents a statement of Protagoras’ to which nothing corresponds directly in Plato’s text, i.e. Protagoras’ statement in S3. But how are we to account for the phrase “they do not consent” in (3) if not by postulating a statement of Protagoras’ to which the opponents refuse to give their assent? And if we must attribute some statement to Protagoras here, which statement if not the one I propose? Secondly, it may be said that not only does my account import qualifiers where there are none in Plato’s text, it also makes the Protagorean qualifiers a major issue in the argument in spite of their conspicuous absence. I admit that this is probably the weakest point in my account. Nevertheless, I can see no plausible way of reconstructing the original dialogue reported by Plato without bringing in the qualifiers. At least, if it is conceded that Plato in what he reports by (3) hypothesizes that Protagoras says something about his opponents’ being wrong, the qualifier must be implicit. For Protagoras would certainly not have said “You are wrong!” without qualification, for he is supposed to hold that nobody is ever wrong in an absolute way. Plato cannot intend to have him say something so foolish. If Protagoras says something about the falsity of some view, he must be expected to qualify his statement by “for me”. Hence, the qualifier must be understood as implicit at least here. And if we are forced to understand an implicit qualifier here, qualifiers are to be understood throughout the passage where relevant.

Someone may however think that Plato’s argument construed in this way is a sophistical one and the conclusion in (5) is illegitimately obtained. I can see two reasons for such a response. First, in the statement in (5) where Protagoras is said to admit his doctrine to be false when he admits that his opponents speak the truth, one may still feel that the qualifiers ought to be respected: Protagoras only admits that his own doctrine is false *for them*. But let us recall that steps (3) and (4) are intended to show precisely that the opponents neither do nor should accept any qualification on Protagoras’ part which renders this view relative. After (4) the opponents are not unfair

if they claim that Protagoras doesn't find any fault with anything they say. "What further admission do we need," the opponents will ask rhetorically, "to be entitled to report that the Measure doctrine is false and that Protagoras admits it?"

Secondly, a sceptic might complain that nowhere in the argument does Protagoras strictly speaking admit that Man is not the measure of all things or its more rigorously stated equivalent that not everything that seems to a person is so for that person. When the opponents claim that the Measure doctrine is not true for Protagoras, "not true for Protagoras" does not imply that Protagoras does not believe in the doctrine. But in order to affirm that Protagoras admits that the Measure doctrine is false, one must show that he believes it to be false. Only in that case can it be said that the doctrine is false for Protagoras in a sense acceptable to him. This objection would be based on a misunderstanding of Plato's intentions. The aim of the argument is not to show conclusively that Protagoras does not believe in the Measure doctrine or that he is formally inconsistent, but to show that Protagoras cannot answer his opponents.¹³ Considered in this way the argument is successful. Protagoras cannot answer: first, because the Measure doctrine bars him from saying that anybody is wrong or thinks what is false in an absolute sense; second, even if Protagoras seems to be able to set forth objections of the form "your view is false *for me*," nevertheless, when his interlocutor is a person who does not share Protagoras' notion of relative truth, this answer will not help, simply because the opponent will not accept this sort of answer. On Protagoras' own premisses such an answer is not true for such an opponent.

Let us consider the last point more closely. The opponents believe that the Measure doctrine is false even for Protagoras; Protagoras admits this to be true for the opponents ([3] – [4]). Suppose that rather than going immediately to (5) the opponents continue the dialogue by asserting: "So, the Measure doctrine is false for you Protagoras." What answer could Protagoras come up with?¹⁴ If he wishes to give an answer that he can reasonably

¹³ In this I agree with Waterlow, "Protagoras and Inconsistency," 35-36 and Burnyeat, 190-191.

¹⁴ At 171D1-4 Socrates suggests that Protagoras would have found some fault with the admissions made on his behalf: "If he suddenly popped up out of the ground here, from the neck up, he would probably convict me of talking a great deal of nonsense, and you of agreeing to it, and he'd duck down again and rush off." We do of course not know what Plato envisages Protagoras as saying, but the fact that Protagoras rushes off suggests that Plato did not suppose he had points to make that could stand examination. Perhaps his point is that Protagoras would not choose to put his relativized answer up for discussion.

expect his opponents to consider – and, hence, might be true for them – he can at any rate not go on relativizing, adding “for me” to everything he utters: “Even if it is true for you that the Measure doctrine is false for me, that view of yours is nevertheless false for me.” If the opponents believe that the Measure doctrine is not even true for Protagoras, they will surely not accept an answer such as “but your view, which is true for you, that the Measure doctrine is false for me, is false for me.” And Protagoras cannot reasonably expect them to accept it. In fact, the very same reasons which lead the opponents to maintain (3), where they deny that their own view about the falsity of the Measure doctrine is false for Protagoras, will serve as reasons for denying him any relativization of this kind.¹⁵ By giving a relativized answer Protagoras would be asking his opponents to accept a statement which he admits is not true for them. Thus Protagoras cannot say anything which is intended as an objection to the claim that the Measure doctrine is false (*simpliciter*).

Protagoras might however say something like the following: “Gentlemen, I do not wish to object to anything you say in any way nor do I even expect you to accept my statements, but may I still express my opinion that your statement is not true for me?” It is not clear whether an answer like this makes much sense at all. At any rate the opponents would not have to worry because they could simply say “Since you have no objection at all, Protagoras, we understand that you have given your admission to our statement.” What really is at issue here is the fact that by admitting that the Measure doctrine is false for his opponents, Protagoras admits that his opponents do not live in a world where truth is relative to individuals. Protagoras must therefore realize that no claim on his part which states or implies relativity of truth is true in his opponents’ world.

Our hypothetical sceptic pointed out that (4S), which says that Protagoras admits that it is true for his opponents that the Measure doctrine is not even true for Protagoras, cannot be taken as Protagoras’ admission that he does not believe in the doctrine. In the opponents’ statement the phrase “for Protagoras” does not have any connection with Protagoras’ beliefs. Hence, Socrates cannot take (4) to give him Protagoras’ permission to conclude that he, Protagoras, disputes the Measure doctrine. But as I understand the argument there is not a direct move from (4) to the conclusion that Protagoras positively disputes the Measure doctrine. The aim of (3) and (4) is rather to disarm Protagoras of the qualifiers in an argument with opponents.

¹⁵ This does not mean that the opponents will refuse to admit any relativized statement whatsoever; they may well think that in certain cases relative statements are appropriate, e.g. the wind is cold for me, warm for you, cf. 171D9ff.

At the beginning of (5) Plato indeed says that Protagoras disputes the Measure doctrine. However, he quickly modifies this saying that rather Protagoras confesses the falsity of his thesis by admitting that its denial is true. There is a difference between positively disbelieving or disputing a proposition and admitting something which amounts to its falsity. Strictly speaking, Socrates can rightly claim to have established only the latter. As I have interpreted (1) – (4) above, Socrates actually manages to show that Protagoras cannot answer opponents who claim that the Measure doctrine is false: Protagoras admits that his opponents judge truly when they disbelieve the Measure doctrine and he cannot object to or undermine their view in any way. And if steps (1) – (4) successfully render Protagoras totally defenseless, Socrates seems to be justified in claiming that when Protagoras admits that his opponents speak truly, he admits that the man on the street is not a measure of anything which he has not learnt. For the latter is exactly what somebody who disbelieves the Measure doctrine does believe. If Protagoras admits the falsity of his doctrine for his opponents and is unable to qualify this admission by maintaining that this holds only for them and not for him, the opponents can rightly say that their view has been conceded without qualification.¹⁶

It is a presumption of my interpretation of Plato's self-refutation argument that Protagoras was a genuine relativist, holding that if a person believes that things are so and so, then they truly are so for him. Moreover, this is the most charitable interpretation of his Measure doctrine and may well be historically accurate.¹⁷ It is this fact, however, implying that truth is not relative for the opponents, which enables his opponents to disarm Protagoras of the qualifiers.

¹⁶ Burnyeat's interpretation does not differ from mine only in the account it gives of (3) and (4). In his view Plato's argument works as follows: The Measure Doctrine is a theory of truth for everyone; after establishing that the doctrine is false for those who do not believe in it, there is a move to "not everyone is a measure" and thence to the conclusion, "not true for Protagoras" (because, if some men are not measures, not everyone is, and hence the supposedly universal doctrine is no longer universal, not even for Protagoras). While ingenious and sound in itself, this does not square sufficiently well with the text. Aside from the difficulties Burnyeat's interpretation has with (3) and (4), Plato's argument simply does not appear to have the structure Burnyeat gives it. For instance, in the text there is not a direct move from "not everyone is a measure" to "false for Protagoras"; the move to "not true for Protagoras" in 171C6-7 comes from "disputed by Protagoras" (strictly speaking this ought to be "conceded to be false by Protagoras").

¹⁷ Burnyeat holds that this aspect of the presentation of the Measure Doctrine is historically accurate (Burnyeat, 172-3). This is also implied by Karl-Martin Dietz's account, who nevertheless thinks that Plato and Aristotle can force Protagoras into inconsistency only by interpreting his statements in terms of their own non-relative concepts of truth (*Protagoras von Abdera* [Bonn, 1976], 60-4, 81).

It is fair to ask whether the Measure doctrine can be interpreted in a different way so that it is not vulnerable to the kind of argument Plato subjects it to and we have been considering. In a recent book on the *Theaetetus* David Bostock suggests that Protagoras could have refused to accept a premiss of Plato's argument as reconstructed by Burnyeat, a premiss also present in my account. Bostock writes: "On his [Burnyeat's] account, a claim is taken to be 'true for x' if and only if it is a description of x's world which is true (of that world) in an absolute and objective way."¹⁸ As an alternative Bostock proposes, somewhat hesitantly, that it is open to Protagoras to maintain that "*p* is true for x" means precisely the same as "x believes that *p*," and that even if this renders the thesis that what seems to a person is true for that person a mere tautology, the thesis still has a point: it should be understood "as the claim that there is no such thing as (objective) truth is supposed to be."¹⁹

How can a statement saying in effect, "What seems to a person is what seems to that person" really mean "There is no objective truth"? I can think of two ways of understanding this tautology as an expression of the claim that there is no objective truth, neither of which however will do as a plausible final account Protagoras' thesis. First, the tautology might be an expression of the claim that the notion of objective truth is dispensable; appearances, beliefs and the like are all we ever have and in holding these everybody is equally justified; if people still use the words "true" and "false", we should take them merely to be stating their beliefs. But however charitably interpreted the tautology cannot express this kind of rebuttal of objective truth without a further premiss. Surely, if the Measure doctrine, interpreted as "What seems to a person is what seems to that person", is at all to have the point Bostock suggests, Protagoras must include (at least implicitly) a further stipulation that: "Everyone is justified in holding whatever seems to him" or a similar claim granting legitimacy to every appearance. Without this Protagoras' dictum interpreted as Bostock suggests would be a mere pointless tautology. But then Protagoras is immediately caught in a self-refutation argument thus: If every appearance is justified and it appears to me that not all appearances are justified, then, since this is an appearance, not every appearance is justified. Protagoras might of course retort that it does not worry him that his doctrine appears unjustified to some; he may admit that his opponents are justified in their belief while claiming that he himself is justified in his.²⁰ But to the opponent it will not

¹⁸ Bostock, 91.

¹⁹ Ibid. note 6.

²⁰ On the present hypothesis "I am justified in believing *p*" has replaced "*p* is true for me." We would have to take the point of the qualifiers Protagoras himself used, "true for me," to be "I am justified in believing."

appear to be the case that Protagoras is justified in his belief, and Protagoras will again admit that belief to be justified. In short, he can be silenced again by the same sort of reasoning as before.

Perhaps, however, Bostock is thinking of a different defense of Protagoras. He may think, like Aristotle, Sextus and many modern interpreters, that the Protagorean doctrine is to be understood as the thesis that every judgement or appearance is true (*simpliciter*) and that the doctrine implies a denial of the law of contradiction.²¹ If that is what Protagoras meant, Protagorean sentences do not stand in need of any qualifiers, nor of course would Protagoras' opponents have any obligation to use them, nor can it be fairly held against Plato to leave them out. On this interpretation "Milk is white" and "Milk is not white" are both simply true. Moreover, if this is what Protagoras meant, he will fall victim to a self-refutation argument in even fewer steps than he does in Plato's *Theaetetus*, which offers the more charitable and presumably more accurate account. For as Sextus says: "For if every appearance is true, it will be true also, being in accordance with an appearance, that not every appearance is true."²² Now, of course, someone committed to rejecting the law of contradiction may not be worried about this conclusion. Nevertheless, this is not an enviable position to be in, as it involves holding without any qualification that it is at the same time true and not true that every appearance is true.

The best alternative for Protagoras would be to except his own doctrine from the claim it makes. Presumably he did not think of it as covering itself – there are surely no qualifiers included in the reported accounts of what Protagoras wrote.²³ But it might have been difficult for him to defend the exception. For if the doctrine is supposed to hold for "seeming" in a fairly wide sense so as to include all judgements, it is peculiar and *ad hoc* to maintain that all appearances of the falsity of all appearances are objectively false, whereas all other appearances are true – it is irrelevant in this context whether this is taken as "true *simpliciter*" or "true for the subject of the appearance." Moreover, had Protagoras undertaken to defend or support the exception, he would presumably have had to use arguments whose

²¹ Aristotle, *Met.* IV, 4-6, esp. 1007b18-23 and 1009a6ff., Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII, 390 and, of modern interpreters, e.g. Antonio Capizzi, *Protagora: Le testimonianze e i frammenti* (Florence, 1955), 289; W. K. C Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III, Cambridge, 1969), 181-2; Karl-Martin Dietz, *Protagoras von Abdera*. On Sextus' interpretation and use of self-refutation arguments see Burnyeat's first article on self-refutation "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy," *The Philosophical Review* 85 (1976), 44-69.

²² Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII, 390.

²³ Plato, *Theaetetus* 161C; Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII, 60.

premisses were themselves exempted. The appeal Protagoras' doctrine undeniably has is without doubt in part due its being both simple and sweepingly general. It might retain this appeal even if it lost some of its generality by exempting only itself from the claim it makes. But if the thesis is to be defended at all, and in particular if Protagoras is to defend the exception he takes to his own doctrine, he would have to exempt much more, for relative or subjective premisses will never yield an objective truth. And if several other statements were excepted, the charm of simplicity and generality would be lost.²⁴

The University of Iceland/The University of Oslo

²⁴ I am indebted to Gisela Striker for comments on an original draft of this paper and to Patricia Kenig Curd, Zeph Stewart, Steven K. Strange, Roslyn Weiss, Olav Gjelsvik, Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson and Malcolm Schofield for comments and objections.