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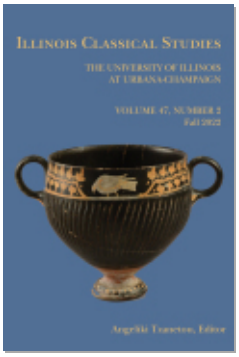

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Two Portraits of Protagoras in Plato: *Theaetetus* vs. *Protagoras*

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This article will contrast two portrayals of Protagoras: one in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates discusses Protagorean theory and even comes to his defense by imitating the deceased sophist; and another in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates recounts his encounter with the sophist. I suggest that Plato wants listeners and readers of the dialogues to hear the dissonance between the two portraits and to wonder *why* Socrates so distorts Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Protagoras in the *Protagoras* behaves and speaks in ways that are incompatible with the Protagorean position presented in the *Theaetetus*.

This article has two parts. In part one, I examine two tensions in the representations of Protagoras. In the first part, I begin by tracking the use of the word "human" [ἄνθρωπος] in Socrates's interpretation of Protagoras's human-measure fragment in the *Theaetetus* and, then, compare this usage to the one in the *Protagoras*.[1] In the first part of the discussion in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates mainly interprets "human" as meaning an individual person, but in the first part of the *Protagoras*, Protagoras uses "human" as a kind term.[2] Furthermore, Protagoras in the *Protagoras* has very different views on refutation, ignorance, and falsity

1. In this paper, I use the Levett, rev. Burnyeat translation (henceforth LrB) of *Theaetetus* from Cooper and Hutchinson (1997). For the *Protagoras*, I use the translation of Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (henceforth SLKB), also in Cooper and Hutchinson (1997). The Greek text is that of Burnet (1903).

2. I should acknowledge that I am skeptical of Platonic *compositional* chronology. So, this paper will not address the possible dating of the composition of the two dialogues; claims that seek to do so I think are too speculative. For skepticism about Platonic chronology, see Howland (1991); Nails (1993); and Press (1996). What cannot be debated is that Plato has a *narrative* or *dramatic* chronology. The *Protagoras*, where a thirty-five-year-old Socrates debates Protagoras in 433/2 BCE, comes a generation prior to the *Theaetetus*, whose internal dramatic date in 399 BCE has a seventy-year-old Socrates discussing the views of Protagoras, who is dead (Nails [2002] 309, 320). My claims about Socrates's mischaracterization of Protagoras's position are strengthened when read in light of the *dramatic* chronology. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates intentionally caricatures Protagoras's views, even though Socrates has personal acquaintance with the sophist with whom he wrangled more than thirty years prior, as depicted in the *Protagoras*.

as compared to his portrayal in the *Theaetetus*. In fact, the Protagorean position in the *Theaetetus* can be reconstructed as entailing:

(1) It is impossible to judge what-is-not.
(2) One only judges what one is experiencing at that moment, and this is always true.
(3) One can never judge falsehood.

According to this view, since there is no falsehood, everyone is always right, and so no one can be refuted. Protagoras in the *Protagoras* does not subscribe to this drastic theory, and both his words and deeds in that dialogue undermine any kind of commitment to those extreme beliefs.

In the second part of the article, I try to answer the question, Why these distortions of Protagoras? I begin by arguing that Socrates in the *Theaetetus* does not try to represent Protagoras accurately but instead gives a caricature of the sophist in order to discourage Theaetetus from some of the repugnant ethical and pedagogical implications of a Protagorean theory mixed with the flux doctrine (which entails that nothing is in itself one thing; that nothing simply is, but instead all things come to be; and that all things move or change). Next, I show a commonality between the *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*; both portraits of Protagoras disagree with Socratic views by: (i) denying unity to the good and (ii) denying an objective standard that would that allow advantageous things to actually benefit us in the future. I arrive at this position by comparing how the word "advantageous" [ὠφέλιμος] is used both in the *Protagoras* and in the *Theaetetus*. This word and its relation to the good cause a critical breakdown in the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras*. This same word is treated in a similar but nevertheless unusual way in the *Theaetetus* in Socrates's discussion of Protagoras after his Defense. Socrates seems to accept a group relativism except in the case in which a city establishes what is "advantageous" to itself, because, as we will see, this has to do with futurity.

Preliminary Considerations When Discussing the *Theaetetus*

It is important to distinguish at least three different parts in the first section of the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates discusses Protagoras.[3]

3. Not including the framing narrative (142a–3c) and the long prologue (142a–51e) that includes Theaetetus's first attempt at a definition (143c–d), the *Theaetetus* is commonly divided into three parts where Socrates examines a different definition of knowledge in each part. Part one (151e–86e) treats Theaetetus's suggestion that knowledge is perception; part two (187a–201c) treats knowledge as true judgment; part three knowledge as true judgment with a λόγος (201c–210b). This is fairly standard division in the secondary literature.

First Part (151e3–165e6)

After Theaetetus's suggestion that knowledge is perception (151e1–3), Socrates brings in Protagoras's *homo mensura* (152a2–4), as well as the flux doctrine (152d7–e1). Socrates will discuss these three propositions as intertwined, and he even claims they converge on the same thing (160d6).

Second Part (165e7–168c2)

In the preceding part, Socrates mainly criticizes the Theaetetean-Protagorean-Heraclitean theory. In the second part, Socrates defends Protagoras *as* Protagoras (S imitates P). It is worth noting that in the Defense, "Protagoras"[4] will allude not only to his own theory but he also refers to the flux doctrine,[5] as well as to the claim that "knowledge is perception."[6]

Third Part (169d2–186e12)

Following this Defense, Socrates investigates Protagorean ideas again, mostly in discussion with Theodorus; however, at 183c8 Theaetetus jumps back in to continue the conversation until the end of the dialogue.[7]

I distinguish these three parts of the first definition in the *Theaetetus* because interpreters should be careful not to run them together and not to pick and choose quotations from different sections without first making explicit that they are doing so. As I will argue in the following section, the discussion of Protagoras's views in the first part differs significantly from the other two parts.

[1.1] Protagoras's human-measure fragment and "human" [ἄνθρωπος] in the Theaetetus

After Theaetetus offers his first proper definition of knowledge—that "knowledge is perception" (151e1–3)—Socrates says that Protagoras "said the very same

4. I use quotation marks to signal that I am referring to the character that Socrates creates and portrays in the Defense. In part, it is to induce skepticism that this representation is completely accurate.

5. In the Defense, discussion that nothing is in itself one: 166b6–c1; discussion of γίγνομαι [becoming]: 166b8, 166b8–c1, 166c3–6 (three instances); discussion of the idea that all things move: 168b4–5.

6. Discussion of αἴσθησις [perception] in the Defense: 166c3–4, 167b7–c2, 168b6–7.

7. This section can be further subdivided as follows:

(i) 169d3–72b7 discussion of Protagoras
(ii) 172b8–7c5 digression on the two types: the philosopher vs. the person in the courtroom
(iii) 177c6–9d2 discussion of Protagoras + flux ("Secret Doctrine")
(iv) 179d3–184b4 discussion of flux doctrine by itself
(v) 184b4–6e12 discussion of Theaetetus's claim that knowledge is perception

thing, only he put it in rather a different way" (152a1–2). Thus, Socrates connects Theaetetus's definition with Protagoras's human-measure fragment, which states:

> Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not. (152a2–4)[8]

Socrates next gives his own explication of Protagoras's dictum. His gloss on the line is as follows:

> As each thing appears to me, so it is for me; and as it appears to you, in turn, so it is for you—you and I each being a human. (152a6–8)[9]

Socrates crucially construes Protagoras's human-measure fragment *individualistically* (as opposed to a collective or group relativism), and he also equates appearance with reality.

Socrates therefore gives an individualistic interpretation to the word ἄνθρωπος ("human") in Protagoras's maxim and thereby makes each individual person the measure of what-is and what-is-not. In this first part of the first definition, Socrates turns Protagoras's relativistic theory into a form of *subjectivism*. Socrates ignores an interpretation of ἄνθρωπος in Protagoras's fragment as meaning all humankind or as related to a human group, collective, or polity until he impersonates "Protagoras" in the Defense (the second part of the first definition). It is there, in the Defense, that for the first time in the dialogue it is suggested that ἄνθρωπος could be read as implying a larger social-political unit and that Protagoras's relativism could be also be a group or collective one rather than individualistic.[10] Socrates again takes up group relativism in the third part, during his discussion of Protagoras's view with Theodorus.[11] In order to distance

8. πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον' ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὄντων, ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν. Cf. DK80 B1: πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων, ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

9. LrB, slightly modified; ὡς οἷα μὲν ἕκαστα ἐμοὶ φαίνεται, τοιαῦτα μὲν ἔστιν ἐμοί, οἷα δὲ σοί, τοιαῦτα δὲ αὖ σοί: ἄνθρωπος δὲ σύ τε κἀγώ.

There is much debate on whether the lines that follow Protagoras's famous dictum are Protagoras's own or an interpretation. I follow Gagarin (1968) 137, in taking them not as Protagoras's own but as Socrates's—or better, as Plato's own interpolation of Protagoras's thought: "I think it unlikely that Plato found this explanation [what I called Socrates's 'gloss'] of the [hu]man-measure saying in a writing of Protagoras and reworded or summarized it for this dialogue. It seems to me more probable that Plato heard this explanation from other people, perhaps from later Protagoreans." See also Cornford (2010 [1935]) 33: "It would be entirely in accordance with dialectical procedure that Plato should ignore what Protagoras actually meant and adopt such a construction of his words as would contribute to his own analysis of sense-perception."

10. 167c2–4 and 168b56.

11. 172a1–b7; 177c9–178a10; 179a5–8.

Protagoras from the views developed here by Socrates in the first part of the first definition, I will refer to it as "the Protagorean theory." This is a shorthand for Plato's *individualistic* interpretation of Protagoras's theory.

Shortly after joining Theaetetus's definition to Protagoras's fragment, Socrates implies that Protagoras secretly held certain beliefs that he taught only to certain student-initiates. In addition to Protagoras's dictum, Socrates joins a third position, mainly attributed to Heraclitus,[12] that "nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing" (152d3–6)[13] and "nothing ever is but instead everything becomes."[14] I will refer to this as the "flux doctrine."

Why Is Protagoras's Doctrine Supposedly Secret?

On its face, Protagoras's human-measure fragment is not consistent with the flux doctrine. As Socrates reveals the tenets of flux, he says that "one ought to remove 'Being' from everywhere" (157a9–b1). He follows this by adding: "We ought, rather, to speak according to nature and refer to things as 'becoming,' 'being produced,' 'passing away,' 'changing'; for if you speak in such a way as to make things stand still, you will easily be refuted" (157b5–8).[15] But Protagoras's own one-line fragment contains five references to forms of "to be" or "being"![16]

I think this is one of the main reasons that Socrates was forced to call Protagoras's doctrine "secret": he had to explain away the master's use of "being" in this famous saying.[17] Thus, according to this Socratic interpretation, Protagoras used "being" in his message for mass-consumption, whereas in private he taught his students the more Heraclitean lesson that there is no being but only becoming. Socrates individualizes Protagoras's maxim, so it becomes "things are to me as

12. Socrates also names Protagoras, Homer, Empedocles, and Epicharmus (152e3–5).

13. ὡς ἄρα ἓν μὲν αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὑτὸ οὐδέν ἐστιν . . . ὡς μηδενὸς ὄντος ἑνὸς μήτε τινὸς μήτε ὁποιουοῦν.

14. This is a paraphrase of "the things of which we naturally say that they 'are' [εἶναι], become [γίγνεται], as the result of movement [φορᾶς] and change [κινήσεως] and blending [κράσεως] with one another [πρὸς ἄλληλα]. We are wrong [οὐκ ὀρθῶς] when we say they 'are' [φαμεν εἶναι], since nothing ever is [ἔστι μὲν γὰρ οὐδέποτ᾽ οὐδέν], but everything always becomes [ἀεὶ δὲ γίγνεται]" (152d7–e1; LrB, slightly modified).

15. LrB, slightly modified; τὸ δ᾽ εἶναι πανταχόθεν ἐξαιρετέον . . .ἀλλὰ κατὰ φύσιν φθέγγεσθαι γιγνόμενα καὶ ποιούμενα καὶ ἀπολλύμενα καὶ ἀλλοιούμενα· ὡς ἐάν τί τις στήσῃ τῷ λόγῳ, εὐέλεγκτος ὁ τοῦτο ποιῶν.

16. Man *is* [1 εἶναι] the measure of all things, of *the-things-which-are* [2 τῶν μὲν ὄντων], that they *are* [3 ὡς ἔστι], and of *the-things-which-are-not* [4 τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων], that they *are* not. [5 οὐκ ἔστιν]' (152a2–4).

17. I do not think the historical Protagoras held the view being attributed to him here; i.e., the so-called "Secret Doctrine." As I make clear later, the combination of the individualized Protagorean theory (which I do not think Protagoras held) and Heraclitean flux cannot be made coherent.

they appear to me and are to you as they appear to you." By then joining flux to it, however, he undermines any sort of single, subsisting self—which would actually let *us* be measures. There is on this interpretation no possibility of a distinct and durable "you" or "I," just an infinite multitude of selves becoming.[18]

Another Troubling Aspect: Who or What Does the Perceiving?

An aspect of the Secret Doctrine that has not received much comment is that the theory as Socrates develops it does *not* seem to function at the level of the perceptual experience of a *unified* subject or human being more generally but is developed and described at the level of a single, simple, sense organ. In his elaboration of the Secret Doctrine, Socrates three times uses the singular form *an* eye (157d3, 157e5) or *the* eye (157e2) as opposed to the dual or plural form, *eyes*.[19] This seemingly small detail, that perception occurs at the level of a single sense organ, will introduce problems into the Protagorean theory, which Socrates exploits later in his objections.

In the (supposedly Protagorean-inspired) "covered-eye objection" (165a4–165d2), Socrates asks what happens when someone is looking at a cloak, but one eye is covered and the other open.[20] Does one see, or perceive, the cloak, or

18. I will say more about how the flux doctrine undermines the strong sense of self that the individualized Protagorean theory requires.

19. The relevant passage is:

> ἐπειδὰν οὖν ὄμμα καὶ ἄλλο τι τῶν τούτῳ συμμέτρων πλησιάσαν γεννήσῃ τὴν λευκότητά τε καὶ αἴσθησιν αὐτῇ σύμφυτον, ἃ οὐκ ἄν ποτε ἐγένετο ἑκατέρου ἐκείνων πρὸς ἄλλο ἐλθόντος, τότε δὴ μεταξὺ φερομένων τῆς μὲν ὄψεως πρὸς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν, τῆς δὲ λευκότητος πρὸς τοῦ συναποτίκτοντος τὸ χρῶμα, ὁ μὲν ὀφθαλμὸς ἄρα ὄψεως ἔμπλεως ἐγένετο καὶ ὁρᾷ δὴ τότε καὶ ἐγένετο οὗ τι ὄψις ἀλλ᾽ ὀφθαλμὸς ὁρῶν, τὸ δὲ συγγεννῆσαν τὸ χρῶμα λευκότητος περιεπλήσθη καὶ ἐγένετο οὐ λευκότης αὖ ἀλλὰ λευκόν, εἴτε ξύλον εἴτε λίθος εἴτε ὁτῳοῦν συνέβη χρῆμα χρωσθῆναι τῷ τοιούτῳ χρώματι.
>
> Thus *an eye* [ὄμμα] and some other thing—one of the things commensurate with it—which has come into its neighborhood, generate both whiteness and the perception which is by nature united with it (things which would never have come to be if it had been anything else that either had approached). In this event, motions arise in the intervening space, sight from the side of the eyes and whiteness from the side of that which cooperates in the production of the color. *The eye* [ὁ μὲν ὀφθαλμὸς] is filled with sight; at that moment it sees, and becomes not indeed sight, but *a seeing eye* [ὀφθαλμὸς ὁρῶν]; while its partner in the process of producing color is filled with whiteness, and becomes not whiteness but white, a white stick or stone or whatever it is that happens to be colored this sort of color. (156d3-e7; LrB slightly modified; emphasis added)

20. Many of the names for the objections come from, or are heavily indebted to, Chappell (2004). For discussion of the "covered eye objection" in particular, see Chappell (2004) 98–100.

not? The objection is actually quite strong if the Secret Doctrine takes perceptual experience to happen *not* at the level of a unified subject of experience but at the level of a single sense organ, *and* sense organs do not have to operate in conjunction. One eye has one perceptual experience (the covered eye sees nothing or darkness), and the other eye has another completely different experience (the open eye sees the cloak). One possible way out of the seeming contradiction is to bite the bullet and say that there are two "perceivers," each having their own perceptual experience: a covered-eye perceiver and an open-eye perceiver.

But how then do these two perceivers relate? According to "Protagoras," these two "persons" do not have to cohere together. In his Defense, "Protagoras" asks Socrates, "Do you expect him to concede to you that the man, who is in process of becoming unlike, is the same as he was before the process began?" (166b4–5). "Protagoras" follows this up by adding, "Do you expect him even to speak of 'the man' rather than of 'the men,' indeed of an infinite number of these men coming to be in succession, assuming this process of becoming unlike" (166b4–5, 166b7–c2).[21] This becoming an infinite multitude of selves arises from the third adopted position, the flux of becoming as opposed to the *stasis* of being. It grants "Protagoras" cover; he has no need to reconcile the different perceptual experiences from the different *individual* sense organs (e.g., the right or left eye or ear) into a single human being or subject.

A major failing of the Secret Doctrine is that no mere perception from a simple sense organ can get one to more complicated kinds of perceptions, like multisensory experiences or to perceptual beliefs or judgments. The Protagorean theory is never interrogated about multimodal perceptual experiences in this first part—for example, about the possibility of several different senses engaged with the same object all in their own ways. How would they coordinate? The resulting cacophony of perceptions can never coalesce into a single human being or subject. This point that perceptions need to be organized and coordinated into a single self-subsisting knower and, thus, for the attainment of knowledge leads to Socrates's final, fatal objection against the flux theory, what I call the "wooden-horse objection" (184d1–186e12), which appears in the third part of the first definition. Without a single, unified, and persisting subject underlying all these diverse perceptions, there can be no knowledge.[22] When Socrates first presents the Protagorean theory, he does not interrogate whether or not there needs to

21. ἢ αὖ ἀποκνήσειν ὁμολογεῖν οἷόν τ' εἶναι εἰδέναι καὶ μὴ εἰδέναι τὸν αὐτὸν τὸ αὐτό . . .μᾶλλον δὲ τὸν εἶναί τινα ἀλλ' οὐχὶ τούς, καὶ τούτους γιγνομένους ἀπείρους, ἐάνπερ ἀνομοίωσις γίγνηται, εἰ δὴ ὀνομάτων γε δεήσει θηρεύσεις διευλαβεῖσθαι ἀλλήλων.

22. This is one of the first philosophical formulations of what is made famous by Kant's idea of the transcendental unity of apperception from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1999 [1787]) A108, A118, B132, B139, B142, B151, A178.

be a unified subject or perduring percipient for the various sense modalities or for more complicated perceptual experiences that may involve higher-order cognition. Later, however, Socrates does bring up this very objection against the theory (in the "wooden-horse objection," 184d1–186e12). So, we know that Plato himself was aware of this difficulty.

One of the initial attractions of the Secret Doctrine is that it was a guarantee on the truth of one's own perceptions. Sometimes this is interpreted as the "privatization of perception" or as the "infallibility of perception."[23] But these interpretations appear to take it for granted that the perceptual experiences described by the Protagorean theory inhere in and are guaranteed by a single underlying subject or human being.[24] The combination of a Heraclitean flux of selves and perception at the level of individual sense organs undermines any kind of multimodal perceptual experience or any kind of belief or judgment originating from a single unified self. This lays the foundation for my earlier claim that individualized Protagorean relativism (subjectivism) assumes the necessity of a single, unified self or human being—without which there cannot be knowledge or any knower. But the positions that Plato here joins to it (i.e., flux and and the claim that "knowledge is perception") invalidate the idea of strong self, of a unified human being.

There is an irreconcilable tension among the various positions joined together by Socrates in the first definition. In fact, the *individualistic* Protagoreanism that Socrates articulates seems to require a robust, temporally persisting sense of self. There must be a strong, lasting self that judges what things are and what things

23. For privatization of perception, see Burnyeat (1990) 14, 16, 44, 47n60 (and Matthen [1985] for an interesting criticism of this view); for infallibility of perception, see Fine (1994) 239–43; (1996) 129–31; (1998).

24. I want to highlight three interpreters who, to their credit, at least mention the trouble of going from a single sense organ to a single perceiving subject as a problem, though none of them resolves it. McDowell (1974) takes it for granted that when Socrates talks of a sense organ he means the subject or the perceiver; eliding from one to the other, he writes, "'the thing which collides and the thing it collides with'; i.e. the sense organ, or more generally the perceiver, and the object" (131). Likewise, Sedley (2004) writes, "Every perception is an interaction between a subject and an object. The subject may be thought of either as the perceiver, or more specifically as the relevant sense-organ" (91). He does not elaborate on the point that a relevant sense organ is quite different from a perceiver, or how one could get from sense-organ perceptions to either a multimodal-sense experience or a unified subject fit for beliefs and judgments. Van Eck (2009) writes, "This implies that the perceiver or sense-organ which is the subject of the sentence is supposed to become different without anything happening to itself" (205n9). Again, van Eck makes no issue of the difference between sense organ and perceiver. Plato cannot have been unaware of this problem, since he has Socrates raise the "Wooden-Horse Objection" later at 184d1–186e12.

are not and what *will be*—for that very person. There is an expectation that what a self judges best for itself, particularly concerning its own future, is and will be for the *same* self. Otherwise, the vigorous individualism that Socrates builds into his Protagorean relativism is for naught. If in making future judgments for him- or herself, a person chooses things for a wholly different self than the one he or she will be in the future, then the judgment would be meaningless. It would be as if I went clothes shopping, but all my decisions would be for someone else, someone completely different than me, with completely different measurements, and I had no idea who this person will be. The two propositions of the flux doctrine, that "nothing is in itself one thing" and that "nothing ever is but instead everything becomes," undermine the single, unified, continuing self or human being that is required by an individualistic Protagoreanism.

[1.2] Protagoras's Use of "Human" [ἄνθρωπος] in the Protagoras

Let us look at how Protagoras uses the word "human" [ἄνθρωπος] in the *Protagoras* to see whether it can help us in interpreting the human-measure fragment. Although Protagoras in the *Protagoras* never explicitly expresses or alludes to his human-measure dictum, to better understand what Protagoras might mean by "human" [ἄνθρωπος], it is helpful to track his repeated use of "human" early on in the *Protagoras*.[25] In order to answer Socrates's questions as to whether and how virtue is teachable and why everyone has a portion of the political art, Protagoras tells a famous myth about the origins of human society (320d–322d), which he follows immediately with a logical explication (322d–328d). Throughout the tale and his later explanation of it, Protagoras uses the word ἄνθρωπος to mean the whole human race, or kind.[26] At 321c2 he refers explicitly to the human race [τὸ ἀνθρώπων γένος], and he will use the word in that sense for the rest of his myth and explanation. He does not use it to mean an individual human being—as Socrates's *individualized* Protagoreanism holds—but, rather, the entire human species. Looking at how Protagoras uses "human" [ἄνθρωπος] in this first part of the *Protagoras* as a kind term, referring to all of humankind, should make us rethink that the same term should be interpreted in his famous human-measure

25. Before the great myth, Protagoras uses the plural ἄνθρωποι to refer to groups of people at 317b1–b5.

26. Within the Great Myth, Protagoras uses ἄνθρωπος in the singular but as connotating a kind at 321c5,7, d3,4, e3 (twice), and 322a3. It is worth noting that in Protagoras's story, after humans are granted a "divine portion" (322a3), they are most often referred to in the plural form; see 322b1, c2,4, and d1. The same is also true in Protagoras's explanation that follows; see 323a6, c2,8, d5,7, 324a5, c2, 326b5 (singular), 327c5 (singular),6, d1,5,7, and 328b2. An exhaustive treatment of Protagoras's usage in the whole dialogue is outside the scope of this paper.

dictum in the individualistic way that Socrates does in the first part of the first definition of the *Theaetetus*.[27]

[2.1] Protagoras in the Theaetetus *on Refutation, Ignorance, and Falsity*

Let us turn to another contrast between the representations of Protagoras. Plato consistently portrays Socrates as regularly criticizing Protagoras (or his followers) by name for holding to some extreme, implausible views—not only in the *Theaetetus* but also in the *Cratylus* and the *Euthydemus*. In the *Cratylus* Socrates asks Hermogenes,

> Is the being or essence [ἡ οὐσία] of each of them something private for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is "the measure of all things," and that things are to me as they appear to me and are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own? (*Cratylus* 385e4–6a4)[28]

Here we see that, again, Socrates applies his *individualistic* gloss to Protagoras's human-measure dictum but attributes it to the sophist. And, again, Socrates contrasts Protagorean relativism with "fixed essences," those things that are in themselves something. Similar to the *Theaetetus*, Socrates draws a radical implication out of Protagoras's thought:

> But if Protagoras is telling the truth—if it *is* the *Truth* that things are for each person as he believes them to be, how is it possible for one person to be wise and another foolish? (*Cratylus* 386c2–4; original emphasis)[29]

If everyone is always right, and each one is his or her own measure or criterion of truth, then there is no falsehood, no way for there to be error or ignorance,

27. There are some interpretations of Protagorean relativism that see general relativism as simply following from the aggregate of individuals. In fact, "Protagoras" in the Defense in the *Theaetetus* even speaks (167c2–4, 168b5–6) as if a more general or collective relativism just arises as another instance of a singular entity (in this case, a collective one), like "the city" (on which, see more below). However, I think we are owed an explanation of how one goes from an individual to a general relativism, and we should not just assume that it can or ought to be taken for granted. This dissatisfaction with the account given by "Protagoras" should provoke the reader or listener to question Socrates's characterization of Protagoras's position.

28. This and the following quotation are from the C. D. C. Reeve's translation of *Cratylus* in Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 101–56.

> πότερον καὶ τὰ ὄντα οὕτως ἔχειν σοι φαίνεται, ἰδίᾳ αὐτῶν ἡ οὐσία εἶναι ἑκάστῳ, ὥσπερ Πρωταγόρας ἔλεγεν λέγων πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον εἶναι ἄνθρωπον—ὡς ἄρα οἷα μὲν ἂν ἐμοὶ φαίνηται τὰ πράγματα εἶναι, τοιαῦτα μὲν ἔστιν ἐμοί: οἷα δ' ἂν σοί, τοιαῦτα δὲ σοί—ἢ ἔχειν δοκεῖ σοι αὐτὰ αὑτῶν τινα βεβαιότητα τῆς οὐσίας.

29. οἷόν τε οὖν ἐστιν, εἰ Πρωταγόρας ἀληθῆ ἔλεγεν καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀλήθεια, τὸ οἷα ἄν δοκῇ ἑκάστῳ τοιαῦτα καὶ εἶναι, τοὺς μὲν ἡμῶν φρονίμους εἶναι, τοὺς δὲ ἄφρονας.

and also no need for a paid teacher such as the sophist Protagoras. At least in the *Euthydemus* it is *the followers* of Protagoras and not the man himself who are said to hold to this radical view of "no falsity":

> *The followers of Protagoras* made considerable use of it, and so did some still earlier. It always seems to me to have a wonderful way of upsetting not just other arguments, but itself as well. But I think I shall learn the truth about it better from you than from anyone else. The argument amounts to claiming that there is no such thing as false speaking, doesn't it? And the person speaking must either speak the truth or else not speak? (*Euthydemus* 286c2–8, emphasis added)[30]

> [I]f it is impossible to speak falsely, or to think falsely, or to be ignorant, then there is no possibility of making a mistake when a man does anything? I mean that it is impossible for a man to be mistaken in his actions. (*Euthydemus* 287a1–4)[31]

The portrait of Protagoras that we get in the *Protagoras* seems at many points incompatible with some of the inferences drawn by Socrates (such as the "no falsity" view or the claim that "everyone speaks the truth") from a supposed Protagorean point of view in the *Theaetetus*. Plato's portrait of Protagoras in the *Protagoras* appears closer to the "original," historical Protagoras than Socrates's simulated copy of him in the *Theaetetus*, which is more of a contorted caricature.[32]

The Impossibility of Negative Judgments and Negation

In the first part of the first definition of the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates is seeking a criterion for knowledge, he interprets Theaetetus's suggestion that knowledge is perception to entail that "[p]erception . . . is always of what is, and unerring—as befits knowledge" (152c5–6).

In the subsequent Defense that comprises the second part of the first definition, "Protagoras" (corroborating this view) is made to say, "For it is impossible to judge [δοξάσαι] what is not [τὰ μὴ ὄντα], or to judge anything other than what

30. This and the following quotation are from the Rosamond Kent Sprague translations of *Euthydemus* in Cooper and Hutchinson (1997) 708–45.

> καὶ γὰρ οἱ ἀμφὶ Πρωταγόραν σφόδρα ἐχρῶντο αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ ἔτι παλαιότεροι: ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀεὶ θαυμαστός τις δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ τούς τε ἄλλους ἀνατρέπων καὶ αὐτὸς αὑτόν—οἶμαι δὲ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρὰ σοῦ κάλλιστα πεύσεσθαι. ἄλλο τι ψευδῆ λέγειν οὐκ ἔστιν; —τοῦτο γὰρ δύναται ὁ λόγος: ἦ γάρ; —ἀλλ᾽ ἢ λέγοντ᾽ ἀληθῆ λέγειν ἢ μὴ λέγειν;

31. εἰ γὰρ μήτε ψεύδεσθαι ἔστιν μήτε ψευδῆ δοξάζειν μήτε ἀμαθῆ εἶναι, ἄλλο τι οὐδ᾽ ἐξαμαρτάνειν ἔστιν, ὅταν τίς τι πράττῃ; πράττοντα γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἁμαρτάνειν τούτου ὃ πράττει.

32. Demont (2013) 130, proposes using Protagoras from the *Protagoras* to defend the "Protagoras" of the Defense in the *Theaetetus*.

one is immediately experiencing; and what one is immediately experiencing is always true [ἀεὶ ἀληθῆ]" (167a7–b1). This line makes "Protagoras" agree with an extremely radical consequence of Protagoreanism, namely, that there is no such thing as falsehood, and everyone is always right. Based on Plato's portrait of Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, it is highly unlikely that the historical Protagoras would have actually endorsed views that lead to such unreasonable outcomes.[33] I do not think interpreters have fully appreciated how drastic the implications of this distorted caricature of Protagoras are.[34]

I offer here a reconstruction of the implications that Protagoras would be agreeing to according to the depiction offered in this part of the *Theatetatus*:

(1) It is impossible to judge what-is-not.
(2) One only judges what one is experiencing at that very moment, which is itself always true.
(3) One can accordingly never judge a falsehood.
(4) Since there is no falsehood, everyone is always right, and no one can be refuted.

If Protagoras had accepted these positions, *then* he would be saying that humans can never judge or think of things that are nonexistent. He would fall into the same Eleatic trap of being unable to judge things that are-not or those things that have non-being. Plato discusses the pitfalls of the Parmenidean and Eleatic inability to talk about non-being in the *Sophist* (237a3–268d5) There the Eleatic Stranger sets out to explain non-being not as a complete negation of being but instead as a being-different or being-other-than.

I contend that the claim Socrates makes on behalf of Protagoras in the Defense section of the *Theaetetus* to the effect that "it is impossible to judge [δοξάσαι] what is not [τὰ μὴ ὄντα]" (167a7–8) ought to be taken literally and at face value. If one accepts the reconstructed Protagorean consequences, then what is impossible to judge is negation and negative judgments, in general. We can only make positive judgments. For when does one ever experience the *not*-cold? The Protagorean might try to say that it is when one experiences heat. But this only gives us the positive experience of heat; it does not grant us the further judgment of *not*-cold. In virtue of the relevant negation, *not*-cold is neither something that exists nor a possible object of judgment. Strictly speaking, we never "perceive" negation or a nonexistent state of affairs by means of the senses; it is an ideational operation of the mind. If this radical implication is taken on, then an *individualistic*

33. For a defense of this claim see Chapter 7 "The 'Human-Measure' Fragment" in Schiappa (2003) 117–133; cf. Zilioli (2002) and (2007).

34. An exception is Katja Vogt's reconstruction of what she calls Measure Realism in contrast to Truth Relativism in chapter 4, "The Long Goodbye from Relativism" (2017).

Protagorean not only gives up on properly speaking for anyone else but also gives up on the possibility of either perceiving negation or of speaking about any kind of negation. Yet Socrates's "Protagoras" uses negation (or ideas that imply negation) thirty times in the brief episode![35]

Someone might object that the "is" and "is not" of Protagoras's dictum ought to be taken factually, instead of existentially, as in "it is the case" or "it is not the case." Even on this weaker interpretation of the Protagorean theory, however, how could one explain thinking or judging things counterfactually? That is, how could one entertain a state of affairs that is counter to "what is the case" and represents strictly "what is not the case"? Ancient Greek grammar allows for such constructions with the present and past counterfactual conditional sentences. Yet, the Protagorean theory cannot accommodate this common way of thinking and speaking.

Furthermore, as was already mentioned in connection to forms of "being" or "to be," "Protagoras would not have granted his consent to the suggestion that one cannot speak of what is not (*hôs ouk esti*) since his human-measure aphorism states otherwise" (Schiappa [2003] 135).[36] Protagoras in the *Protagoras* presents very different views on refutation, ignorance, and falsity.

35. Uses of negation in the "Defense": "remember and not know [μὴ εἰδέναι] the same thing" (166a3–4); "unless he is still experiencing them [μηκέτι πάσχοντι]?" (166b2–4); "the same man to know and not know [μὴ εἰδέναι] the same thing?" (166b4–5); "to speak of 'the man' rather than of 'the men' [οὐχὶ τούς]" (166b7–8); "refute it . . . by showing that each man's perceptions are not his own private events [ἐξέλεγξον ὡς οὐχὶ ἴδιαι αἰσθήσεις]" (166c3–4); "it does not follow [οὐδέν]" (166c5–6); "That is not the way to behave [οὐ καλῶς ποιῶν]" (166d1); "the measure both of what is and of what is not [τὸ μὴ φάναι εἶναι]" (166d5); "not to confine [μὴ . . . δίωκε]" (166d8–e1); "not to make one of these two [οὐδέτερον]" (166e4); "that is not even a possibility [οὐδὲ γὰρ δυνατόν]" (167a1); "nor is it our business to make accusations [οὐδὲ κατηγορητέον]" (167a1); "What never happens is that a man who judges what is false [οὔ τί γε ψευδῆ δοξάζοντά τίς] is made to judge what is true. For it is impossible to judge what is not [οὔτε γὰρ τὰ μὴ ὄντα δυνατὸν δοξάσαι], or [οὔτε] to judge anything other than what one is immediately experiencing" (167a6-b1); "but in no way *truer* [ἀληθέστερα δὲ οὐδέν]" (167b4); "no man judges what is false [οὐδεὶς ψευδῆ δοξάζει]. And you, too, whether you like it or not [ἐάντε μή], must put up with being a 'measure'" (167d1–3); "there is no reason to try to evade that method either [οὐδὲ γὰρ τοῦτο φευκτέον]" (167d6); "do not be unjust in your questions [μὴ ἀδίκει ἐν τῷ ἐρωτᾶν]" (167e1); "[μηδὲν]" (167e2); "a man who does not [μὴ χωρὶς] take care to keep controversy distinct from discussion" (167e3–4); "not you [ἀλλ᾽ οὐ σέ]" (168a4); "without ill will or hostility [οὐ δυσμενῶς οὐδὲ μαχητικῶς]" (168b2–3); "But you will not proceed as you did just now [ἀλλ᾽ οὐχ ὥσπερ ἄρτι]" (168b7).

36. "It is also unclear whether Protagoras ever espoused the belief that falsehood is impossible. In Plato's *Euthydemus* 'speaking falsely' is equated with 'speaking of what is not'—*hôs ouk esti*—which interlocutors agree is impossible . . . Protagoras would not have conceded such a point" Schiappa (2003) 137.

[2.2] Protagoras on Refutation, Ignorance, and Falsity in the Protagoras

In the *Protagoras* Socrates, exasperated by repeated responses that seem to distance Protagoras from his own answers, exclaims, "Don't do that to me! It's not this 'if you want' or 'if you agree' business I want to test [ἐλέγχεσθαι], but you and me, and I think the argument will be tested [ἐλέγχεσθαι] best if we take the 'if' out" (331c4–d1). In the *Protagoras* Socrates and Protagoras are involved in an agonistic *elenchus*, which is itself a kind of verbal contest or trial. The "Protagoras" of the *Theaetetus* might try to counsel his counterpart in the *Protagoras* that there is no need to worry about the outcome of this "test" by Socrates, since everyone is always right, there is no falsehood, and no one can be refuted (another meaning of the verb ἐλέγχεσθαι). In doing so, however, he would seem to be at odds with Protagoras in the eponymously named dialogue, who acts and speaks as if there is the possibility of falsehood and as if everyone does not speak the truth all the time. He also believes in the possibility of error, disagreement, refutation, and ignorance, all of which are necessary to the art of the teacher or sophist.

At 328b–c, Protagoras says he is worth the high fee he charges. Nevertheless, he adds, "a student pays the full price only if he wishes to; otherwise, he goes into a temple, states under oath how much he thinks my lessons are worth and pays that amount." As Chappell (2004) points out, this system of payment implies "that Protagoras thinks it possible for his pupils to make *false* claims about what seems true to them" (106n85, emphasis added). An oath acts as a safeguard against a student lying by claiming that Protagoras's lessons were worth much less than he *really* believed. Protagoras's exegesis of Simonides's poem (339a–47b) similarly depends on the belief that poets can get things wrong. For Protagoras, one of the most important parts of an education is to be "clever" [δεινόν] about poetry, to understand the things said by poets, whether those things are made correctly or *not* [ἅ τε ὀρθῶς πεποίηται καὶ ἃ μή] (339a1–2). Protagoras believes that Simonides contradicts himself in the poem under discussion (339b). At 339c Protagoras accordingly asks, "Do you consider that the same man [ὁ αὐτὸς οὗτος] says this and those things, the previous ones?" This is ironic considering that in the Defense section of the *Theaetetus*, as well as in the Secret Doctrine attributed to him in the same dialogue, "Protagoras" holds that there is no sameness or identity; that is, that a person is never the same from one moment to the next. Protagoras's criticisms of Simonides depend on positions that "Protagoras" precludes in the *Theaetetus*. Whereas Protagoras points to a contradiction between what Simonides says in different parts of his poem, a follower of the Protagorean theory of the *Theaetetus* could reply that these different parts are effectively the work of two different poets, two separate (temporally distinct) entities, and so

there is no need to harmonize or integrate their respective claims. The actual criticism leveled by Protagoras here relies on Socrates's belief in a subsisting, self-same subject that persists throughout the poem. At 340e, Protagoras alludes to the possibility that "the ignorance [ἀμαθία] of the poet would be great." But the Protagorean theory of the *Theaetetus* entails that there is no ignorance and falsity. In this dialogue's Defense section, "Protagoras" cautions against attributing ignorance or wisdom to people (167a). Toward the end of the *Protagoras*, by contrast, Socrates explicitly asks, "[D]on't you say that ignorance [ἀμαθίαν] is this sort of thing: to have a false belief [τὸ ψευδῆ ἔχειν δόξαν] and to be deceived [ἐψεῦσθαι] about matters of great importance?" (358c3–5). At this point, Prodicus and Hippias have also joined Protagoras in the conversation, and all of them agree. At the very end of the dialogue, Protagoras agrees that he has contradicted himself and accuses Socrates of just wanting to win the argument (360e). It is another turn of the screw that the point on which Protagoras has been refuted is the claim that "some men are most ignorant [ἀμαθέστατοι] yet most courageous." While I have demonstrated some of the most extreme *epistemological* consequences of *individualized* Protagorean theory, I now want to spell out its ethical and pedagogical implications. It is in light of these implications, I propose that Socrates distorts Protagoras's philosophy in order to dissuade others from those views.

[3] The Repugnant Ethical Implications of the Protagorean Theory

There are ethical and pedagogical implications of the *individualized* Protagorean theory, saddled with the flux doctrine, that have not previously been mentioned. These consequences follow mainly from the third proposition in Theaetetus's first definition, Heraclitean flux, and on its two assertions that "nothing is in itself one thing" and that "nothing ever *is* but instead everything becomes." If flux entails the instability of *both* subjecthood and objecthood, then education, training, or socialization that involves imitating or learning from another person is impossible, because one could never successfully align one's own self to the other person or to the object lesson being taught. That is because there can never be two selves at two different moments that are ever the same. Learning and imitation are temporal processes that presuppose a kind of stability and continuity in both student and teacher for which an individualized Protagorean relativism joined to an extreme Heracliteanism simply does not allow.

That there can be no interpersonal learning, education, or socialization is a repellent pedagogical and moral outcome of the Protagorean theory. Worse than subjectivism, it collapses into an extreme form of solipsism. There can be no true connection or communication with others or, for that matter, even

with ourselves beyond any given moment. This problem is even more serious in relation to the question that vexes Protagoras and Socrates in the *Protagoras*, namely, Can virtue be taught to others? The theory attributed to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* precludes this possibility. Neither the Protagoras represented in the *Protagoras* nor, I maintain, the historical Protagoras would endorse those extreme consequences.

It seems to follow, then, that Plato does not have Socrates represent Protagoras accurately in the *Theaetetus* but instead gives a caricature of the sophist in order to turn Theaetetus (and us, the readers) away from these egregious outcomes. But this extreme Protagorean view is not a wholly invented enemy, insofar as certain "followers of Protagoras" advocated (such as Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, as represented in the *Euthydemus*) for something like it. The difference in views attributed by Plato to Protagoras in the *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*, respectively, mirror and are perhaps meant to represent those between an older, respected first generation of sophists (Gorgias, Protagoras, Prodicus) and their upstart "offspring" (Polus, Calicles, Euthydemus, and Dionysodorus), who do not care for education and virtue as their forerunners did.

[4.1] Protagoras's use of "advantageous" [ὠφέλιμος] in the Protagoras

I turn at this point to a commonality between both the *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus* by examining a key term in both dialogues, the "advantageous" [ὠφέλιμος], to show how a Protagorean view (from either dialogue) fundamentally conflicts with Socratic positions on the good or an objective standard that would allow for future benefits or advantages. There are key moments in the *Protagoras* where there is a breakdown in the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras. These aporetic moments can shed light on the *Theaetetus* and especially on Socrates's characterization of "Protagoras" in the Defense speech.[37] At one point in the *Protagoras* Socrates asks whether "[t]hese good things [ἀγαθὰ] constitute what is advantageous to humans [ὠφέλιμα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις]" (333d8–e1).[38] Protagoras shoots back, "Good god, yes! And even if they are not advantageous to humans, I can still call them good" [κἂν μὴ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὠφέλιμα ᾖ, ἔγωγε καλῶ ἀγαθά] (333e1–2).[39] Concerned that he has "irritated" [τετραχύνθαι] (333e3) Protagoras, Socrates carefully and gently asks his next question:

37. On the breakdown of the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras at *Protagoras* 334c-8e, see: Robinson (1953) 9; Klosko (1979) 125–42; Stokes (1986) 312; Benitez (1992) 222–52; M. Frede (1992) xix; Schofield (1992) 122–36; A. Long (2005) 4–5; McCoy (2007) 71–84; R.C. Bartlett (2016) 52–4, 213–7; Fossheim (2017) 13–15; Pettersson (2017) 180–5.

38. SLKB, slightly modified.

39. SLKB, slightly modified.

> Do you mean things that are advantageous to no human being [ἃ μηδενὶ ἀνθρώπων ὠφέλιμά ἐστιν], Protagoras, or things that are of no advantage whatsoever [ἢ ἃ μηδὲ τὸ παράπαν ὠφέλιμα]? Do you call things like that good [ἀγαθά]? (333e5–4a2)

This passage is crucial for several reasons. First, we see again that ἄνθρωπος appears in a plural from and is used by Protagoras in a generic sense: he means advantageous to *all* humans as a kind, not just to a single individual. Second, Socrates is trying to understand how Protagoras relates "good" to "advantageous." This tension between "good" and "advantageous" opens up a series of questions for astute listeners or readers of the dialogue. Is the higher, more encompassing category here the advantageous or the good? Is there a gap between things that are categorized as "good" and those as "advantageous"?[40] That result would be puzzling, considering that most people see the terms as synonyms. Are all good things advantageous? Advantageous to what or to whom? Are all advantageous things good? Again, good to or for whom? These are questions that are left unanswered within the dialogue, although commentators have tried to come up with responses. It seems, however, that there is an irreconcilable difference between these two thinkers. For Protagoras, good and advantageous are always and only relative attributes in need of datives: good *for* or advantageous *for* someone or something. However, Socrates (and Plato) in the *Republic* countenance a good that is absolute, in itself, and in no way relativized; that is, the form of the Good.[41] Third, it is the interpretation of this word ὠφέλιμος—which I have been translating as "advantageous"—and of its relation to ἀγαθά ("good things") that causes a major rupture in the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras*. In fact, it requires the action of several of the listeners and bystanders of the discussion (Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus, and Hippias) to get them back to talking to each other (335d–338e).

Fourth, it is Socrates's question on this point that leads to Protagoras's famous "rant" about the relativity of the good and the advantageous:

> But I know of many things that are disadvantageous [ἀνωφελῆ] to humans [ἀνθρώποις], foods and drinks and drugs and many other things, and some that are advantageous [ὠφέλιμα]; some that are neither to humans [ἀνθρώποις] but one or the other to horses; some that are advantageous only

40. On "advantageous" in Plato's *Protagoras*, see: Maguire (1973) 116–22, 127–32; McDowell (1974) 172, 178; Haden (1984) 227, 237–8; Kerferd (1949) 23–5; Burnyeat (1990) 23, 32, 39; Zilioli (2002) 82–90, 95–113; Zilioli (2007) 124–32; McCoy (2007) 20–3; Rademaker (2013) 100–102; R. Bartlett (2016) 47–52, 57–64, 87–99, 174–178, 184–6, 197–200; Ågotnes (2017) 31.

41. *Republic* 6 505a2, 508e2–3; 7 517b8–c1, 526be1, 534c1.

> to cattle; some only to dogs; some that are advantageous to none of these but are so to trees; some that are good for the roots of a tree, but bad for its shoots, such as manure, which is good spread on the roots of any plant but absolutely ruinous if applied to the new stems and branches. Or take olive oil, which is extremely bad for all plants and is the worst enemy of the hair of all animals except humans [πλὴν ταῖς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου], for whose hair it is beneficial [ἀρωγόν], as it is for the rest of their bodies. But the good [τὸ ἀγαθόν] is such a multifaceted and variable thing that, in the case of oil, it is good for the external parts of the human body [τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ] but very bad for the internal parts, which is why doctors universally forbid their sick patients to use oil in their diets except for the least bit, just enough to dispel a prepared meal's unappetizing aroma. (334a3–c6)[42]

This excursus on how things are advantageous or disadvantageous relative to particular kinds of things or contexts illustrates Protagoras using two kinds of relativism, a general and an individual one. Protagoras says that some things (e.g., food, drink, and drugs) are disadvantageous to humans, as an example of which he later cites the ingesting of olive oil. In this instance, Protagoras uses a general relativism and treats *all* humans as a genus—even while using ἄνθρωπος in the singular (334b5 twice, 334c1). Likewise, he goes on to talk about horses and plants as respective genera. Later, however, he makes the claim that all doctors prohibit their sick patients from using olive oil as a condiment as much as possible. In this instance, Protagoras has in mind a more individualized relativism, where doctors are making individual expert judgments depending on what is or is not affecting a particular person at a particular time.[43] Protagoras in the *Protagoras* denies the kind of unity that a form of the Good would allow us for bringing

42. ἀλλ᾽ ἔγωγε πολλὰ οἶδ᾽ ἃ ἀνθρώποις μὲν ἀνωφελῆ ἐστι, καὶ σιτία καὶ ποτὰ καὶ φάρμακα καὶ ἄλλα μυρία, τὰ δέ γε ὠφέλιμα: τὰ δὲ ἀνθρώποις μὲν οὐδέτερα, ἵπποις δέ: τὰ δὲ βουσὶν μόνον, τὰ δὲ κυσίν: τὰ δέ γε τούτων μὲν οὐδενί, δένδροις δέ: τὰ δὲ τοῦ δένδρου ταῖς μὲν ῥίζαις ἀγαθά, ταῖς δὲ βλάσταις πονηρά, οἷον καὶ ἡ κόπρος πάντων τῶν φυτῶν ταῖς μὲν ῥίζαις ἀγαθὸν παραβαλλομένη, εἰ δ᾽ ἐθέλοις ἐπὶ τοὺς πτόρθους καὶ τοὺς νέους κλῶνας ἐπιβάλλειν, πάντα ἀπόλλυσιν: ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἔλαιον τοῖς μὲν φυτοῖς ἅπασίν ἐστιν πάγκακον καὶ ταῖς θριξὶν πολεμιώτατον ταῖς τῶν ἄλλων ζῴων πλὴν ταῖς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ταῖς δὲ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀρωγὸν καὶ τῷ ἄλλῳ σώματι. οὕτω δὲ ποικίλον τί ἐστιν τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ παντοδαπόν, ὥστε καὶ ἐνταῦθα τοῖς μὲν ἔξωθεν τοῦ σώματος ἀγαθόν ἐστιν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, τοῖς δ᾽ ἐντὸς ταὐτὸν τοῦτο κάκιστον: καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οἱ ἰατροὶ πάντες ἀπαγορεύουσιν τοῖς ἀσθενοῦσιν μὴ χρῆσθαι ἐλαίῳ ἀλλ᾽ ἢ ὅτι σμικροτάτῳ ἐν τούτοις οἷς μέλλει ἔδεσθαι, ὅσον μόνον τὴν δυσχέρειαν κατασβέσαι τὴν ἐπὶ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι ταῖς διὰ τῶν ῥινῶν γιγνομένην ἐν τοῖς σιτίοις τε καὶ ὄψοις.

43. There is also an elision between a relativism based on context and one based on opinion. Protagoras uses the former to support the latter. Tellingly the Forms are supposed to answer both (as at *Symposium* 211a). I owe this point to Nick Pappas.

together various individual or collective goods under a single explanation. Additionally, the conversation between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras* founders on the relation between good and advantageous. There appears to be a fundamental difference between Socrates and Protagoras on just this point, though the contrast is not fully explored there but awaits further elaboration in the discussion in the *Theaetetus*. Let us, therefore, turn to look at the "advantageous" [ὠφέλιμος] in the *Theaetetus*.

[4.2] Group Relativism Reconsidered in the First Definition of the Theaetetus

To recapitulate briefly, in the first part of the first definition of knowledge, Socrates has interpreted the Protagorean theory *individualistically*; that is, he makes the theory subjectivist. In fact, Socrates's gloss on the maxim verifies this.[44] Socrates's Defense of Protagoras (the second part of the first definition) is the first time that a different interpretation of ἄνθρωπος [human] is introduced and taken seriously. Instead of "human" signifying each individual, it means a group or collective:

> Similarly, the wise and good orators are those who make useful things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself. (167c2–4)
>
> [F]or each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be. (168b5–6)[45]

So, although it is "Protagoras" that finally proposes and allows for a group or collective relativism, he seems, strangely, to treat the city as if it were itself just a single, collective subject and to hold that whatever it "judges" or "considers" will be the case.[46] Following the Defense, in part 3, Socrates will allude to group relativism four times. Each time he does so, Socrates allows for a city to decide for itself many things: what is right, noble, shameful, just, unjust, pious, and

44. Remember Socrates's gloss: "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you" (152a6–8).

45. τοὺς δέ γε σοφούς τε καὶ ἀγαθοὺς ῥήτορας ταῖς πόλεσι τὰ χρηστὰ ἀντὶ τῶν πονηρῶν δίκαια δοκεῖν εἶναι ποιεῖν. ἐπεὶ οἵά γ' ἂν ἑκάστη πόλει δίκαια καὶ καλὰ δοκῇ, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι αὐτῇ, ἕως ἂν αὐτὰ νομίζῃ·

τό τε δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι ἰδιώτῃ τε καὶ πόλει.

46. Socrates does this, in part, grammatically by referring to the city in the feminine singular. This is similar to the obfuscation by unification that Socrates orchestrates in the *Crito*; he unifies various often conflicting laws and commonwealth of the city into one speaking and thinking entity, "the Laws." See Duque (2020) 19–103.

impious. But what he cannot seem to accept is a group relativism in which a city establishes what is "advantageous" to itself. There is something about letting collectives (and most likely even individuals) legislate what is advantageous that Socrates cannot seem to endorse even on Protagoras's behalf. He thinks that is a bridge too far.

Below are the four instances where Socrates in conversation with Theodorus alludes to a group relativism. (To facilitate the discussion that follows, I have also divided both the first and second of these into two parts, [a] and [b].)

[1a] Then consider *political* questions. Some of these are questions of *the noble and shameful*, of *just and unjust*, of *pious and impious*; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes on these matters and establishes as its law or convention is truth and fact for that city. (172a1–3)[47]

[1b] But when it is a question of laying down *what is advantageous and what is disadvantageous* to the state, the matter is different. The theory will again admit that here, if anywhere . . . the decision of one city may be more in conformity with the truth than that of another. It would certainly not have the hardihood to affirm that when a city decides that a certain thing is to its own *advantage*, that thing will undoubtedly turn out to be for its *benefit*. (172a5–b2)[48]

[2a] [N]ot least in questions of *what is just and right*. Here they are perfectly ready to maintain that whatever any community decides to be *just and right*, and establishes as such, actually is what is *just and right* for that community and for as long as it remains so established. (177c9–d2)[49]

[2b] On the other hand, when it is a question of what things are good [τἀγαθὰ], we no longer find anyone so heroic that he will venture to contend that whatever a community thinks *advantageous*, and establishes, really is *advantageous*, so long as it is the established order. (177d2–5)[50]

[3] [O]ne might put a question about the whole class of things to which "*what is advantageous*" belongs. These things are concerned, I take it, with future time;

47. LrB slightly modified, emphasis added; οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ πολιτικῶν, καλὰ μὲν καὶ αἰσχρὰ καὶ δίκαια καὶ ἄδικα καὶ ὅσια καὶ μή, οἷα ἂν ἑκάστη πόλις οἰηθεῖσα θῆται νόμιμα αὑτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ἑκάστῃ.

48. LrB slightly modified, emphasis added; ἐν δὲ τῷ συμφέροντα ἑαυτῇ ἢ μὴ συμφέροντα τίθεσθαι, ἐνταῦθ', εἴπερ που, αὖ ὁμολογήσει . . .διαφέρειν καὶ πόλεως δόξαν ἑτέραν ἑτέρας πρὸς ἀλήθειαν. καὶ οὐκ ἂν πάνυ τολμήσειε φῆσαι, ἃ ἂν θῆται πόλις συμφέροντα οἰηθεῖσα αὑτῇ, παντὸς μᾶλλον ταῦτα καὶ συνοίσειν.

49. LrB; emphasis added; οὐχ ἥκιστα περὶ τὰ δίκαια, ὡς παντὸς μᾶλλον ἃ ἂν θῆται πόλις δόξαντα αὑτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ ἔστι δίκαια τῇ θεμένῃ, ἕωσπερ ἂν κέηται.

50. LrB slightly modified, emphasis added; περὶ δὲ τἀγαθὰ οὐδένα ἀνδρεῖον ἔθ' οὕτως εἶναι ὥστε τολμᾶν διαμάχεσθαι ὅτι καὶ ἃ ἂν ὠφέλιμα οἰηθεῖσα πόλις ἑαυτῇ θῆται, καὶ ἔστι τοσοῦτον χρόνον ὅσον ἂν κέηται ὠφέλιμα.

thus when we legislate, we make laws that are going to be *advantageous* in the time to come. This kind of thing we may properly call "future."(178a6–a10)[51]

[4] Legislation also and "*what is advantageous*" is concerned with the future; and it would be generally admitted to be inevitable that a city when it legislates often fails to achieve what is *the most advantageous*. (179a5–8)[52]

In [1a] and [2a] Socrates discusses the possibility of a group relativism with respect to several qualities a city may judge (e.g., noble and shameful, just and unjust, pious and impious). Nevertheless, in each of [1b], [2b], and [4] he dismisses the possibility of a group relativism with respect to what is advantageous to it. (The word συμφέροντα in [1b] functions as a synonym for ὠφέλιμος.) Interestingly, there seems to be something about the fallibility of attributing to something the property of being advantageous—which is related to future outcomes and judgments about future advantages—that escapes the otherwise general infallibility offered by the Protagorean theory. As previously noted, it is this same concept of the "advantageous" and its relation to the good that derails the discussions between Socrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras*. It is also the attribute, according to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, that precludes Protagoras from affirming a collective relativism. While a city can decide for itself what is just and unjust, pious and impious, and noble or good (172a; 177c–d), it cannot determine what is or is not advantageous to it.

While our investigation of "human" [ἄνθρωπος] revealed that Protagoras in the *Protagoras* uses this word very differently than how Socrates interprets "human" in Protagoras's human-measure fragment in the *Theaetetus*, our investigation of "advantageous" [ὠφέλιμος] has shown that this word is used in a similar way in both dialogues. In each instance, however, its usage leads to trouble and tension with established Socratic views. In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras's discussion of the relativity and plurality of the advantageous and the good stands in stark contrast to Socrates's unifying form or idea of the Good in the *Republic* and elsewhere. In the *Theaetetus*, in the third part of the first definition, Socrates allows for a group relativism according to which a collective body can decide many things for itself (e.g., what is noble or shameful, just or unjust, pious or impious), but he does not allow that a city can decide what is advantageous to

51. LrB slightly modified, emphasis added; εἰ περὶ παντός τις τοῦ εἴδους ἐρωτῴη ἐν ᾧ καὶ τὸ ὠφέλιμον τυγχάνει ὄν: ἔστι δέ που καὶ περὶ τὸν μέλλοντα χρόνον. ὅταν γὰρ νομοθετώμεθα, ὡς ἐσομένους ὠφελίμους τοὺς νόμους τιθέμεθα εἰς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον: τοῦτο δὲ 'μέλλον' ὀρθῶς ἄν λέγοιμεν.

52. LrB slightly modified, emphasis added; Οὐκοῦν καὶ αἱ νομοθεσίαι καὶ τὸ ὠφέλιμον περὶ τὸ μέλλον ἐστί, καὶ πᾶς ἄν ὁμολογοῖ νομοθετουμένην πόλιν πολλάκις ἀνάγκην εἶναι τοῦ ὠφελιμωτάτου ἀποτυγχάνειν;

itself. The reason for this is that such judgments impinge on future good or bad outcomes that cannot be known with certainty beforehand. The introduction of the idea of the "advantageous" in connection with the good relies implicitly on some kind of objective standard according to which a polity or individual could judge that something is or is not truly beneficial or advantageous. But such an assessment is not possible for an epistemological theory that depends *only* on immediate perceptions, nor is it possible for an ontological theory that posits constant flux and thereby denies any possible connection between a current and past self. Most important for this section, however, a judgment of what is advantageous is impossible for a Protagorean relativism (whether conceived in individual or collective terms) because it denies both a unity to the good that would allow one to make a comparison between and among goods and a more objective standard from which to make judgments about future benefits.

In this article I have compared and contrasted the portraits of Protagoras provided in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*, respectively. On the one hand, I have drawn out tensions between these portraits, concerning how the term "human" is employed in the two dialogues and the views on refutation, ignorance, and falsity attributed to Protagoras in each of them. On the other hand, I have looked at a commonality between the Protagoras in the *Protagoras* and in the *Theaetetus* by examining the word "advantageous" in both dialogues. This examination allowed us to see how Protagorean relativism, whether construed individually or collectively, denies both unity to the good and an objective standard from which to make judgments about future benefits. In the course of my analysis, I have also tried to answer the question of *why* Plato might have had Socrates distort the representation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* by suggesting that the repugnant ethical and pedagogical implications of a Protagorean view mixed with extreme Heraclitean flux in this dialogue may well point to differences between Protagoras himself and his followers regarding the importance or even possibility of education and socialization.[53]

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