Refutation and Relativism in Theaetetus *161-171*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the dialogues between 'Protagoras', Theodorus and Socrates in *Theaetetus* 161-171 and emphasise the importance for this passage of a dilemma which refutation is shown to pose for relativism at 161e-162a. I argue that the two speeches delivered on Protagoras' behalf contain material that is deeply Socratic and suggest that this feature of the speeches should be interpreted as part of Plato's philosophical case against relativism, reflecting the relativist's own inability to defend his theory from attempts to refute it. I then discuss Theodorus' role in the refutation of Protagoras and argue that his voice is needed to get relativism disproved in the self-refutation argument of 171a-c. I conclude with a brief discussion of the image of Protagoras at 171d.

I

τὸ γὰρ ἐπισκοπεῖν καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖν ἐλέγχειν τὰς ἀλλήλων φαντασίας τε καὶ δόξας, ὀρθὰς ἑκάστου οὔσας, οὐ μακρὰ μὲν καὶ διωλύγιος φλυαρία, εἰ ἀληθὴς ἡ ἀλήθεια Πρωταγόρου ἀλλὰ μὴ παίζουσα ἐκ τοῦ ἀδύτου τῆς βίβλου ἐφθέγξατο;

Examining and trying to refute one another's appearances and beliefs, when each person's are correct – isn't that prolonged and utter nonsense, if Protagoras' *Truth* is true and it wasn't joking when it spoke forth from the shrine of his book?[1]

In the literature on the critique of Protagoras' relativism in Plato's *Theaetetus* 161-171 an approach taken by several scholars has been to argue that whether or not Protagoras can escape Plato's 'self-refutation' (or 'exquisite' 171a6) argument the sophist is left 'in a vulnerable position'.[2] Such a view allows us, as Burnyeat puts it, 'to salvage something from Plato's self-refutation argument' even if we are forced to conclude that the argument as presented in the text is formally invalid.[3] The vulnerability in question is often seen as the difficulty Protagoras would have in *asserting* his theory without compromising his relativism. McDowell suggests that if Protagoras can only state that his theory is true *for himself*, 'we are

Accepted August 2003

[1] *Theaetetus* 161e7-162a3. Unless stated otherwise, all references are to the *Theaetetus*. All translations from the Greek are my own.

[2] McDowell's words (1973, p. 171).

[3] Burnyeat 1990, p. 30.

Phronesis XLIX/1
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justified in wondering why we should find what he says interesting'.[4] Burnyeat, noting that 'to assert anything is to assert it as a truth', asks 'isn't there something inherently paradoxical about someone asserting (or believing) that *all truth is relative*?'.[5]

In this paper I advance an interpretation of *Theaetetus* 161-171 that envisages a similar dilemma for Protagoras. In the passage quoted above, extracted from the beginning of Socrates' critique of relativism, Socrates argues explicitly that refutation would be mere 'φλυαρία' if Protagoras' 'Measure' theory were true. Relativism leaves refutation both pointless and invalid. If we are all infallible Measures, what could be gained from comparing opinions or testing one another's views? How, furthermore, could we ever find weaknesses in other people's sets of convictions? Although I agree with the general thesis that there is something problematic about the assertion of relativism, I suggest that Plato's intention here is to invite us to see *refutation* as posing a particular dilemma for the relativist. Given that relativism invalidates refutation, how can a relativist such as Protagoras either refute his opponents or engage with their attempts to refute him?

Moreover, the remarks of both Burnyeat and McDowell are responses specifically to the self-refutation argument, using Protagoras' 'vulnerable position' as a possible response on Plato's part to readers who find the 'exquisite' argument less than convincing. I propose, however, that the dilemma posed by refutation for the relativist is at work in several other passages of *Theaetetus* 161-171. Even though Socrates lightly introduces his observation that relativism would make refutation 'φλυαρία' by saying that he will 'pass over in silence' the fact that Protagoras' theory

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[4] 1973, p. 171.

[5] Burnyeat 1990, p. 30 (emphasis original). See also Passmore 1961, pp. 67-8. In an earlier article Burnyeat considers the possibility that Protagoras might 'reply that he asserts the Measure doctrine and its consequences to be true only for himself' (1976b, p. 190). He suggests that even if we were to grant Protagoras this reply (a concession he later argues to be 'too generous to Protagoras' (1976b, p. 192)) such a retort would be tantamount to 'a refusal to submit to dialectical discussion' (1976b, p. 191). He proceeds to relate this claim to the image of Protagoras returning to refute Socrates and Theodorus at 171d; in this image, Burnyeat suggests, Protagoras is making precisely the reply mentioned above and the fact that Protagoras does not *fully* emerge from Hades shows that 'his "refutation" or defense . . . just *is* a refusal to enter fully into a common world with his opponents for discussion' (1976b, p. 193 n. 23 (emphasis original)). Lee's view that Protagoras' escape from the self-refutation argument comes 'at the cost of showing that he is not really saying or asserting anything' (1973, p. 252) is discussed briefly below.

would make a laughing stock of his midwifery and dialectic (161e4-7), these remarks set the agenda, I believe, for much of the subsequent discussion. In particular, they underpin the two speeches in which Socrates argues on behalf of the dead sophist (162d5-163a1, 166a2-168c2), passages to which I now turn.

II

What is most striking about these speeches, as several scholars have already noted,[6] is the fact that they are replete with non-relativist philosophical assumptions, some of which are unmistakably Socratic. While the text suggests a number of reasons for Socrates' decision to defend Protagoras, none of them, I will argue, explains by itself the pervasiveness of non-relativist views in the speeches he produces on the sophist's behalf. Indeed, they only emphasise the strangeness of Socrates' dialectical manoeuvre in these passages: defending a theory quite alien to him and yet compromising that defence by including in it ideas and assumptions of his own.

Let me begin by sketching out what I see as the most bewilderingly non-Protagorean features of the first speech (162d5-163a1). In his first speech Protagoras' first complaint is that they are using 'demagoguery': 'δημηγορεῖτε' (162d6). Plato's own *Protagoras* provides a fascinating parallel with this passage. In that dialogue the discussion is, of course, between Socrates and Protagoras himself. At one point Socrates starts to leave, explaining that if he is to stay Protagoras must stop making long speeches:

> χωρὶς γὰρ ἔγωγ' ᾤμην εἶναι τὸ συνεῖναί τε ἀλλήλοις διαλεγομένους καὶ τὸ δημηγορεῖν.
>
> For I thought that it was one thing to meet and hold discussions with each other, another to practise demagoguery.[7]

In the *Theaetetus* Socrates makes Protagoras use the very objection Socrates employed in the earlier dialogue against *him*. What is more, the *Theaetetus* itself provides further Socratic parallels for this complaint of 'Protagoras', for earlier in this dialogue Socrates describes Protagoras as 'δημούμενος' (161e4) and just before delivering his first speech in defence

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[6] Particularly McCabe 2000, pp. 38-9. I discuss previous readings of the speeches at the end of this section.

[7] *Protagoras* 336b1-3.

of Protagoras Socrates calls the way he himself has argued 'δημηγορία' (162d3).

After Protagoras has summarised and rebuffed the content of Socrates' objections he turns to the manner in which Socrates has opposed him. He tells them not to argue from probability and chastises them for not using proofs: 'ἀπόδειξιν . . . καὶ ἀνάγκην οὐδ' ἠντινοῦν λέγετε' (162e5-6). He goes on to say that in mathematics arguments based on probability and 'πιθανολογία' ('persuasive talking' 162e9) would be worthless. Whereas the term 'ἀπόδειξις' is by no means exclusive to the Socrates of Plato's dialogues,[8] 'ἀνάγκη' ('necessity') is a word used particularly frequently in Socratic dialectic. In the *Theaetetus* itself Socrates often says that something is a matter of 'ἀνάγκη',[9] and 'ἀνάγκη' is repeatedly used by Theaetetus to agree with Socrates.[10] The use of mathematics as a dialectical model, moreover, echoes *Socrates'* earlier insistence that the inquiry into the nature of knowledge should be modelled on Theaetetus' geometrical definitions (148d). Finally, the rejection of 'πιθανολογία' is most out of place in the mouth of an intellectual who took pride in his mastery of persuasion.[11]

Why should the content of this short speech be so jarringly non-Protagorean? Perhaps we can glean the answer from the reasons suggested in the text of 161-166 for Socrates' decision to defend Protagoras. What are these reasons? There are, first of all, suggestions prior to both these

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[8] Demosthenes, for example, uses 'ἀπόδειξις' of his way of arguing (*De Corona* 18.300).

[9] 160a9, 170e7, 179b1, 188a7, 189e1, 204a7, 205b1.

[10] 159a9, 159b11, 160e5, 186e3, 188a9, 189a7, 189e3, 200d3, 204c9, 205a3, 209b1.

[11] We learn of the pride Protagoras took in his powers of persuasion at 178e. Lee notes that Protagoras' criticism of persuasive discourse is 'deeply ironical' (1973, p. 228).

There may be a further suggestion of the Socratic in the address with which this speech begins ('ὦ γενναῖοι παῖδές τε καὶ γέροντες' 162d5-6; compare 166a2 and 166c2-3). In Plato's works Socrates very frequently uses 'ὦ γενναῖε' ('O noble [man]') and other apparently complimentary terms of his interlocutors precisely when *challenging* their positions, the very use to which Protagoras puts this phrase here. See, for example, *Hippias Maior* 298a6, *Euthyphro* 7e1 and *Cratylus* 432d11. However, Dickey has argued that in Plato's works such forms of address (which she calls 'friendship terms') 'are used by the person in a dominant position in a dialogue at any time, or by another person at a moment where he feels himself to have won the upper hand in the debate' (1996, p. 117). Protagoras' use of such a term could, therefore, be taken as a sign of self-confidence rather than of the Socratic. On the use of 'ὦ γενναῖε' in Plato see Halliwell 1995, pp. 110-11 and Dickey 1996, p. 279.

speeches that the refutation of Protagoras may be becoming eristic or, at least, methodologically defective. Socrates describes his own arguments against Protagoras as demagoguery ('δημηγορία') at 162d3 (immediately before the first speech used to defend Protagoras) and at 164c8-d2 he objects that they have behaved 'ἀντιλογικῶς' ('like specialists in controversy') and carried on like 'ἀγωνισταί' ('contestants') by relying on verbal consistency.[12] The speeches attributed to Protagoras might, then, be a way to clear up the *methodology* of the refutation by eliminating any suggestion of the eristic or the demagogic from the discussion.

It is not easy, however, to discern precisely what Plato sees as eristic in the arguments of these passages.[13] There would seem, moreover, to be other motivations for these speeches. It is claimed at one point that there is an ethical obligation to defend the dead sophist's theory; Protagoras must be helped, Socrates says, 'for the sake of justice' ('τοῦ δικαίου ἕνεκα' 164e6-7). This is because, as Socrates has just said, the relativist would have had much to say himself in his theory's defence if he were alive and the 'guardians' Protagoras left have not tried to vindicate the 'Measure' doctrine themselves (164e2-5).

A third consideration that might explain the use of these speeches is Socrates' clear resolve to make the refutation of Protagoras as rewarding an intellectual experience for Theaetetus as he can. Socrates at one juncture refuses to quarrel with one of Theaetetus' suggestions so that the young man can 'grow' (163c5-6) and later on he describes an antagonist 'ambushing' the definition of knowledge as perception with counter-arguments (165d5) and taking Theaetetus for ransom, after causing the latter to be filled with wonder for his wisdom ('θαυμάσας τὴν πολυάρατον σοφίαν' 165e1-2). Presumably Socrates would not wish Theaetetus to be in thrall

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[12] Note also the suggestions of the eristic in the imagery used elsewhere in 161b-164c: the philosophical debate is compared to wrestling at 162b1-9 and at 164c5-6 Socrates likens Theaetetus and himself to fighting cocks. See also the description of a 'πελταστικὸς ἀνὴρ μισθοφόρος ἐν λόγοις' (165d6) who refutes Theaetetus and takes him hostage, a passage said to be part of Socrates' 'defence' of Protagoras (165a4-5). (Presumably, as McDowell notes (1973, pp. 162-64), the failings of this man's argument illuminate the weaknesses of the earlier criticisms.)

[13] For example, have Socrates and Theaetetus been paying too *much* or too *little* attention to verbal expressions? As Bostock notes (1988, p. 87), the latter seems to be suggested at 165a5-7, the former at 164c8-9, 166c1-2, 166d7-e1 and 168b8-c2. (Bostock, however, goes on to argue that the inconsistency is only apparent and that 165a5-7 also suggests that mere expressions have been *over*emphasised (1988, p. 88)). See also McDowell 1973, pp. 158-64.

to such 'wisdom', let alone secure this sort of victory over his young interlocutor himself, and perhaps his speeches in defence of Protagoras (particularly the second speech, which immediately follows this passage) are intended to ensure that Theaetetus would have the resources to answer such an adversary.

I will not attempt here to demonstrate which of these factors best explains Socrates' delivery of speeches on Protagoras' behalf. For even if such a choice were necessary, it should be clear that these considerations would not in themselves require 'Protagoras' to be made to argue in a way incompatible with his relativism. How would Theaetetus' philosophical education be any the better for this apparent distortion? How could the attainment of the correct dialectical method require it? And, most strikingly of all, the duty to treat the sophist *justly* surely calls for an accurate representation of his views.

To understand the surprising features of the first Protagorean speech we need to recall, I suggest, the opposition between the 'Measure' theory and Socratic midwifery described at 161e-162a. For one or more of the three reasons mentioned above, Socrates needs a defence of Protagoras. Given his claim that as a philosophical midwife he does not produce theories of his own (150c-d, 157c-d, 161a-b) Socrates needs somehow to have Protagoras reply for *himself* here. But we *cannot* hear an unadulterated Protagorean voice at this point, for each of the three motivations Plato suggests for this speech assumes that dialectical refutation is a profitable and valid form of discourse, an assumption at odds with Protagoras' 'Measure' theory. A desire to make philosophical midwifery fruitful for Theaetetus, scruples about correct dialectical methodology and the sense of obligation to supply the arguments Protagoras himself would have advanced – none would arise without belief in the validity and value of refutation. When Socrates assumes the voice of 'Protagoras or someone else on his behalf' (162d4-5) to defend the 'Measure' theory he *cannot* jettison all his own objectivist views, for the very purposes of the speech rely on assumptions that are inimical to uncompromising relativism.

The same surprises await and the same answer suggests itself in the second speech of defence attributed to Protagoras (166a2-168c2). This speech also incorporates Socratic principles and objectivist attitudes into a relativist's defence.[14] Note that it is said that Protagoras himself makes this

[14] I do not attempt to enumerate here all the ways in which the content of the second speech is incompatible with completely general relativism. As McDowell notes,

speech (165e4-166a2), rather than 'Protagoras or someone else on his behalf' (as at 162d4-5), and that there are some distinctly Protagorean sentiments expressed. For example, it is claimed that the 'sophist' who can make good things appear honourable to his pupils is entitled to receive a large salary (167c-d). Another Protagorean touch may be the use of wrestling images to describe intellectual debate.[15] Sextus Empiricus tells us that Protagoras' book 'Truth' was also called 'Downthrowers'.[16]

When, however, methodological issues are raised in this speech much of what is said smacks of Plato's Socrates or, at least, seems most out of place in a speech of Protagoras. Protagoras says that Socrates has taken advantage of Theaetetus' youth and that he (Protagoras) would only be refuted if someone were to answer as he would and come unstuck (166a-b).[17] As I have stressed, at 161e-162a it was argued that the 'Measure' theory would invalidate refutation completely. But with the 'ἐλέγχομαι' at 166b1 Protagoras accepts that it would indeed be possible to refute him. This may seem no more than a *conditional* acceptance of the validity of refutation. But note that the reason why the sentence has a conditional clause is the fact that Protagoras himself is not being questioned. It is not conditional because of any doubts he has over refutation's efficacy. Socrates is likewise invited 'to refute utterly' if he is able to ('εἰ δύνασαι, ἐξέλεγξον' 166c3-4). We would expect Protagoras to distrust

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the account of the politician (167c) 'clearly presupposes that the question whether a certain policy or piece of legislation is beneficial to a community is a question to which there is a single right answer', the accuracy of which is independent of the community's opinions (1973, p. 167). It seems best to me to read such passages in the light of the modified relativism introduced at 171d-172b, rather than in terms of relativism's invalidation of refutation, given that, as McDowell observes (1973, p. 172), the remarks about political benefit and harm at 167c correspond nicely with the account at 171e-172b.

[15] See 'σφάλληται' (166b1) and 'σφάλλῃ' (167e6).

[16] *Against the Logicians* I.60. Burnyeat argues that this title 'no doubt reflects the type of argument to be found in the book' (1976a, p. 45 n. 2).

[17] Protagoras here refers to Theaetetus disparagingly as 'παιδίον τι' (166a3). He later says explicitly that inexperience puts one at a disadvantage, stating that some people use misleading terms 'ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας' (167b3). See also 162d5 and 168c8-d2. While this is certainly too objectivist a claim for a subscriber to the Measure doctrine to maintain, the notion that age or experience brings wisdom can hardly be described as *Socratic*. Yes, Socrates suggests in this dialogue that Theaetetus' ready acquiescence to his arguments is the result of the latter's *youth* (162d3), but his later statement that Protagoras is older and so probably wiser than them seems thoroughly ironic (171c10-d1). See also *Lysis* 209a-c. I am grateful to the anonymous referee for *Phronesis* for bringing these passages to my attention.

refutation as a whole, yet the conditional clause here merely voices doubts about Socrates' ability to disprove the 'Measure' doctrine.[18]

Protagoras later says that anyone of sense would choose to debate 'δι' ἐρωτήσεων' ('through questions' 167d6-8). Pure Socrates. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates tells Polus not to make long speeches. Instead, he says, Polus should be 'ἐν τῷ μέρει ἐρωτῶν τε καὶ ἐρωτώμενος' ('taking his turn in asking and being asked questions' 462a3-4). And for Protagoras to tell Socrates to use the process of questioning is the precise opposite of what occurs in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name. Socrates says there that he needs short answers and as a result Protagoras is forced to ask questions, despite great reluctance on his part to do so.[19]

Protagoras then distinguishes between 'ἀγωνιζόμενος' ('competing') and 'διαλεγόμενος' ('practising dialectic' 167e4-5) and says that while in the former one may play around and trip others up by all available means, in the latter one must be serious and set one's interlocutor on his feet in order to turn others to philosophy (168a5), prescriptions that are again not merely incongruous but thoroughly Socratic. This distinction (and the advice to turn people 'to philosophy') could not be placed more inappropriately than in a speech of the very sophist who has been presented as dialectic's Public Enemy Number One. What is more, Socrates himself draws exactly the same distinction in the *Meno*. There he contrasts the approach of 'τῶν σοφῶν τις . . . καὶ ἀγωνιστικῶν' ('one of the wise and competitive') with that of himself and Meno, who wish to 'διαλέγεσθαι' ('have a dialectical discussion').[20] And Protagoras' demand for seriousness recalls, for example, Socrates' request that Callicles agree not to play around.[21]

After stipulating seriousness Protagoras states that in dialectic one should only show one's interlocutor the errors that come about 'ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν προτέρων συνουσιῶν' ('from himself and his former associations' 168a1). The claim here that slips can come about 'ὑπὸ προτέρων συνουσιῶν' should make the reader think back to Socrates' earlier assertion that some people on whom he was exercising his midwifery miscarried 'διὰ πονηρὰν συνουσίαν' ('because of the wicked company they

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[18] In addition Protagoras' challenges to 'refute' him echo Socrates' frequent use of such challenges in the *Gorgias*. See especially 'ἔλεγχέ τε καὶ ἐλέγχου' (462a4-5) and 'μ' ἔλεγχε' (467b2), but also 467a1 and 470c7.

[19] *Protagoras* 338e3-4. See also *Protagoras* 348b1-c4.

[20] *Meno* 75c8-d4.

[21] *Gorgias* 500b5-7.

kept' 150e5). More generally, such scruples about dialectical *responsibility* are entirely in the spirit of Plato's Socrates, who clearly deems it important to establish whether one's interlocutor can really be held accountable for what is said during a shared inquiry: witness Socrates' insistence in other dialogues that his interlocutors give replies to which they are committed.[22] Whereas in one such passage, *Protagoras* 331c, Protagoras had to be told by Socrates to say what he believes, it would seem that in our passage Protagoras has embraced some of Socrates' most distinctive methodological principles and preoccupations.

The scholarly literature on the *Theaetetus* has already frequently observed that these passages contain ideas which would be most out of place in a speech of Protagoras. Ubiquitously, however, the response has been to read this as little more than 'irony'. Cornford, for example, says that 'the sophist is (ironically) represented as exhorting the dialectician to argue seriously'. Bostock observes that the speeches contain 'rather a nice irony'.[23] Lee claims that in *Theaetetus* 161-171 Protagoras is the victim of 'ironical and unflattering' impersonations which show him 'as being deeply at odds with himself'.[24]

McCabe, however, asserts that there is more philosophical substance than 'irony' to these literary ploys. She notes that in his second speech 'Protagoras challenges Socrates in Socrates' own terms, familiar from the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*'.[25] For McCabe Protagoras' use of Socratic terms

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[22] See, for example, *Crito* 49c-d and *Republic* 346a and 350e. Protagoras' injunction that they learn what he really means (166d7-e2) also recalls the importance in Socratic dialectic of refuting a person's real convictions. See Ford 1994, p. 211. I do not wish to suggest, however, that what Protagoras says amounts to the 'rule' Vlastos ascribes to Socrates when he claims that Socrates' 'first rule in elenctic dialogue is "say what you believe"' (1994, p. 41).

[23] Cornford 1935, p. 68; Bostock 1988, p. 87 n. 3. See also McDowell 1973, p. 165.

[24] Lee 1973, p. 226 and p. 237. A passage that might be thought to favour a reading of these speeches as light 'irony' is 168c6-8, where, at the end of the second speech, Theodorus accuses Socrates of joking ('παίζεις'), a verdict with which Socrates agrees ('εὖ λέγεις'). It seems to me, however, most natural to take Theodorus' remark about joking here to refer only to the immediately preceding passage, where Socrates describes his long second speech as providing 'paltry' support for Protagoras ('σμικρὰ' 168c4) and says that Protagoras himself would have defended his theory 'more magnificently' ('μεγαλειότερον' 168c4), for the explanation Theodorus offers for his charge of flippancy is his statement that Socrates has in fact defended Protagoras 'very vehemently' ('πάνυ . . . νεανικῶς' 168c6).

[25] McCabe 2000, p. 38. She compares what is said in these speeches to *Euthydemus* 277dff. and *Gorgias* 482 (2000, p. 39).

shows that Socrates himself is being challenged through these speeches: in her words, 'Socrates needs to defend his own peculiar style of argument'.[26] What we surely need to explain, however, is why Protagoras is represented as speaking not only with Socratic terms but also out of Socratic *assumptions*. If the message of the incongruous elements of the speeches is really just that Socrates needs to defend his own way of arguing, why did Plato not simply have Protagoras refer to and question Socrates' midwifery? Why have him talk as if he *shared* many of Socrates' convictions?

Once again the answer lies, I contend, in the bad blood between relativism and refutation. The second speech takes refutation to be a legitimate philosophical pursuit; indeed, it is quite explicit about this assumption (166a-c). 'Protagoras' must, then, compromise his relativism the moment this speech begins. Nor is this an inessential trait of such a speech; we should surely be prompted to wonder how Protagoras could *ever* defend his views from other people's attempts to refute them. For to do so he would have to practise some refutation himself and allege that his opponents were objectively mistaken in imputing weaknesses to his position. If we look at the speeches from Protagoras' perspective, then, it becomes apparent that the sophist would *always* need to adopt and borrow the voice of a non-relativist such as Socrates if he wished to defend his theory cogently.

III

The voice of a non-relativist is also integral, I propose, to the refutation of Protagoras' theory that follows the second speech. Theodorus is brought in as Socrates' interlocutor immediately after this speech when Socrates starts to attack relativism in earnest.[27] Burnyeat states that Socrates' replacement of Theaetetus with Theodorus at the start of his

[26] McCabe 2000, p. 38. Cole emphasises Socrates' importance for these speeches in a very different way. He suggests that the inconsistencies in the second speech come about because Socrates is reverting 'to more congenial ways of thought' (Cole 1966, p. 118).

[27] Socrates tries on several occasions to draw Theodorus into the discussion of Protagoras: see 162b-c, 164e-165b and 168c-169c. Socrates explains that he suffers from a 'fearful lust' (169c1) for dialectical exercise and adds that Theodorus' participation will benefit them both (169c2-3). Socrates' eagerness here for both old and young people to have philosophical conversations with him recalls his advising Lysimachus, Melesias, Nicias and Laches to find teachers for *themselves* as well as for their sons at the end of the *Laches* (201a-b).

refutation of relativism is 'in effect . . . a promise to deal fairly and justly with Protagoras'.[28]

Not at all. Although Theodorus is of course Protagoras' friend, he is hardly an ideal advocate of Protagoras' position. For a professional mathematician would hardly be likely to champion Protagoras' theory. Theodorus' objectivist proclivities can be seen in the way his answers are worded. When Socrates asks whether they should say that Theodorus' opinions are true to him and false to his detractors Theodorus' assent is guarded, despite earlier unhesitant answers.[29] He says: 'ἔοικεν ἔκ γε τοῦ λόγου ἀνάγκη εἶναι' ('it seems to be necessary, at least from the theory' 170e6). Note the 'γε' ('at least'). Similarly when Socrates proposes that Protagoras' theory is more false than true according to the numerical difference between its adherents and its opponents Theodorus responds: 'ἀνάγκη, εἴπερ γε καθ' ἑκάστην δόξαν ἔσται καὶ οὐκ ἔσται' ('necessarily, if at any rate it will and will not be true according to each opinion' 171a4-5). Another 'γε' marks the hesitancy of this agreement.

Earlier in the dialogue Theodorus gives this reply to Socrates when the latter attempts to involve him in the debate:

> οὐκ ἂν οὖν δεξαίμην δι' ἐμοῦ ὁμολογοῦντος ἐλέγχεσθαι Πρωταγόραν, οὐδ' αὖ σοὶ παρὰ δόξαν ἀντιτείνειν.
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> So I wouldn't want Protagoras to be refuted on the basis of what I concede; but then again I wouldn't want to oppose you disingenuously.[30]

Theodorus declares that he does not want to oppose Socrates contrary to his real convictions.[31] Given that Theodorus has been characterised as a man of sobriety[32] we should expect him to honour that declaration. But Theodorus is no relativist himself. So if Theodorus replies according to his own beliefs when answering for Protagoras it looks extremely likely that Protagoras will indeed 'be refuted through' Theodorus.

Initially it looks as if Theodorus has been called in to help *defend* Protagoras. He is told that he must not suppose that while Socrates is to

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[28] Burnyeat 1976b, p. 175.

[29] See, for example, Theodorus' 'οὐδὲν ἄλλο' and 'τί μήν;' (170b8, c1), his assertion that the suggestion that no person thinks that another is ignorant is 'unbelievable' (170c9) and his heated declaration that hordes of people disagree with him (170e1-3).

[30] 162a5-7.

[31] Note that Socrates will insist directly after the 'exquisite' argument that he and Theodorus must say what they believe (171d3-5).

[32] At 145b10-c2 we learn that 'παίζειν' is not 'Theodorus' way'.

defend the sophist by every means available he (Theodorus) should play no part in Protagoras' defence (168e7-169a1). But Plato immediately goes on subtly to show how Protagoras' theory poses a threat to Theodorus' own profession. Socrates says that their inquiry will establish whether Theodorus is a measure of mathematical diagrams or whether *everyone* is as qualified in such matters as he is (169a1-5). Previously Theodorus' friendship with Protagoras has been stressed.[33] Here we learn how fundamentally Protagoras' relativism is opposed to Theodorus' claim to be an expert in mathematics. If Theodorus were to vindicate his friend's theory he would be putting himself out of a job.

What role does Theodorus play during the refutation of relativism? As the arguments begin Socrates expresses anxiety that they may not be qualified to make agreements on Protagoras' behalf and resolves to use the sophist's own words (169d10-170a1). But in the event all they can do is *begin* with the formulation of the 'Measure' theory (170a3-4). After this formulation Socrates provides no further quotes from Protagoras' book. Instead he starts to address and interrogate Protagoras by name.[34] Theodorus answers on his friend's behalf. It is up to Socrates and Theodorus, therefore, to work through the theory's implications.[35]

Socrates proceeds to use the conclusion that the disputable theories Theodorus himself holds are true for him and false for his opponents in the altercation between *Protagoras* and his critics that forms the 'exquisite' argument at 171a-c. Socrates turns straight from the discussion of the opposition Theodorus might encounter to Protagoras himself (170e7). This is a crucial move. By using the quarrel between Theodorus and the hordes of dissenters as the model for the exchange between Protagoras and his opponents Socrates implicitly casts Theodorus as Protagoras during the self-refutation argument.

The literature on the 'exquisite' argument has acknowledged and discussed at length the way in which the qualified phrases 'true *for me*' and 'true *for you*' are discarded and an objective sense of 'true' returns.[36]

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[33] See, for example, 162a4 and 168e8.

[34] See 170a6 and c2.

[35] I do not mean to suggest that Protagoras' text is completely forgotten, for during the 'exquisite' argument Socrates argues that Protagoras (implicitly, presumably) agrees that his opponents' opinion is true 'ἐξ ὧν γέγραφεν' (171b8). My point is that it is *Theodorus* who must decide whether or not to concede this point on Protagoras' behalf.

[36] Many argue that the 'exquisite' argument is rendered invalid by the return to an

''Αληθής' and 'ψευδής' are repeatedly used in an absolute sense (171a8, b1, b2, b7, b12), rather than in the sense of 'true for x' or 'false for y' (the sense which Protagoras' theory would demand). This allows Socrates to argue that as Protagoras grants that the opinions of his opponents are true (sc. *simpliciter*), he must concede that his opponents' claim that his theory is false (sc. *simpliciter*) is true (sc. *simpliciter*). I propose that the reason for this return to an objective sense of truth is the fact that *Theodorus* is the interlocutor here. A sober mathematician would be the last person we should expect to take exception to the use of unrelativised terms. It might be argued that I am laying too much emphasis on the fact that Theodorus rather than Theaetetus is the interlocutor at this moment. Isn't Theaetetus a mathematician too? Yes, but at this stage in the dialogue Theaetetus has not renounced his definition of knowledge as perception and Socrates' interpretation of that definition as a relativist's theory.[37] Unlike Theodorus, a professional mathematician, Theaetetus has yet to commit himself as to which notion of truth he finds acceptable.

As the 'exquisite' argument develops Theodorus shows none of the hesitancy of his earlier answers. His responses are simple and unguarded assent: 'πάνυ μὲν οὖν', 'ἀνάγκη', 'οὐ γὰρ οὖν', 'φαίνεται' and 'οὕτως'.[38] Only at the end, when Socrates concludes that Protagoras does not agree with his own theory, does Theodorus speak up on his friend's behalf: 'ἄγαν, ὦ Σώκρατες, τὸν ἑταῖρόν μου καταθέομεν' ('Socrates, we're running

objective sense of 'true'. See Vlastos 1956, p. xiv n. 27; McDowell 1973, pp. 169-71; Lee 1973, pp. 244-45; Bostock 1988, pp. 89-92 and Chappell 1995, p. 334. Fine also argues that this argument would not prove effective against a relativist because of the absence of qualifying phrases (1998a, pp. 145-46, p. 163). She concludes, however, that Plato does not see Protagoras as a *relativist* at all (1998a, p. 162). Here she draws on an earlier article (Fine 1996) in which she proposed that Protagoras is depicted in the *Theaetetus* as a subscriber not to relativism but to a theory she calls 'infallibilism' (the theory that every belief is unerringly true *simpliciter*). See also Fine 1998b, pp. 228-34. The principal task of the scholars who undertake to defend the 'exquisite' argument is accordingly to account for the absence of qualifiers. Burnyeat does this by interpreting 'true for x' as 'true in x's world' (1976b, pp. 181-82). Tigner argues that because Protagoras accepts that his opponents' position is true (for them), he is committed to endorsing their position *as they endorse it* (1971, p. 369). Emilsson claims that in their exchange with Protagoras the sophist's opponents refuse to allow him to use the qualifiers to defend himself and that 'Protagoras has to comply' (1994, p. 142).

[37] See 151e-152a.

[38] 171a10, 171b3, b6, b9 and c4.

my friend too hard' 171c8-9). Not that Theodorus says that Socrates alone is in the wrong. He says that 'we' are running Protagoras too hard. Theodorus depicts himself contributing to the refutation of Protagoras, and rightly so.

The voice of Theodorus is thus as indispensable for the refutation of Protagoras' theory as Socrates' was for its defence. I earlier quoted Theodorus' resolve that Protagoras should not be refuted through him (162a5-6). Note the proximity of this resolve to Socrates' declaration that Protagoras' theory would doom all dialectic and refutation (161e4-162a3). It is precisely because of this feature of Protagoras' theory that non-relativists have been needed both to defend and to refute it. An objection might be that such voices are needed on Protagoras' behalf merely because the conversation occurs after the sophist's death. Quite so, on a narrowly dramatic level. But I propose that Plato uses the timing of the dialogue and the consequent forced absence of Protagoras to expose more vividly philosophical problems which Protagoras would have even if he were alive.

IV

It should come as no surprise that Protagoras rebukes *Theodorus* as well as Socrates (171d2-3) when Socrates then goes on to imagine Protagoras coming out of the ground up to his neck, voicing objections and running away. There is much in the preceding discussion to which Protagoras might well wish to object: Socrates' arguing on his behalf in two speeches, Theodorus' allowing the notion of objective truth to return in the 'exquisite' argument and the very attempt of the two men to subject his theory to refutation. But note the wording at 171d2: Socrates describes Protagoras as 'ἐμε . . . ἐλέγξας ληροῦντα'. Protagoras himself is said to 'refute'. If Protagoras were to try to raise objections he would be confronted by the dilemma that his 'Measure' doctrine invalidates the very 'refutation' which his protest would be. If he claims, for example, that Socrates was wrong (*simpliciter*) to slip the idea of objectivity into the 'exquisite' argument, he is himself invoking objectivity and so giving up on his 'Measure' theory.[39]

[39] On this subject see also Waterlow (1977, p. 29) and Burnyeat (1976b, p. 191). Protagoras would incur what Passmore (1961, p. 62) and Mackie (1964, p. 193) call 'pragmatic self-refutation': i.e. the way in which his 'Measure' theory is presented (refuting Socrates' objections) conflicts with the theory itself (which invalidates refutation).

How are we to read the imagery here? Lee interprets Plato's description of the sophist at 171d as depicting Protagoras' head and neck as a *plant*.[40] This corresponds, he argues, with the fact that as long as Protagoras uses qualifying phrases he does not assert anything at all. 'If Protagoras can escape the "exquisite" argument, it will be only at the cost of showing that he is not really saying or asserting anything: he is "no better than a vegetable"'.[41] But, as Burnyeat objects, plants do not run away.[42]

McCabe, on the other hand, claims that Protagoras is 'in bits' in this image. She reads this passage as an indication that Protagoras' theory 'incorporates a vacuous account of who he is and an untenable account of what it is to believe'. Because our beliefs are made completely private and piecemeal affairs by Protagoras' theory, she argues, he would do away with the notion of personal identity. Protagoras himself, she says, is accordingly depicted in the *Theaetetus* as 'either dead, or absent, or in bits'.[43] But McCabe offers no passage from the text to support this reading. She offers nothing besides her interpretation of this image and of the dramatic structure of the *Theaetetus* which suggests that Plato himself necessarily thought that Protagoras' theory 'undermines any systematic account of who we are'.[44] She can only say that what she suggests is 'revealed, not in the argument proper, but in the dramatic frame.'[45] But it is pressing the absence of Protagoras too hard, surely, to infer without any

[40] Lee 1973, p. 250.

[41] Lee 1973, p. 252. Lee alludes here to Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1006a13-15.

[42] Burnyeat 1976b, p. 192 n. 23. Ford also notes that in 171d 'nothing in Plato's language particularly evokes plants' (1994, p. 201). Ford himself interprets this image as a reflection on how texts can be used philosophically in the absence of their authors, suggesting that we read the surfacing of Protagoras' head as a reference to a *textual* 'κεφάλαιον'. 'What returns to the interlocutors is Protagoras' *kephalaion*, the lead statement of his book encapsulating his thesis' (1994, pp. 203-4). Ford concludes that the image at 171d is part of 'an extensive illustration of how the thoughts of philosophers may survive them in texts and may continue in conversations' (1994, p. 214). An advantage Ford claims for his reading is that it can specify why Protagoras should emerge only as far as his *neck* in this image. Such details need only be fully explained, however, if we assume with Ford that this image is meant as an 'allegory' (1994, p. 205). It seems to me, moreover, that Ford's interpretation does not do justice to the fact that Socrates and his interlocutors are discussing a *relativist's* theory in this passage. Engaging with a relativist poses dialectical problems that are quite independent of those caused by reading a written text in the absence of its author.

[43] McCabe 2000, p. 50 and p. 49.

[44] McCabe 2000, p. 49.

[45] McCabe 2000, p. 50.

further evidence that Plato thinks that Protagoras calls into question his own *identity*.

An interpretation of the image along the lines set out by Burnyeat would at least have the merit of drawing on points actually argued for in the text (at 161e-162a).[46] I suggest that we relate this image specifically to the problems with refutation which Protagoras incurs through his relativism. In the image Protagoras starts to approach them, but gets only 'as far as the neck' ('μέχρι τοῦ αὐχένος'). He refutes them, but then runs away. This *aborted* return from Hades reflects the sophist's dilemma over refutation. If he wishes to *defend* his position and refute Socrates he must take part in philosophical debate and articulate himself in non-relative terms. But if he wishes to *maintain* his position he can only pop up, shout 'true for you, false for me!', sink down and take to his heels.[47]

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[46] See n. 5 above. Although Burnyeat reads this image as a portrayal of Protagoras refusing to participate fully in philosophical discussion, he does not mention 161e-162a in his own discussion of 171d. I am very grateful to Luca Castagnoli for showing me a draft of a forthcoming paper in which he has independently reached a conclusion about this image similar to the one I present here (Castagnoli 2004).

[47] An earlier version of this paper was submitted as an essay in my M.Phil. degree (Cambridge 2001). I am indebted to my supervisor, Malcolm Schofield, for his encouragement and advice. I would also like to thank Luca Castagnoli for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper. My thanks also to my M.Phil. examiners and the anonymous referee for *Phronesis* for their helpful suggestions for improvement.

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