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RELATIVISM AND SELF-REFUTATION IN THE *THEAETETUS*

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RELATIVISM has always been a position of great interest to philosophers, and this interest has generally been accompanied by a desire to refute the position. Various kinds of relativism are available, but there has been a particularly strong interest in the view that *every* judgement is true *for* the person whose judgement it is—the view known as ‘relativism about truth’. Protagoras’ famous claim that ‘Man is the measure of all things’ has often been taken to represent this sort of relativism. Plato responds to Protagoras with what remains as the primary criticism of relativism about truth, that it is self-refuting.¹ Given the enduring philosophical significance of this criticism, it is unsurprising that the self-refutation argument at *Theaetetus* 170 E–171 C has been the subject of much lively debate. In this paper I shall address the following questions: (i) what is the position of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*?² (ii) what is Plato’s argument against Protagoras at 170 E–171 C?³ and (iii) is

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¹ Among contemporary proponents of the self-refutation charge, we may count M. Mandelbaum, ‘Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativisms’ [‘Subjective’], *Monist*, 62/4 (1979), 403–23, repr. in J. W. Meiland and M. Krausz (eds.), *Relativism—Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame, 1982), 34–61 (cited from the reprint), 36–7; and H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge, 1981), 123–4.

² I completely leave aside any issues regarding the historical Protagoras; throughout this paper, ‘Protagoras’ will refer to the Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be sure about what the historical Protagoras thought, since his works are not extant, but many scholars have thought that Plato’s *Theaetetus* gives the most accurate account of Protagoreanism, though they disagree on what position Plato attributes to Protagoras.

³ In this paper I shall ignore, except in relation to the self-refutation argument,

Plato's argument successful? In providing answers to these questions I hope to shed light not only on Plato's case against Protagoras but also on the self-refutation argument as such, especially since I think that Plato's argument *is* successful against relativism about truth.⁴ Plato's argument succeeds in showing, I shall argue, that relativism about truth, whether or not the relativistic thesis itself is only relatively true, faces a devastating dilemma: the position is either self-refuting or violates the conditions of rational discourse in some other way.

I

The heart of the passage in question is this:⁵

Secondly, it [the *Truth* that Protagoras wrote] has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is . . . And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion. (171 A 6–B 2)

Plato seems to be arguing as follows:

If (A) every judgement is true,
and (B) it is judged that (A) is false,
then (C) it is true that (A) is false,
and therefore (D), (A) is false.⁶

Plato's other main lines of argument against Protagoras: (a) showing that there is an inconsistency between Protagoras' relativism and other beliefs Protagoras seems to hold, particularly about wisdom and expertise, and (b) showing that Protagorean relativism depends, to some extent at least, on a Heraclitean world-view, and that this Heraclitean world-view is a hopeless case. (The precise relationship between Protagoreanism, Heracliteanism, and the main thesis under consideration in these passages, that knowledge is perception, is a matter of debate, as M. F. Burnyeat explains in *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis, 1990). See also M. Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* [Responses] (Oxford, 2005), ch. 5.)

⁴ Contemporary versions of relativism about truth typically relativize truth to conceptual frameworks rather than individual agents. In my discussion of the exquisite argument in sect. IV, I shall address the argument's relevance for such versions as well.

⁵ Throughout the paper, I shall use the translation in the Hackett edition (Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*), except where noted otherwise.

⁶ This is how M. F. Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaete-*

Sextus Empiricus (*M.* 7. 389–90) took this to be the form of Plato’s self-refutation (*περιτροπή*) argument against Protagoras, which has come to be known as the ‘exquisite argument’. It is a valid argument, and I think that it shows (A) to be self-refuting: if it is true, it is false (assuming that someone judges it to be false). But, as many scholars have pointed out, this does not mean that the argument shows Protagoras’ relativism to be self-refuting, since (A) does not accurately represent his position, that is, (A) is not equivalent to Protagoras’ measure doctrine.⁷ (Throughout this paper, I shall use ‘(M)’ to refer to this doctrine.) An adequate formulation of Protagorean relativism requires the use of qualifiers concerning the person for whom a judgement is true. In other words, (M) does not say that every judgement is true, but rather that every judgement is true *for* the person whose judgement it is. And if we replace (A) with this formulation of (M), the argument becomes:

If (M’) any proposition *p* is true *for* A if it seems to A that *p*,⁸
 and (N) it seems to someone that (M’) is false,
 then (O) (M’) is false *for* the person to whom it seems so.

And clearly, this fails to show that (M)/(M’) is self-refuting: all that is shown is that (M) is false for Protagoras’ opponents and not that it is false *simpliciter*, or that it is false for Protagoras himself (which would again be self-refuting, as the initial premiss, (M), is presumably what Protagoras believes and is thus true for him). Hence, it is not the case that (M) is false if it is true. Protagoras’ position requires the use of the relativizing qualifiers, and by dropping them in the passage quoted above (171 A–B), Plato gives the impression that he is making an illegitimate move in arguing against Protagoras.

tus [‘Self-Refutation’], *Philosophical Review*, 85/2 (1976), 172–95 at 173, says the argument works ‘on the face of it’, though he goes on to argue that this is not really how Plato means us to take it.

⁷ D. Bostock, *Plato’s Theaetetus* (Oxford, 1988), 90; Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 173–4; T. D. J. Chappell, ‘Does Protagoras Refute Himself?’ [‘Protagoras’], *Classical Quarterly*, NS 45/2 (1995), 333–8 at 334; J. McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus* (Oxford, 1973), 171; K. Sayre, *Plato’s Analytic Method* (Chicago, 1969), 87–8; G. Vlastos, Introduction to the Library of Liberal Arts, *Plato’s Protagoras* [*Protagoras*] (Indianapolis and New York, 1956), xiv n. 29. With the exception of Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, these authors find fault with Plato for omitting the qualifiers. According to Burnyeat, on the other hand, (A)–(D) is not, in fact, how Plato argues against Protagoras.

⁸ In this paper I shall use ‘it seems to X that’, ‘X believes that’, and ‘X judges that’ interchangeably.

Plato is well aware of the need for the relativizing qualifiers, and he carefully states Protagoras' position at 170 A 3–4, just before the exquisite argument: 'He says, does he not, that things are for every man what they seem to him to be?' (And Theodorus agrees that that is Protagoras' view.) But when it comes to arguing against Protagoras, the qualifiers are dropped, and this has led many scholars to the conclusion that the exquisite argument is a failure.⁹ Vlastos, for example, writes:

Protagoras is very fussy about adding 'for . . .' after 'true' or 'is' or 'real' . . . Even Plato himself is not as careful as he should be on this point. While he puts in the 'for . . .' almost invariably while *reporting* or *describing* Protagoras' doctrine (not only at 170a, but at 152b, c, 158a, and all through 166c–167c, where the repetition gets almost tiresome, and then again at 171e–172a; also at *Crat.* 385e–386d), he sometimes drops it in the course of arguing *against* Protagoras (e.g. in the 'exquisite' argument at 171a), thereby inadvertently vitiating his own polemic.¹⁰

But is inadvertence a realistic explanation of what happens in the exquisite argument? Given how conscientious Plato is in reporting Protagoras' position, it seems unlikely that he would have *inadvertently* dropped the qualifiers while constructing a key argument against him, where dropping the qualifiers yields a manifestly bad argument. This is particularly the case since a careful statement of Protagoras' view immediately precedes the exquisite argument, at 170 A 3–4.¹¹ What is more, as Burnyeat shows, Plato comes across as adamant about giving Protagoras as fair a representation as pos-

⁹ Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, 90; Chappell, 'Protagoras', 334; McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*, 169–71; Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, 87–8; Vlastos, *Protagoras*, xiv n. 29.

¹⁰ Vlastos, *Protagoras*, xiv n. 29.

¹¹ G. Fine, 'Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*' ['Plato'], *Apeiron*, 31/3 (1998), 201–34 at 203, arguing against reading Protagoras as a relativist, claims that 'Vlastos overstates the extent to which Plato includes the qualifiers in reporting Protagoras's position' and that Plato often omits them. This strikes me as a weak objection, for two reasons. (i) As I point out above, the qualifiers are in place at critical points of the text (170 A 3–4, 152 A 6–8), where Plato apparently wishes to state the position precisely. (ii) Even if we suppose that Plato omits the qualifiers as often as he includes them, it is far more reasonable to think that the qualifiers are sometimes dropped for the sake of simplicity (and that we should take the qualifiers to be implicit) than it is to think that Plato sometimes adds unnecessary qualifiers that misrepresent the position. Fine offers a non-relativistic interpretation of the existing qualifiers in G. Fine, 'Protagorean Relativisms' ['Relativisms'], *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 19 (1996), 211–43 at 240 n. 61. I shall have more to say about her position shortly.

sible, when Socrates keeps referring to Protagoras' book *Truth* and its thesis that man is the measure of all things (170 C 2, D 1–2, D 5, 170 E 9–171 A 1, 171 B 7, C 6), and when

Theodorus is prevailed upon to replace Theaetetus as Socrates' interlocutor—in order that the distinguished mathematician's maturity and professional sense of rigor shall ensure more serious and responsible treatment for the ideas of his friend Protagoras (cf. 162e, 168b–169d).¹²

The notion that the reason for dropping the qualifiers at 171 A is inadvertence, then, seems inconsistent with Plato's whole approach in his discussion of Protagoras' position. Given the care with which Protagoras' position has been treated up to 170 A, 'it would be nothing less than perverse dishonesty were Plato without reason to make Socrates argue in the sequel in a way that depended for its damaging effect on omission of the relativizing qualifiers'.¹³ And as Burnyeat goes on to point out, 'perverse dishonesty is not a charge to be leveled lightly against a philosopher of Plato's stature and integrity'.¹⁴ Inadvertence therefore fails as a satisfactory explanation for Plato's dropping the qualifiers at 171 A, and we must find an alternative interpretation of the passage.¹⁵ Before doing so, however, we must reach a clearer understanding of Protagoras' view.

II

Plato's dropping the qualifiers gave rise to the appearance that the exquisite argument amounts to no more than an *ignoratio elenchi*, failing to address Protagoras' position. It has been argued, however, that Plato does not actually commit this fallacy, and that he

¹² Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 175. T. D. J. Chappell, 'Reading the *περιτροπή*: *Theaetetus* 170c–171c' [*Theaetetus*], *Phronesis*, 51/2 (2006), 109–39 at 112–13, recants his earlier view (Chappell, 'Protagoras') and argues against the view that Plato carelessly omits the relativizing qualifiers, which he calls the 'relativity reading of the *περιτροπή*'. He points out that this view asks us 'to believe that Plato blunders in this way even though the *περιτροπή* is presented after eight Stephanus pages' worth (160e–168c) of close study of arguments . . . all of which Plato evidently takes to be fallacious precisely because . . . these arguments are careless about qualifiers in various ways' (112).

¹³ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 177.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ In attempting this, I am assuming that the argument is meant as a serious argument against Protagoras. See S. Waterlow, 'Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171a6–c7' ['Inconsistency'], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 59 (1977), 19–36 at 28–9, for evidence on Plato's confidence in the argument.

treats Protagoras consistently between the exquisite argument and the rest of the *Theaetetus*. Burnyeat, for instance, has argued that Plato represents Protagoras' view consistently as a kind of relativism, rather than 'the crude subjectivism that Sextus refutes'.¹⁶ Conversely, Fine argues that Protagoras is not a relativist at all, but rather a subjectivist (though Fine prefers to call the view 'infallibilism'), as Sextus takes him to be.¹⁷ Based on this reading of Protagoras, Fine takes the exquisite argument to function very much like Sextus' version above.¹⁸ To make any progress on understanding the exquisite argument, then, we must first turn to the text to gain some clarity on what exactly Protagoras' position is.

In the *Theaetetus* Protagoras' measure doctrine comes into play as part of the attempt to define knowledge as perception (151 E). According to Socrates, the view that knowledge is perception implies the measure doctrine, which is understood as saying that as each thing appears to a person, so it is for that person (152 A 6–8). Socrates explains this view with the following example of conflicting appearances: of two people facing the same wind, one may feel cold while the other does not. In cases such as this, the ordinary diagnosis would be that one of them is right and the other wrong, but Protagoras rejects this view: we should say instead that the wind is cold for the one who feels cold, and not cold for the one who does not (152 B).¹⁹ This is generalized to all sense-perception, yielding

¹⁶ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 172. There is some disagreement over what kind of relativism Protagoras' view is: Burnyeat argues that it is a relativism *about truth* ('Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', *Philosophical Review*, 85/1 (1976), 44–69 at 45–6; 'Self-Refutation', 181), according to which 'every judgement is true *for* the person whose judgement it is' ('Self-Refutation', 174). Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 32, on the other hand, argues that this received view about Protagoras' relativism is mistaken, and that his view should instead be called 'relativism of fact', according to which '[w]hat is relative to the believer is the reality that makes the belief true'. I shall have more to say about this disagreement in what follows. (Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, 89–92, McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*, 169–73, and Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, 87–90, agree with Burnyeat that Protagoras is a relativist about truth. However, they, unlike Burnyeat, take the exquisite argument to be a failure on the grounds that Plato drops the relativizing qualifiers at that point.)

¹⁷ Fine, 'Relativisms' and 'Plato'. To be more precise, Fine, 'Plato', 205, thinks that according to infallibilism, '(i) all beliefs are absolutely true, and (ii) there are no truths that are not believed: p is true if and only if it is believed'.

¹⁸ Fine, 'Plato', 224–8. A key argument in Fine's interpretation of Protagoras as an infallibilist ('Plato', 234) is that the exquisite argument is successful if we take Protagoras to be an infallibilist, but not if we take him to be a relativist.

¹⁹ What Plato says about the second person has been interpreted alternatively as the person having a (conscious) experience of it not being cold, or as the person not

the thesis ‘things are *for* the individual such as he perceives them’ (152 C 2–3, cf. 170 A 3–4), which may be formulated as ‘*x* is *f* for A if and only if *x* appears *f* to A’.²⁰

Both clauses of this biconditional formula call for elaboration. We must, to begin with, distinguish between three different kinds of ‘appearance’ corresponding to the ‘appears’ in the formula: (i) an ‘appearance’ may be a perceptual experience, such as the perceptual experience of a cold wind; (ii) an ‘appearance’ may be a belief that is based on perceptual experience, as in ‘it appears to me that the wind is cold’;²¹ and (iii) an ‘appearance’ may be a belief about anything (unlike the restricted sense in (ii) above), as in ‘this view appears crazy to me’. Plato makes use of all three of these phenomena in the *Theaetetus*, and all three senses play significant roles in Protagoras’ position, as I explain below. We shall also see that the first clause of the biconditional, ‘*x* is *f* for A’ can be cast as “‘*x* is *f*” is true for A’, or simply ‘*p* is true for A’.

On Protagoras’ view, seemingly contradictory appearances turn out not to be really contradictory, that is, they do not constitute a violation of the principle of non-contradiction (PNC), because Plato supports Protagoras with a Heraclitean ontology: ‘nothing ever is, but everything is always coming to be’²² (152 E 1).²³ On this view, nothing can be said to be anything or any kind of thing unqualifiedly (152 D 3–4); this is why Protagoras rejects the notion that the wind is simply cold or not cold, and that one of the two people at issue must be right and the other wrong. Everything that we ordinarily take to be something—such as the property of coldness—is actually in a process of coming to be ‘as the result of

having any experience about the matter at all (and therefore not having an experience of the wind being cold). For a defence of the first view, see R. J. Ketchum, ‘Plato’s “Refutation” of Protagorean Relativism: *Theaetetus* 170–171’ [‘Refutation’], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 10 (1992), 73–105 at 78, and for the second view Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 178.

²⁰ There is a dispute about whether this formula and its equivalents should be cast as a biconditional, or instead as a conditional: ‘*y* is *f* for X if *y* appears *f* to X’. I address this matter below, but we can set it aside for the time being.

²¹ ‘The wind appears cold to me’ seems ambiguous between (i) and (ii). To be precise, the perceptual experience should be expressed as ‘a cold wind appears to me’.

²² My translation.

²³ I follow the convention of referring to the view (or set of views) Plato marshals in support of Protagoras as ‘Heraclitean’. Even though the view in question seems very close to what we know of Heraclitus’ views, it should be noted that Plato himself never calls the view ‘Heraclitean’ (cf. Lee, *Responses*, 86).

movement and change and blending with one another' (152 D 7–9). Plato explains that perceptual properties do not exist independently of our perceptual apparatus: any colour, for example, comes into being as a result of the interaction between an eye and a perceived object, both constantly in motion (153 E–154 A). Such interactions are always the source of 'twin births', since they produce both the perceptual property and the corresponding perceptual experience (156 A–C). This is why perceiving wrongly (or falsely) is impossible: 'All appearances are true precisely because the object cannot fail to exist when the appearance exists'.²⁴ This also explains why the apparently conflicting experiences do not constitute a violation of PNC: the different experiences have different objects, each of them being particular, or 'relative', to the corresponding percipient, at that particular moment.²⁵

Plato's exposition of the measure doctrine focuses on perceptual experiences until around 160 C, where these are linked to beliefs based on such experiences (i.e. items in (ii) above).²⁶ Having established the essential link between a perceptual experience—which Plato repeatedly calls a 'perception' (*αἴσθησις*: 159 D 1, E 2, E 7–8)—and the perceptual property, he concludes that 'my perception is true for me' (160 C 7).²⁷ Plato treats this conclusion as proof of Protagoras' measure doctrine (160 C 8–9) and goes on to derive support, in turn, for the thesis that knowledge is perception:

²⁴ Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 32; cf. Lee, *Responses*, 44.

²⁵ Each experience is therefore unique: one's experience at a particular time cannot be shared by any other percipient or re-experienced by the same percipient at another time. Cf. M. F. Burnyeat, 'Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed', *Philosophical Review*, 91/1 (1982), 3–40 at 4–5.

²⁶ Beliefs have, in fact, made their appearance at the very beginning, since the wording of the measure doctrine makes it clear that the doctrine is about beliefs/judgements: man is the measure of the things that are that (*ὡς*) they are, and of the things that are not that they are not. (The use of *ὡς* suggests that man is the measure of what is and of what is not the case; perceptual experiences, conceptualized or otherwise, do not take this propositional form.) Yet only at this point of the text does Plato explicitly address the question of what the view at hand means for beliefs.

²⁷ That Plato attributes truth-value to a perception may be taken as evidence that the perception at issue belongs in category (ii) above, a belief based on perceptual experience. Yet we see in *Republic 9* that Plato is willing to discuss the truth and falsity of perceptual experiences: he argues that we may falsely experience a bodily state *as* pleasant, when in fact it is merely a neutral state (584 A–585 A). Plato anticipates contemporary philosophers of mind in thinking of experience as being conceptualized, which allows truth-value for experiences since they may be conceptualized rightly or wrongly. For a more detailed discussion of this matter, see M. M. Erginel, 'Plato on a Mistake about Pleasure', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 44/3 (2006), 447–68.

How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought [*διανοία*] about what is—or what is coming to be—how can I fail to be a knower [*οὐκ ἐπιστήμων*] of the things of which I am perceiver? (160 D 1–3)

Here Plato moves from his findings about perceptual experiences to conclusions about thoughts and knowledge—and therefore beliefs—concerning the objects of perception. Then, at 161 D 2–3 Protagoras' view is stated explicitly in terms of beliefs/judgements: 'whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him'.

What goes for seemingly conflicting appearances, then, goes also for seemingly conflicting judgements based on perception: when one person judges that it is cold, and another judges that it is not, both are right without contradicting one another.²⁸ This is simply because their judgements are in fact about different things altogether, each making a judgement about an object of perception that is private to him/her.²⁹ Therefore, if I judge that the coffee at our

²⁸ The fact that Heraclitean ontology saves Protagoras from violating PNC has led some scholars to the conclusion that Protagoras wants to preserve PNC, contrary to Aristotle's suggestion in *Metaphysics Γ 5* (1009^b7–8), where Aristotle argues that Protagoras is a subjectivist and that this commits him to denying PNC. In agreement with Aristotle, Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 26, argues that Protagoras denies PNC, but that his view is such that we could never catch him in self-contradiction. Fine, 'Plato', 207, and Chappell, 'Theaetetus', 123–4, however, argue that the introduction of Heraclitean ontology makes no sense except as a move designed to save Protagoras from violating PNC. This seems right to me: it becomes difficult to make sense of the text if we suppose that Protagoras did not care about preserving PNC. Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 26, cites two passages as evidence, but they are not convincing. (a) At 166 B 4–5 Protagoras is presented as not hesitating 'to admit that it is possible for the same man to know and not know the same thing', but as Waterlow herself notes, the very next sentence points out that there is a manoeuvre by which someone who feared to say this could avoid doing so. Waterlow explains that, given Heraclitean ontology, 'a subject is never the same from one instant to another', which shows that 'the same man' does not exist at two different points in time, and so he cannot know and not know the same thing after all. (b) 167 A 7–8 suggests that, according to Protagoras, false belief is impossible, and all beliefs are therefore true, 'even mutually inconsistent ones' (ibid.). Indeed, the view that false belief is impossible is supported by many passages, but as we have seen, Heraclitus prevents us from ever encountering a genuine contradiction. The absence of false belief is therefore no reason for Protagoras to deny PNC.

²⁹ There is some disagreement as to whether the objects of perception are private, or whether they are public objects with relational properties. Fine, 'Plato', 207 n. 14, defends the former view, while M. Matthen, 'Perception, Relativism, and Truth: Reflections on Plato's *Theaetetus* 152–160', *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 24 (1985), 33–58 at 35 ff., defends the latter. Matthen writes: 'public existents have [properties such as hotness and bitterness] not in themselves but only relative to percipients (or acts of perception)' (35). Matthen points out that Socrates speaks

neighbourhood restaurant is heavenly, then it *is* heavenly for me, even if everyone else finds it disgusting. The state of affairs corresponding to my judgement necessarily obtains, since the property in question necessarily comes into being along with my perceptual experience of the property (which my judgement is based on). On the other hand, the coffee is disgusting for those who find it so, since their judgements correspond to a state of affairs that also obtains necessarily.³⁰

A fact comes into being in the case of each perception, and such a private fact underwrites the truth of the judgement made by the perceiver. While the facts exist only relatively to perceivers, that is, the truth of judgements is determined in an ordinary way, in accordance with the correspondence theory of truth: every judgement is true because it corresponds to a fact that exists relatively to the person who makes that judgement. What this means is that, in Burnyeat's helpful terminology, 'each of us lives in a private world',³¹ and it is the facts in each person's private world that make her judgements true. This is why Waterlow insists on calling Protagoras' view a 'relativism of fact' as opposed to a 'relativism of truth': 'what the doctrine asserts is a relativism of fact and not in any extra sense a relativism of truth'.³² Here we need to be careful about what the 'relativism of truth' is that is being rejected.³³ If

of 'the same wind' (152 B 2–3), but this occurs during the initial introduction of Protagoras' doctrine, and Socrates may be using pre-theoretical, everyday language to get across the thought that two people under seemingly identical circumstances may have very different and yet equally true perceptions. For Socrates also claims that 'everything is really motion, and there is nothing but motion' (156 A 4–5), which weighs heavily against the public-objects reading. Furthermore, Socrates goes on to explain that the two forms of motion, active and passive, engage in intercourse to generate the twin birth of perception and 'what is perceived' (*αἰσθητόν*: 156 A 5–B 1). That is, from the interaction of active and passive motions we get a perceptual experience and a perceptual property, which is itself identified as 'what is perceived', suggesting that there is nothing (public or otherwise) behind the private property. In any case, Matthen agrees that the properties of, and truths about, objects are private. Therefore, the choice between the two readings at issue will not matter so far as this paper is concerned.

³⁰ Even though a number of people may agree, for example, that the coffee at our neighbourhood restaurant is disgusting, their agreement with each other is just as unreal as their disagreement with me: what makes their judgement true is made true on an individual basis, the judgement of each corresponding to a privately obtaining state of affairs.

³¹ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 182.

³² Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 33.

³³ Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 31 n. 17, identifies several scholars as proponents of the objectionable interpretation, including Vlastos, *Protagoras*, xiv; McDowell,

by ‘relativism of truth’ we mean the view that there is no objective truth³⁴ and that ‘any proposition p is true in the case of the person who judges that p ’, then, on the reading I have defended, Protagoras’ view is a relativism of truth. The text makes it clear that the relativized facts entail non-objective truths that are determined with respect to each person: ‘whatever a man thinks at any time is the truth for him’ (158E 5–6, cf. 160C 7–9, 161D, 167A). It is therefore not only the case that ‘ x is f for A if and only if A judges that x is f ’, but also that “‘ x is f ” is true for A if and only if A judges that x is f ’, or simply

(M'') p is true for A if and only if A judges that p .³⁵

What we do *not* have here is a theory of relativized truth, a special way of determining what is to count as true, which it might be useful to distinguish as a ‘relativistic theory of truth’.³⁶ The position that

Plato: Theaetetus, 169–71; and Sayre, *Plato’s Analytic Method*, 87–91. I agree with Waterlow’s rejection of what *she* calls ‘relativism of truth’ and endorsement of ‘relativism of fact’ based on the textual evidence I discuss above.

³⁴ I follow Fine’s distinction between ‘objective’ and ‘absolute’ truth: ‘Let us say that an objective truth is one that obtains independently of belief, and that an absolute truth is one that is true *simpliciter*, that is simply flat-out true rather than being merely relatively true’ (‘Relativisms’, 234). The same distinction is employed by M. Baghrmian, *Relativism* (London, 2004), 121–2.

³⁵ Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 76, argues that ‘Protagoras does not single out “true for S” for special treatment’. On his view, truth is treated just like any other property, such that “‘If something seems true to someone, then it is true for that person” is an instantiation of P1 [If X seems f to S then X is f for S], and thus Protagoras is committed to it if he is committed to P1’ (ibid.). Lee, *Responses*, 43–4, on the other hand, objects to treating truth as a property of sentences or propositions. She argues that Plato ‘uses statements of the form “ p is true for A” as a shorthand way of referring to how things (truly) are for a person’ (44). (Lee, *Responses*, 45, does note that Ketchum could be right about truth being a property if the Heraclitean analysis of perceptual predicates is ‘meant to cover all properties and states of affairs’. I shall have more to say on this shortly.) In either case, it is clear that we can move from relative facts to an ordinary kind of truth with respect to those facts.

³⁶ Contemporary discussions of ‘relativism of/about truth’ do not make the distinction between relativism of truth in the broad sense and what I have called a ‘relativistic theory of truth’; it is therefore typically not entirely clear whether the view I attribute to Protagoras qualifies as a relativism of truth. Perhaps this is unremarkable since relativism of fact is not seen as a viable option and there is no apparent need for greater precision on this point. Mandelbaum, ‘Subjective’, 35, for example, distinguishes three types of relativism—*subjective*, *objective*, and *conceptual*—and identifies as their common denominator ‘the contention that assertions cannot be judged true or false in themselves, but must be so judged with reference to one or more aspects of the total situation in which they have been made’. According to *subjective relativism*, which comes closest to Protagoras’ view, the truth of

has emerged, then, is a relativism of fact, *and* a kind of relativism of truth.³⁷

any assertion is ‘relative to the characteristics of the person making the assertion’. Protagoras’ view *may* qualify as such a relativism, depending on how we understand the requisite relationship between the truth of an assertion and the characteristics of an individual: on Protagoras’ view, the person making the assertion is partly responsible for the existence of the fact that makes the assertion true (or not). In a way, then, the truth of the assertion is thus dependent on the characteristics of the person, which may satisfy Mandelbaum’s criterion. If, however, the person’s characteristics are supposed to determine the truth of her assertions in a more direct way, without recourse to such relative facts, then Protagoras’ view is not this kind of relativism about truth. We achieve no more clarity by turning to more recent work specifically aimed at clarifying relativism about truth: J. MacFarlane, ‘Making Sense of Relative Truth’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105 (2005), 321–39, has argued that relativism about truth ‘is the view that truth (of sentences of propositions) is relative not just to contexts of use but also to *contexts of assessment*’ (321). He employs this distinction between *contexts of use* and of *assessment* to explain that truth being relative merely to *contexts of use* does not give us relativism about truth, since few would dispute the notion that the truth-value of ‘there are six billion people in the world’ depends on the context in which the assertion is made (i.e. *when* the assertion is made). Relativism about truth requires, according to MacFarlane, the truth of assertions to be dependent on ‘[the] concrete situation in which a use of the sentence is being *assessed*’ (325). But the useful distinction ceases to be of use when we turn to Protagoras: on the one hand, the truth of an assertion (such as ‘the wind is cold’) is determined by the corresponding fact (the existence or otherwise of the property of coldness), which presumably belongs to the *context of use*. On the other hand, the fact at issue can only be a private fact relative to, and generated in part by the condition of, the individual making the *assessment*. The truth of an assertion, then, does depend on the *context of assessment*, and Protagoras’ view appears to satisfy the criterion MacFarlane sets. However, it seems clear that MacFarlane does not have in mind such ontologically interdependent *contexts of use* and *contexts of assessment*, which leaves me uncertain as to whether he would welcome Protagoras’ relativism as a relativism of truth. We may conclude, in any case, that it would not be incorrect to classify Protagoras’ view as a relativism of truth, as long as we are clear about how truth gets relativized on this view. Conversely, if we prefer to use a narrower conception of relativism of truth and disqualify Protagoras’ view, we need to be clear that his view involves some other kind of relativity. I shall shortly return to this last point.

³⁷ This view is quite similar to the one that Fine defends, which is surprising since she denies that Protagoras is a relativist at all—the view she attributes to Protagoras is infallibilism, according to which all beliefs are true *simpliciter*, or true without qualification. (Fine, ‘Relativisms’, 239 n. 58, acknowledges that her ‘infallibilism’ is very similar to Waterlow’s relativism of fact.) The catch is that Fine’s infallibilism is not the ‘crude’ infallibilism which Aristotle and Sextus attribute to Protagoras. For even though Fine, ‘Plato’, 203, claims to be in agreement with Aristotle and Sextus in her interpretation of Protagoras, her version of infallibilism sheds much of the crudeness found in the ancient version. Fine defends infallibilism against the charge that it is in clear violation of PNC by incorporating Heraclitean ontology into Aristotle’s and Sextus’ infallibilism. As we have seen, Heraclitean ontology allows Protagoras to avoid violating PNC because we live in private worlds, and seemingly contradictory judgements are in fact consistent because they correspond to facts that are private to the agents. Given this, it seems misleading to suggest that

I have so far limited my discussion of Protagoras' view to perceptual experiences and judgements about those perceptions (my (i) and (ii) above). But Protagoras' theory extends beyond the perceptual realm, as the original statement of his measure doctrine reveals: man is the measure of *all* things, and not just things in the perceptual sphere. This feature of Protagoras' view comes out explicitly at 170–1, where Plato takes up judgements outside the perceptual realm, in particular judgements of the form 'A judges that B's judgement that *p* is false'. Such judgements, i.e. judgements about other judgements, have generally been distinguished as 'second-order judgements', contrasted with 'first-order judgements', which are simply about some object having some property (perceptual or otherwise). Since second-order judgements are clearly non-perceptual, the fact that Protagoreanism covers them is sufficient evidence that Protagoreanism reaches beyond the perceptual sphere.³⁸ It is thus fairly uncontroversial that Protagoreanism extends beyond the perceptual realm. There is significant disagreement, however, about how exactly this extension is carried out.

The question is, essentially, whether Heraclitean ontology stretches as far as Protagoreanism does. We have seen how Heraclitean ontology saves Protagoras from violating PNC in the perceptual realm, so the question now is whether it will do so in the

all judgements are true unqualifiedly, and to leave it there. Precision requires us to make it clear that A's judgement 'the wind is cold' is true not in the ordinary way, but only with respect to a fact in A's private world—contrary to what is suggested by Fine's claim that seemingly contradictory judgements are both true *simpliciter*, 'not merely true for the one who holds them' (Fine, 'Relativisms', 239). Fine uses 'true *simpliciter*' broadly, for any truth other than relative truth, and she takes relative truth to be truth according to relativism of truth in the narrow sense, i.e. what I have called the relativistic theory of truth. These are acceptable terminological preferences, but it is clearly not enough to say 'A's judgement "the wind is cold" is true *simpliciter*'—we must say 'A's judgement "the wind is cold" is true *simpliciter* in A's world'.

³⁸ At 170 D 4–6 Protagoras is presented as thinking that, if Theodorus comes to a decision in his mind and expresses a judgement about something (*περί τινος*)—not just about perception—the judgement will be true *for him*. That Theodorus is presented as reaching a decision is evidence that Plato is not speaking of judgements about perceptions: we do not need to consider, and then decide, whether the wind feels cold, or whether the apple seems red. The most obvious case of Protagoreanism being applied to second-order judgements is at 170 E 7–171 A 1, where we are told that, given Protagoras' measure doctrine, if nobody believes the measure doctrine, then it is not true *for anyone*. Here the second-order judgement is about the measure doctrine itself, and this raises the disputed question concerning the self-applicability of the measure doctrine; I take up this matter in sect. III.

non-perceptual realm as well. Echoing Fine's distinction between *Narrow Protagoreanism* (NP) and *Broad Protagoreanism* (BP),³⁹ we may distinguish between *Narrow Heracliteanism* (NH) and *Broad Heracliteanism* (BH). Narrow Heracliteanism says that no perceptual property exists objectively, and each comes into being, along with the perception of that property, as a result of the interaction between a percipient and the environment. Broad Heracliteanism says that no property exists objectively, and each comes into being, along with the perception or cognition of that property, as a result of the interaction between an agent and the environment. Waterlow writes:

[Protagoras'] view has its basis in a theory of perception according to which there is no ontological distinction between an appearance and the quality of which it is an appearance. This doctrine is then tacitly extended to include under 'appearance' opinion as well as perception.⁴⁰

Others, however, have opposed BH, arguing that NH is all that the text supports. Fine observes that at 170 D 8–9—a context where Plato has just emphasized (170 D 5–6) the need to use the relativizing qualifiers with Protagoras' position—Plato tells us that many people 'think the opposite' (*μάχονται αντιδοξάζοντες*) of what Theodorus thinks (on behalf of his friend Protagoras), holding that his view is false. She takes this to mean that 'beliefs do genuinely conflict', which Heraclitean ontology had prevented in the case of perceptual properties.⁴¹

But this is a very thin thread with which to hang Protagoras, for it paves the way for an easy self-refutation. On Fine's reconstruction of the exquisite argument, the argument reaches the intended conclusion that '(M) isn't true for anyone' by relying on the premiss 'Protagoras believes that all beliefs are true', which ignores the qualifier that I have argued is necessary.⁴² With the qualifier

³⁹ Fine explains the distinction as follows: 'According to Narrow Protagoreanism, each thing is, for any person, the way he perceives it as being. According to Broad Protagoreanism, each thing is, for any person, the way he believes it is' ('Relativisms', 214). She rightly comments that Plato focuses on Narrow Protagoreanism in his initial discussion of Protagoras' view (152 A–169 D), and on Broad Protagoreanism in the self-refutation argument (169 D–171 D).

⁴⁰ Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 32. Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 181–2, likewise suggests that BH supports BP just as NH supports NP, preserving the link between Protagoreanism from Heracliteanism in moving outside of the perceptual realm.

⁴¹ Fine, 'Plato', 219.

⁴² *Ibid.* 224–8. See my note 37 above. The premiss should therefore have been

in place, Fine's reconstruction of the exquisite argument becomes invalid, just as she argues is the case with the qualifiers the relativistic reading requires.⁴³ Fine perhaps feels entitled to ignore the qualifiers, speaking as we are about non-perceptual beliefs, because she assumes NH, and non-perceptual beliefs are not part of our Heraclitean private worlds. Yet this gives Plato a very easy victory against Protagoras, so easy that the measure doctrine would be uninteresting if this interpretation were right. For Fine's argument functions essentially by depriving Protagoras of the vital ability to avoid violating PNC, and Protagoras would be right to protest that the exquisite argument is a straw-man argument if it depended on such a move.⁴⁴

Aside from the fact that NH is an uncharitable reading of the measure doctrine, the textual evidence favours BH. First, the Heraclitean ontology is stated without restricting it to the perceptual sphere: We are told at 152 D 2–4 that 'there is *nothing* which in itself is just one thing: *nothing* which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing', at 152 D 6 that '*nothing* is anything or any kind of thing', and at 152 E 1 that '*nothing* ever is, but *everything*

something like 'Every belief is true *in the world of the person who holds that belief*'. A shorthand way of capturing statements of the form 'A's judgement *p* is true in A's world' would be 'A's judgement *p* is true for A'. This is, in fact, what I think the locution 'true-for-someone' means in the *Theaetetus*, e.g. at 161 D 2, 170 D 5, 170 E 4–5, and 171 C 6–7. What we have in those passages is ἀληθείς occurring with a dative, such as ἐκάστω ἀληθείς at 161 D 2. I agree with Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 34–5, and Fine, 'Relativisms', 220 and 'Plato', 219, that the dative does not indicate 'a special concept of relative truth' (Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 34), but I also see no need to interpret them merely 'as of person judging' (ibid.) and to take '*p* is true for A' as synonymous with 'A believes that *p*' (Fine, 'Relativisms'). This synonymy would be appropriate if we took Protagoras' view to be a relativistic theory of truth which reduces 'truth' to 'belief', as on the reading Bostock suggests (*Plato's Theaetetus*, 91). But if we take Protagoras to be a relativist of fact or an infallibilist, we are working with an ordinary truth-making relationship between judgements and facts, so it is not true that '*p* is true for A' means nothing more than 'A believes that *p*'. It may not be natural in Greek (or any other language) for '*p* is true for A' to mean '*p* is true in A's world', but then we are speaking of a highly revisionary theory that rejects much of what is assumed in ordinary language.

⁴³ Fine, 'Plato', 229. All that we can get with the qualifiers in place is '(M) isn't true in the worlds of those who believe it isn't true'. In my own reconstruction of the exquisite argument, I argue that this conclusion is an important step towards Protagoras' self-refutation, but I leave that aside for now.

⁴⁴ Given Fine's reading, identifying a disagreement outside the perceptual sphere is all it takes to refute Protagoras, since he is immediately committed to a contradiction. Since anything follows from a contradiction, we could conclude that the measure doctrine is false, which would give us a self-refutation of sorts.

is coming to be' (my emphases). These statements are not in any way qualified, and there is no suggestion in the text that 'nothing' should be taken as 'no perceptual thing' or that 'everything' should be taken as 'every perceptual thing'. Given that all these statements come from the passage where Plato is introducing Heracliteanism, it would be an especially egregious mistake on Plato's part if he actually meant all those statements only for perceptual things, and somehow persistently omitted this qualification. (At 153 E 4–5 the same unqualified formulation is repeated.) Similarly, when Heraclitean flux is being explained at 156 A 5, we are told that 'everything is really motion, and there is nothing but motion', without restricting 'everything' in any way.⁴⁵ It is also noteworthy that as we move to the exquisite argument, where the issue is no longer perceptual properties, we are given no indication that the Heraclitean ontology is left behind. Given the significance of Heraclitean support for Protagoras, it would be hard to explain this omission if Plato indeed meant to leave Heraclitus behind.

Against this wealth of evidence in favour of BH, all the textual evidence we are given is that many people think the opposite of Theodorus' view, but it seems perfectly natural to speak this way under BH. The whole sentence is: 'Or does there rise up against you, every time, a vast army of persons who think the opposite, who hold that your decisions and your thoughts are false?' (170 D 8–9). Thinking the opposite, in this context, means no more than what the last part of the sentence indicates, that these people hold that Theodorus' decisions and thoughts are false. What they think is not the opposite of Theodorus' view in the sense of contradicting it, but rather in the sense that the content of their thoughts is specifically that Theodorus is wrong. To say that they think the opposite of Theodorus' view is, therefore, entirely consistent with BH, and with Heraclitean ontology preventing a violation of PNC in the non-perceptual sphere as well.

It is undeniable that the Heraclitean theory is put forward predominantly in terms of perceptual properties, but it does not follow from this that the theory is restricted to the perceptual sphere. In fact, Plato tells us at 157 D 8 that 'good' (*agathon*) and 'beautiful' (*kalon*) are among the things that fall under the scope of the theory. The reason for the emphasis on perceptual properties could be sim-

⁴⁵ Again, when Plato is arguing against Heraclitus at 181 B–183 C, it is said that 'all things are in motion in every way' (182 E 5–6).

ply that it is easier to get the idea across in the perceptual sphere. Ketchum has argued, however, that the Heraclitean strategy for explaining seemingly conflicting appearances ‘makes good sense as long as appearances are understood as perceptual sensations’, but not if we are speaking of second-order judgements.⁴⁶

This objection may appear worrisome, but I think it can be overcome. The source of the trouble is the fact that Plato does not tell us how the Heraclitean strategy would apply in such cases. Since Plato *does* tell us that the Heraclitean ontology applies across the board, what we are expected to do is to apply the reasoning found behind the perceptual cases. We start with the basic idea that everything is motion, and that nothing is anything. This means that there is no objective fact about whether torturing prisoners is ever justified, or whether relativism is false. These matters, exactly as in the case of whether the wind is cold, are determined through the interaction between each person and her environment. In the perceptual cases, the interaction takes place between the relevant sensory apparatus and the object of perception, resulting in a perceptual property and the experience of this property. Likewise in the non-perceptual cases, the interaction takes place between the cognitive apparatus and the relevant aspects of the environment, resulting in a non-perceptual fact and the cognition of this fact. Thus it may be true in my world that torturing prisoners is never justified, because there is a fact in my private world that makes it so. Of course, it may also be true in my neighbour’s world that torturing prisoners is sometimes justified, because there is a fact in *his* private world that makes it so. The same model applies to all facts outside the perceptual sphere, including second-order beliefs such as ‘John’s belief that the wind is cold is false’: it may be true in John’s world that the wind is cold, and yet true in my world that John’s belief is false. The former is explained in terms of the perceptual model, and the latter in terms of the non-perceptual model. Both models explain how, in their respective domains, there is no genuine conflict and thus no violation of PNC.

Now this non-perceptual model may not provide a very compelling account of how we form beliefs, but that is another matter. Protagoras desperately needs, and according to our text has, Heraclitus’ support for avoiding violating PNC, in both the perceptual and non-perceptual spheres. That Heraclitus’ theory is untenable is

⁴⁶ Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 85.

a criticism that needs to be taken up separately from our evaluation of Plato's self-refutation argument against Protagoras. My aim in this section was to clarify Protagoras' position in order to enable a proper assessment of the self-refutation argument. We are now prepared to turn to this assessment.⁴⁷

III

I have been speaking of the exquisite argument, which occurs at 171 A 6–B 2, but I agree with Burnyeat that understanding this argument requires also understanding what precedes it, as this argument is 'merely the last in a closely knit sequence of three linked arguments against Protagoras'.⁴⁸ Here is the passage in its entirety, from 170 E 7 to 171 C 7, with added markers—[I], [II], [III]—to indicate the three arguments:⁴⁹

SOC. [I] And what of Protagoras himself? Must he not say this, that supposing he himself did not believe that man is the measure, any more than the majority of people (who indeed do not believe it), then this *Truth* which he wrote is true for no one? On the other hand, suppose he believed it himself, but the majority of men do not agree with him; [II] then you see—to begin with—the more those to whom it does not seem to be the truth outnumber those to whom it does, so much the more it isn't than it is?

THEOD. That must be so, if it is going to be or not be according to the individual judgement.

SOC. [III] Secondly, it has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is.

THEOD. Undoubtedly.

SOC. And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion?

THEOD. Yes, inevitably.

SOC. But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong?

⁴⁷ It was particularly important to recognize that Protagorean relativism applies outside of the perceptual sphere as well, and that Heraclitean ontology follows it all the way. In considering Fine's position, we have seen that alternative views on this point lead to different interpretations of the exquisite argument.

⁴⁸ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 177.

⁴⁹ I repeat the exquisite argument for the sake of ease of reference, and continue after 171 B 2, as what follows shows the link between the exquisite argument and the preceding arguments

THEOD. No.

SOC. But Protagoras again admits this judgement to be true, according to his written doctrine?

THEOD. So it appears.

SOC. It will be disputed, then, by everyone, beginning with Protagoras—or rather, it will be admitted by him, when he grants to the person who contradicts him that he judges truly—when he does that, even Protagoras himself will be granting that neither a dog nor the ‘man in the street’ is the measure of anything at all which he has not learned. Isn’t that so?

THEOD. It is so.

SOC. Then since it is disputed by everyone, the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all, not even for himself?

A rough sketch of the sequence of the arguments seems to be as follows. Either [I] Protagoras himself did not believe that man is the measure of all things, and since no one else does, it is not true for anybody at all. Or he did believe it, but the majority of people do not, and so two things follow: (a) [II] the more the people who believe (M) outnumber those who do not believe it, the more it is (true) than it is not, and (b) [III] Protagoras himself does not believe (M), and so the conclusion of [I] is affirmed at the end of the passage.⁵⁰ This structure gives the impression that [III] is merely a subargument serving the larger argument [I], but [III] is actually the punchline of the whole sequence, since that is where Protagoras is said to refute himself.⁵¹ In what follows I offer my interpretation of arguments [I] and [III], while I set aside [II], which is usually regarded as a weak argument, an inconsequential addition to this passage.⁵²

Let us first examine [I] by assuming the antecedent, i.e. that no

⁵⁰ In fact, we may question whether [I] and [III] are separate arguments: G. Fine, ‘Relativism and Self-Refutation: Plato, Protagoras, and Burnyeat’ [‘Self-Refutation’], in J. Gentzler (ed.), *Method in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998), 137–63 at 147, argues against Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, that [I] is not an argument but rather a premiss, since it is a conditional that Protagoras accepts. On Burnyeat’s reading too, however, the consequent of [I] can be drawn only through [III] (‘Self-Refutation’, 186), so Burnyeat does not take [I] to be a free-standing argument. If [I] is a premiss, it is a premiss of an anti-Protagorean argument.

⁵¹ It seems that the exquisite argument serves two purposes at once: (i) to show that Protagoras (and any proponent of (M)) is in fact committed to rejecting it, and (ii) to show that not even Protagoras believes that (M), enabling [I] to reach its conclusion. This distinction is significant, since (i) completes the self-refutation of (M), and (ii) is a further blow against Protagoras.

⁵² It can hardly be considered a victory against Protagoras to show that his view is less true than it is not true. An opponent of this widely shared view is Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 100–1, who argues that [II] is a significant argument against Protago-

one believes (M), or any of its equivalents. But formulating (M)'s equivalents raises a controversial question that must now be dealt with: is it correct to formulate it as a biconditional, as with (M'')—'*p* is true for A *if and only if* A judges that *p*'—or should it be just the conditional (M*) '*p* is true for A if A judges that *p*'? The question is, of course, whether Protagoras' view entails '*p* is true for A only if A judges that *p*'.

I share Burnyeat's view that it does,⁵³ and that (M) should be formulated as a biconditional, despite various objections to this reading.⁵⁴ Ketchum has offered strong resistance to the biconditional formulation, arguing that we can read [I] with the conditional formulation (M*) thus: 'Plato here is plausibly assuming that those who have never heard of Protagorean relativism in fact believe that it is false. The many would deny it if asked, and thus, on a reasonable view of belief, believe that it is not true.'⁵⁵ In defence of reading the argument this way, Ketchum points out that 'Plato frequently assumes that if *S* can be led to assert that *p* then *S* believes that *p*', and explains that we may be said to believe the more obvious consequences of our conscious beliefs. Accordingly, 'One who believes that some winds are cold believes that Protagorean relativism is false'.⁵⁶ This may be a reasonable view of belief, but it may not be sufficient for reaching the conclusion of [I] because it also needs to be assumed that (a) all of those who have no opinion about (M) have at least one belief that obviously entails the falsity of Protagorean relativism; and (b) none of those who have no opinion about (M) has any belief that obviously entails the truth of Protagorean relativism.⁵⁷ Even if we find these assumptions ac-

ras. I am not convinced by Ketchum's defence of this argument, but I leave the issue aside in this paper.

⁵³ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 178–9.

⁵⁴ The biconditional formulation is essential for Burnyeat's interpretation of [I] because, on his reading, the conclusion of [I]—that (M) is not true for anyone—is reached under the assumption that (M) is not true for those who have no opinion on the matter. For if we were to formulate (M) as (M*), Protagoras' doctrine would be false for those who believe it to be false, but it would not necessarily be false, or fail to be true, for someone who has no opinion about (M).

⁵⁵ Ketchum, 'Refutation', 77–8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 78 n. 10.

⁵⁷ If (b) does not obtain, and, for instance, some people find absolutism wrong-headed but have no knowledge of Protagorean relativism (and I suspect there are such people), then we might have to say that they believe (M). In that case, we would fail to reach the conclusion of [I] because it would no longer be the case that (M)

ceptable, what reason is there for burdening [I] in this way rather than adopting the biconditional formulation?

Ketchum thinks biconditionality entails an absurdity that we should avoid attributing to Protagoras: if I am in a cave and do not feel the wind blowing outside at all, the wind does not seem hot to me.⁵⁸ According to Ketchum, if we assume the biconditional PI* (X is F for S if and only if X seems F to S), we should say in this situation that the wind is not hot for me. ‘But if it is not hot for me by substitution of “not hot” for F in PI*, I can infer that it seems not hot to me *contra* the hypothesis that it did not seem any way at all to me.’⁵⁹ This conclusion is indeed absurd, but it does not follow from biconditionality. The key assumption here is that the wind is not hot for me by substitution of ‘not hot’ for F, and this assumption is false since it depends on misplacing the negation. What biconditionality tells us is that, if it is not the case that the wind seems hot to me, then it is not the case that the wind is hot for me. This has nothing to do with attributing to the wind the property of being ‘not hot’ (which we could infer only if the wind seemed not-hot to me).⁶⁰ Based on the same mistake, Ketchum argues that PI* is ‘inconsistent with the claim that knowledge is perception’, because he thinks that, according to PI*, it is possible ‘for the wind to be not cold for me without my knowing it’.⁶¹ Of course, biconditionality entails no such thing, as I have explained.

Ketchum also rejects the most important evidence in favour of biconditionality. Burnyeat writes: ‘Protagoras commits himself to the full equivalence when he claims that man (*sc.* each man) is the measure not only of what is (*sc.* for him), but also of what is not (*sc.* for him).’⁶² Ketchum objects that man can be the measure of

is not true for anyone. (It is unclear what we should say if one has two beliefs, one entailing (M) and the other entailing not-(M).)

⁵⁸ Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 78–9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 78.

⁶⁰ To put it into logical notation, it follows from PI* that $\neg(X \text{ is F for } S) \leftrightarrow \neg(X \text{ seems F to } S)$, but it does not follow that $\neg(X \text{ is F for } S) \leftrightarrow (X \text{ seems } \neg F \text{ to } S)$. For the latter formula confuses the negation of an attribution of a property with the attribution of the negation of that property. The difference between the wind not being hot and the wind being ‘not hot’ may not be important for practical purposes, but this is clearly not the case for Protagoras’ view: the measure doctrine tells us that facts and doxastic attitudes have a perfect fit, and since there is a distinction between the doxastic attitudes ‘the wind does not seem hot to me’ and ‘the wind seems not-hot to me’, the distinction holds also for the corresponding facts.

⁶¹ Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 79.

⁶² Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 178.

what is not by virtue of judging that something is not the case.⁶³ But this view does not do justice to what Protagoras seems to have in mind: if we endorse only the conditional formulation (M*), it remains possible for p to be true in A's world without A believing that p , since (M*) stipulates only that ' p is true for A if A judges that p ', allowing for p to be true for A without A judging that p . This, however, is inconsistent with the notion that man is the measure of all things, for there could be, on this view, a lot of things that are true in A's world independently of A's belief system, i.e. a lot of things of which A is not the measure.

The possibility of there being unbelieved truths is inconsistent also with the Heraclitean ontology that is attached to the measure doctrine: according to the Heraclitean ontology we find in the *Theaetetus*, nothing is by itself anything. As we saw in Section II above, a thing may come into being *only* as a result of an interaction between an agent and the environment; these interactions always result in both a property/fact and the corresponding perceptual experience/doxastic attitude in the agent. This means that there cannot be unbelieved truths because there cannot be any facts, or *anything*, to which such truths might correspond. On this view, then, man is not the measure merely in the sense that ' p is true for A if A judges that p '—man is the measure in the stronger sense that it is impossible for p to be true unless someone judges that p . Ketchum acknowledges this problem and suggests adding to (M*) the principle that 'nothing is unqualifiedly anything'.⁶⁴ But this addition does not make it through Ockham's razor, since the biconditional formulation (M'') does the same job in a simpler and more economical way, and it carries no disadvantage, as I explain above.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ketchum, 'Refutation', 77. In other words, Ketchum argues that Protagoras could take man to be a measure of what is not simply because we can replace p with 'not- q ' in (M*), yielding: "'not- q " is true for A if A judges that "not- q ".

⁶⁴ Ketchum, 'Refutation', 79–80. M. V. Wedin, 'Animadversions on Burnyeat's *Theaetetus*: On the Logic of the Exquisite Argument' ['Animadversions'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 29 (2005), 171–91 at 183 n. 14, on the other hand, thinks that outlawing unbelieved truths is not a part of 'the measure doctrine proper' but is rather an addition. Even though the unacceptability of unbelieved truths is not manifest in the original statement of the measure doctrine at 152 A, the following passages constitute an exposition of the doctrine, and I think it is untenable to reject biconditionality on the grounds that the preliminary statement of the view does not make it explicit.

⁶⁵ In fact, following Ketchum in employing the conditional formula plus his addition is perfectly consistent with my interpretation of [I], since his addition is meant to capture the Heraclitean ontology and yields the intended result that,

We can now return to our examination of [I]. The argument seems to proceed as follows:

- (1) (M'') For any proposition p , p is true for x if and only if x believes that p .
 - (2) No one believes that (M'').
- So, (3) (M'') is not true for anyone.

It has been argued that this argument constitutes the ‘crowning blow’ against Protagoras.⁶⁶ But two questions need to be asked here: (i) is this a valid argument? (ii) how damaging is it to Protagoras?

Answering these questions requires tackling another important interpretative question about the kind of relativism that we are dealing with: the measure doctrine, (M), is presented as applying to all truth, everything that is (or is not) the case, but it remains an open question whether (M) applies also to itself, or whether the doctrine itself is the sole exception. In other words, is Protagorean relativism only relatively true, or is this thesis the only objective truth (the only thing that is true *simpliciter*)? With respect to (i), the significance of settling this question should be clear: if (M) is only relatively true, then the argument seems to be valid. If, on the other hand, (M) is objectively true, it is not clear how the argument is supposed to work, since it seems that the truth of (M) should then be independent of its being believed. Before we proceed, let us settle our terminology: I shall call the former view ‘global relativism’ (GR) and the latter view ‘qualified relativism’ (QR).⁶⁷

Arguments can be, and have been, made in favour of both GR and QR.⁶⁸ I believe, however, that the dispute between the global

since no one believes (M), (M) is not true for anyone. (Fine, ‘Self-Refutation’, 140 n. 11, endorses Ketchum’s above arguments against biconditionality, but in Fine, ‘Plato’, 205 n. 12, which was written later, she retracts that view and accepts this formulation.)

⁶⁶ Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 186.

⁶⁷ Other terms have been used by others in drawing distinctions between relativisms of varying scope. Baghramian, *Relativism*, 33, for example, prefers ‘total relativism’ vs. ‘restricted relativism’, though the latter is more restricted than my QR: restricted relativism relativizes only first-order judgements, leaving out all second-order judgements. As we have seen, second-order judgements do fall under the scope of Protagoreanism—it is only (M) itself that remains doubtful.

⁶⁸ Defenders of GR include E. K. Emilsson, ‘Plato’s Self-Refutation Argument in *Theaetetus* 171a–c Revisited’, *Phronesis*, 39/2 (1994), 136–49 at 146; Chappell, ‘Protagoras’, 335; and Fine, ‘Plato’, 205 n. 11. Defenders of QR include Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 190; Bostock, *Plato’s Theaetetus*, 90; Lee, *Responses*, 54; and Wedin, ‘Animadversions’, 179–80.

and qualified interpretations of Protagorean relativism cannot be resolved, because the tension between these rival readings is a deliberate feature of the *Theaetetus*. Plato creates the tension in order to show that Protagoras faces a dilemma, and the lesson to be drawn is that, on either reading, Protagorean relativism is a view that comes with an over-expensive price-tag.

In favour of the global interpretation, we may begin by pointing out that stipulating even a single objective truth undermines the connection between the measure doctrine and the thoroughgoing empiricism at stake in the *Theaetetus*: the measure doctrine is put forward as the justification/explanation of the unqualified empiricist thesis that *knowledge is perception*. But if the measure doctrine is qualified so as to allow any truth beyond its scope, the empiricist thesis is thereby left without support. And if the measure doctrine fails to support the empiricist thesis, its appearance in the *Theaetetus* becomes gratuitous.

Second, it is noteworthy that Protagoras does not in any way appeal to some knowledge of the measure doctrine in order to justify his claim that he is wise and that there is such a thing as wisdom. It would clearly be appropriate for him to justify these claims by such an appeal if in fact he thought that (M) is true absolutely and that one who believes it to be true is right and one who does not is wrong. Instead, however, he affirms the existence of wisdom and explains it through a sort of pragmatist move:

[T]he man whom I call wise is the man who can change the appearances—the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him. (166 D 5–7)

Any appeal to greater access to truth, or having truer beliefs, is then rejected explicitly (167 B). Protagoras, then, refuses to say that one is wiser if one believes that (M) (because (M) is true *simpliciter*), when this is what we would expect if he did in fact think that (M) is true *simpliciter* (regardless of whether this account of wisdom is satisfactory).⁶⁹

Third, we may pay attention to the image of Protagoras sticking his head up above the ground to rebut Socrates' arguments, and then rushing off and disappearing again (171 C–D). In this comic episode, Protagoras would be expected, and does attempt, to come

⁶⁹ For a discussion of Protagoras' views on wisdom, see Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 22 ff.

to his position's defence but does not stick around to engage in a debate after blurting out his disapproval and scolding both Socrates and Theodorus (for agreeing with Socrates). The scene is significant for several reasons. It is significant, as Burnyeat points out, that Protagoras 'runs away after delivering his rejoinder; he is not prepared to stay and defend it in discussion'.⁷⁰ The implication seems to be that Protagoras refuses to take his opponent seriously and to engage in a dialectical discussion.⁷¹ This would make good sense if Protagoras were a global relativist, since he could then not claim absolute truth for even (M) itself, and there could not be a genuine disagreement on that question either, precluding any rational discourse about it (i.e., along with all the other relative truths about which there can be no genuine disagreement).

On the other hand, it can be argued on several grounds that Protagoras' relativism is qualified. First, we should notice that, while Protagoras does not qualify (M) so as not to be self-applicable, he does not qualify his assertion of (M) either—he claims, with no lack of assurance, that man is the measure of all things, and not that this is so *for him*. Nor are the consequences of (M) qualified in this way: it is said that 'the wind is cold for the one who feels cold', and not that 'the wind is cold for the one who feels cold for Protagoras'.⁷² But this is not inconsistent with GR: the fact that *p* is true merely for A, and not absolutely, does not mean that A may not assert *p* with confidence. On the contrary, the Protagorean's position parallels the moral relativist's position, whose relativism authorizes her to be as assertive about her own view, and as unconcerned about others', as she likes: there is, after all, no objective value or ethical principle that might limit her oppression of others. Similarly, the Protagorean has no need whatsoever to temper her assertions with

⁷⁰ Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 191.

⁷¹ For other aspects of the scene see E. Lee, 'Hoist with His Own Petard: Ironic and Comic Elements in Plato's Critique of Protagoras (*Theaet.* 161–171)' ['Critique'], in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), 225–61 at 249–51, who argues that Protagoras is being depicted as a plant, in that 'he does not or cannot involve himself with others in the giving and receiving of any *λόγος*' (251). Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation' 192 n. 23, disputes Lee's interpretation of the scene.

⁷² A noteworthy display of Protagoras' confidence in (M) can be seen at 167 D 3: 'you too, whether you like it or not, must put up with being a "measure"'. Cf. Burnyeat, 'Self-Refutation', 190, who defends the qualified interpretation.

caution, since there is no doubt whatsoever that her assertions are true in her world.⁷³

Burnyeat argues, however, that to assert something *is* to assert it to be true (*simpliciter*),⁷⁴ citing Passmore: ‘The fundamental criticism of Protagoras can be put thus: to engage in discourse at all he has to assert that something is the case.’⁷⁵ The question at issue seems to be: what could Protagoras mean by stating (M) other than that (M) is the case (*simpliciter*)? An answer is suggested, again, from a relativistic position in ethics: according to *emotivism*, the function of moral language is not to state facts or to convey information, but rather to express the speaker’s attitudes, and to influence other people’s behaviour. Similarly, Protagoras could say that the point of his utterances is not to assert that something is the case *simpliciter*, but rather to influence other people’s opinions on the matter. This reading of Protagoras’ assertion of, and assertiveness about, (M) is supported by his claim that wise men are distinguished by their ability to change appearances (166 D 4–7): in asserting (M), Protagoras could simply be trying to change how things appear by converting others.⁷⁶

This reading of Protagoras’ assertion of (M) seems perfectly compatible with GR, but it may be objected, with McDowell, that ‘we are justified in wondering why we should find what he says interesting’.⁷⁷ After all, why should we care that man is the measure of all things for Protagoras, as long as this is not the case for us? Protagoras’ expression of his belief in (M) does not offer any reason whatsoever for anyone else to adopt that view, and does not engage others on a rational basis. Under GR, then, Protagoras’ purpose of converting others to his brand of relativism would not be served well, since no rational person would adopt Protagoreanism simply because it is true for Protagoras.

Of course, Protagoras could bite the bullet and reply that he is indeed not asserting anything, and not trying to convert anyone to

⁷³ Her world is, of course, all that she needs to care about, since she has no access to anything outside her world, i.e. the private worlds of others.

⁷⁴ Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 190.

⁷⁵ J. Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London, 1961), 67.

⁷⁶ Even though we live in private worlds and have no cognitive access to the worlds of others, we can play a role in determining their worlds, by influencing the environment that interacts with another’s sensory/cognitive apparatus (which jointly create the ‘appearances’ that constitute private worlds).

⁷⁷ McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*, 171. Cf. Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 191.

his relativism. But this is clearly a disappointing admission for anybody who wishes to see Protagorean relativism as worth thinking and speaking about, not to mention the difficulty of making sense of the prolonged efforts in the *Theaetetus* to make his case. We seem, then, to be stuck with a dilemma with respect to the choice between GR and QR—the text does not support either option in a clear way, and both options come with interpretative and philosophical costs. As I noted earlier, I think this is not due to lack of precision on Plato’s part, but rather a deliberate feature of the text that is meant to show that Protagorean relativism asks us to give up too much, whichever way we take it. So far I have tried to demonstrate this in a more general way, but Plato brings this tension to a climax in the sequence of arguments [I]–[III], to which I return now. The above digression into the global and qualified interpretations of Protagorean relativism was supposed to illuminate our understanding of [I]. Since we have failed to determine which of these interpretations is right, let us see how the argument fares under each interpretation.

If we take Protagorean relativism to be global, [I] is *prima facie* valid: (M'') belongs in the category of propositions that are true if and only if believed, and since we suppose that no one believes (M''), it seems that (3) (M'') is not true for anyone. As Burnyeat suggests,⁷⁸ we can rewrite (3) in terms of the private worlds as:

- (4) It is not true in anyone’s world that (M''') for any proposition p , p is true in x ’s world if and only if x believes that p .

This conclusion is very damaging to Protagoras, since there are no non-relative truths according to GR, which means that (M''') is true neither relatively nor objectively/absolutely—it is not true in any sense at all. We can therefore state Protagoras’ predicament as:

- (5) It is not true *simpliciter* that (M''').

The case with QR, however, is more complicated. Burnyeat, who endorses QR, contends that we can infer from no one believing (M) that no one lives in a private world.⁷⁹ But according to QR, (M) is given as objectively true, which means that there is a sense in which (M'') is true regardless of what anyone thinks. Thus Fine argues

⁷⁸ Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 180–2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 179–82.

against Burnyeat that it is illegitimate to move ‘from what is true *in* someone’s world . . . to what is true *of* someone’s world’.⁸⁰ Wedin develops this thought in an interesting way: he starts by pointing out that, since (M) can be formulated as (W₁) ‘ $\neg(\exists x)(\exists p)(x \text{ bel } p \wedge \neg(\text{in } x\text{'s world it is true that } p))$ ’,⁸¹ someone’s denying (M) can be represented as (W₂) ‘ $(\exists y)(y \text{ bel } (\exists x)(\exists p)(x \text{ bel } p \wedge \neg(\text{in } x\text{'s world it is true that } p)))$ ’. If, then, everyone believes that (M) is false,⁸² this amounts to (W₃) ‘ $(y)(y \text{ bel } (\exists x)(\exists p)(x \text{ bel } p \wedge \neg(\text{in } x\text{'s world it is true that } p)))$ ’, but since each belief is true only in a doxastic agent’s private world, this can, in turn, be translated as (W₄) ‘ $(y)(\exists x)(\exists p)(x \text{ bel } p \wedge \neg(\text{in } x\text{'s world it is true that } p))$ is true in *y*’s world’. This seems to say that everyone is such that in their world there is someone who violates (M) by having a belief that is not true, which ‘appears to say that everyone lives in a world where belief is not sufficient for truth, i.e., in a world where [(M)] is false’.⁸³ But, Wedin argues, this appearance is deceptive. All (W₄) says is that ‘everyone’s world is such that the claim, that someone (*x*) believes something that is not true, is true in that world . . . [but] there is no guaranteeing that this *x* is identical to the *y* whose world is in question’.⁸⁴ Wedin adds that, since there is no crossing from one private world to another, *x*’s world cannot be determined by *y*’s belief. This line of reasoning seems correct: even if it is true in my world that there is some *x* who does not live in a private world, what makes this judgement true is a fact in my private world and thus has no impact whatsoever on *x*’s world. Hence, what is true *in* someone’s world is not necessarily true *of* that person’s world, or of anyone else’s world.⁸⁵

The upshot of the above is that, even if no one believes that (M) is true (and *even* if everyone believes that (M) is false), it does not follow that (5) it is not true *simpliciter* that (M’). Since (M) is not true *in* anyone’s world, we get as far as (4) but fail to reach (5) because of the fact that, under QR, (M) is objectively true.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Fine, ‘Self-Refutation’, 152.

⁸¹ Wedin, ‘Animadversions’, 175–8. Wedin abbreviates ‘*x* believes that *p*’ as ‘*x bel p*’.

⁸² This assumption is stronger than what we have supposed so far, i.e. that no one believes that (M). Nevertheless, Wedin thinks even this stronger assumption does not yield the desired result.

⁸³ Wedin, ‘Animadversions’, 177–8.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 178.

⁸⁵ Ketchum, ‘Refutation’, 86, also insists on this distinction and rejects Burnyeat’s reading of [I].

⁸⁶ Wedin, ‘Animadversions’, 180, acknowledges that his objection to [I] depends

It seems, in other words, that it is objectively true that everyone lives in a private world, while it is not true in any private world that everyone lives in a private world. So is Burnyeat wrong to claim that ‘if relativism is not true for someone, it does not hold of that person’s judgments and beliefs’?⁸⁷ I believe that he is wrong to treat this inference as such a straightforward one, but I think that he is ultimately right, albeit for reasons that he does not bring to light.

The problem is, essentially, that granting (3) and (4) seems inconsistent with the notion that (M) is objectively true. For, given that (M) is objectively true, what sense does it make to say that (M) is not true in anyone’s world? Chappell argues that ‘Protagoras does not have to believe that the relativistic nature of appearances must be *evident* in those appearances’.⁸⁸ This is surely right: relativism does not assume that all of us are actually relativists. But the trouble begins when (M’’) is applied to those non-relativistic beliefs to yield the result that (M’’) is false (if we so believe), or that it is not true (if we so believe, or if we have no opinion on the matter), in our private worlds. The same proposition, (M’’), is then supposed to be both true and not true. Protagoras might respond that it is possible for any proposition *p* to be both true objectively and false in some *x*’s world, because ‘true’ and ‘false’ mean completely different things in the two cases. However, this response makes Protagoras’ position incoherent in a serious way.

Waterlow argues that, supposing that (M’’) itself is objectively/absolutely true:

[W]hat makes true [Protagoras’] belief that all beliefs are true is a reality absolutely and *simpliciter*. Thus it would be a fact *simpliciter* that all beliefs are true. For it would be a fact *simpliciter* that all beliefs except for the Protagorean belief expressed as [(M’’)] are true because made true by facts that exist relatively to believers . . . On this view, ‘true’ means something different when applied by Protagoras to his own opinion [(M’’)] and when applied to all other opinions. No doubt this position could be shown to be

on (M) being objectively true: ‘if [(M)] itself, a free-standing thesis, lies outside the domain of relativized propositions, it is not clear why it should be false just because it is false in everyone’s world’. We shall see shortly that the same objection is applicable to the exquisite argument itself. Thus Wedin, ‘Animadversions’, 178, argues that Burnyeat’s reconstructions of both [I] (‘the unanimity argument’) and the exquisite argument fail for this reason. In what follows I explain why this objection may be dismissed, and that it cannot block either [I] or the exquisite argument [III] from reaching their conclusions.

⁸⁷ Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 179.

⁸⁸ Chappell, ‘Protagoras’, 336.

conceptually incoherent on some level. But it clearly does not entail any straightforward logical inconsistency.⁸⁹

Yet what we are facing is a much graver kind of incoherence than what Waterlow has in mind. For Waterlow is speaking of the incoherence found in having two kinds of truth in two different domains—one kind of truth that applies to (M), and another kind that applies to all other propositions. The case at hand, however, is that the very same proposition, (M''), is both true and not true at the same time, according to two different conceptions of truth. If Protagoras' view is supposed to be that there are some objective truths and some relative ones, there must be a clear sense in which 'truth' refers to the same kind of thing in both cases, and a clear line between the domains in which the two subspecies of truth apply. For otherwise the position becomes completely uninformative and uninteresting: the position could then be made, for instance, fully acceptable to a hard-core realist by stipulating that 'truth' in the case of relative truth is no more than a synonym for belief, and 'truth' in the case of objective truth is an altogether different 'truth', remaining unscathed by this stipulation of synonymy. The primary motivation behind relativisms about truth is the rejection of objective/absolute truth. If relative truth is now presented as capable of coexisting with objective truth with respect to the same domain, it is hard to imagine what appeal this kind of relativism could have.⁹⁰

It may be said that (M'') being objectively true should prevent it from being self-applicable, and so Protagoras need not affirm (3) and (4): in the case of (M'') and its equivalents, believing a proposition does not make it true (for oneself), nor does believing it to be false make it false. Such a move would be in line with my above suggestion that objective and relative truths should have distinct domains. But throughout the arguments [I]–[III] Protagoras is not presented as choosing this option, but rather as granting that (M'') may be relatively true or false.⁹¹ So is this a sophistical manoeuvre on Plato's part, having Protagoras concede things he need not? I do not think so, because denying (3)–(4) would be contrary to the

⁸⁹ Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 21.

⁹⁰ This scenario would be analogous to that of a moral relativist who allows objective truths in ethics, alongside the relative truths. I doubt that anyone would find interesting the view that ethical propositions can be relatively true or false in addition to being objectively true or false.

⁹¹ Otherwise it should not have been accepted on Protagoras' behalf that, if no one believes (M), then it is not true for anyone.

Protagorean relativism we find in the *Theaetetus*. Once Protagoras admits that some proposition p is not true for x even if x believes that p , it becomes obvious that he must loosen his grip on the measure doctrine: man is not, after all, the measure of all things. From the point of view of the measure doctrine, it is bad enough that (M'') would remain objectively true even if x believes that it is false. It would be worse, however, if x were incapable of making (M'') true even in her own private world: man would not be master even in his own house.

To make matters worse, the things of which we are not the measure would not be limited to (M) and its equivalents. In fact, there would be an indefinitely large number of propositions of which we are not the measure. For it follows from (M'') being objectively true that all substitution instances of (M'') are also objectively true. Thus it would be objectively true that 'it is true for Socrates that "the wind is cold" if and only if Socrates believes that the wind is cold'. That there would be so many objectively true propositions is simply a feature of QR, but if we operate with the principle (entertained above on behalf of Plato's critic) that objective truths fall outside the scope of (M''), then the truth-value of this extremely large number of propositions would be independent of us. It would turn out, therefore, that man falls short of being the measure of all things by a very wide margin. Such a severely restricted relativism, it might be argued, does not in fact deserve to be called 'relativism' at all. It is clear, in any case, that this view is not Protagoras' relativism. Plato is therefore justified in rejecting this principle in his treatment of Protagoras, and allowing objectively true propositions, including (M'') itself, to have relative truth-value as well. It follows that Plato is also justified in attributing (3) and (4) to Protagoras, and we are left with the serious incoherence that results from positing (M'') as objectively true.

If we are to take Protagorean relativism as a meaningful position, then, we have to reject the notion that (M'') is true objectively. Ultimately, Protagoras finds himself in the same situation as with GR: (M'') is neither objectively true nor relatively true—it is not true in any sense at all—which yields the devastating blow that (M'') is not true *simpliciter*. Argument [I], then, is as powerful as Plato supposes it to be, whether we prefer the global or qualified interpretation of Protagoras. But the force of [I] is entirely dependent

on the condition that no one believes that (M''), which seems to be falsified by the presence of Protagoras and his supporters. We must therefore turn to [III], where Plato purports to show that not even Protagoras believes in his own doctrine.

IV

The exquisite argument [III] is where Plato presents the first incarnation of the celebrated self-refutation argument against relativism. This argument remains ‘the most trenchant as well as the most popular argument against relativism’,⁹² though it has also become the subject of serious criticism in recent years. If the exquisite argument is successful, therefore, we should be in Plato’s debt not only for inventing the self-refutation argument but also for shedding light on an important ongoing debate.⁹³

In the exquisite argument, Plato drops the relativizing qualifiers and creates the impression of cheating, as I explained in Section I. It seems so because the argument seems to depend on the omission of the qualifiers. But the qualifiers *were* in place in argument [I], and we saw how much could be achieved there. It is therefore not obvious that this argument would fail if the qualifiers were in place. Burnyeat suggests that we give Plato the benefit of the doubt only once, at the beginning of the exquisite argument, and supply the qualifiers, letting them get carried through the rest of the argument by the requirements of consistency.⁹⁴ Supplying the qualifiers, what we get is:

⁹² Baghramian, *Relativism*, 132.

⁹³ In the contemporary literature, a variety of related but distinct arguments are classified as self-refutation arguments against relativism about truth. Some of them follow my reading of the exquisite argument relatively closely, while others differ significantly. I shall have more to say about this shortly. See e.g. T. Bennigson, ‘Is Relativism Really Self-Refuting?’ [‘Relativism’], *Philosophical Studies*, 94 (1999), 211–36 at 212, 229 nn. 1–4, and Baghramian, *Relativism*, 133–6, for the different kinds of self-refutation argument launched against relativism about truth. For recent defences of relativism against the self-refutation charge, see Bennigson, ‘Relativism’, and S. D. Hales, ‘A Consistent Relativism’, *Mind*, 106/421 (1997), 33–52 and ‘Reply to Shogenji on Relativism’, *ibid.* 106/424 (1997), 749–50.

⁹⁴ Burnyeat, ‘Self-Refutation’, 184. Perhaps the omission is not a mistake on Plato’s part—as Burnyeat seems to think—but rather a deliberate and ironic one, Plato expecting us to understand the game, supply the qualifiers, and see what happens. Charity would favour either of these options over the two suggested by others: gross inadvertence or outright dishonesty.

- (6) (Protagoras believes that) (M'') for any proposition p ,
 p is true for x if and only if x believes that p .
 (7) Some people believe that (M'') is false (*simpliciter*).
 So, (8) (Protagoras believes that) their belief, that (M'') is
 false, is true *for them*.
 Thus, (9) (Protagoras believes that) (M'') is false (*simpliciter*).

Under this reconstruction of the exquisite argument, Plato reaches the conclusion that Protagoras' view is self-refuting, but the critical move from (8) to (9) has drawn much criticism. At (8) Protagoras admits that since his opponent, say Socrates, believes that (M'') is false, it must be true *for Socrates* that (M'') is false. But, critics protest, this does not mean that Protagoras must admit that (M'') is false *simpliciter*. Protagoras could simply insist that (M'') is false not *simpliciter* but rather merely relatively to Socrates. And his belief that it is true for Socrates that (M'') is false can be phrased as 'it is true for Protagoras that it is true for Socrates that (M'') is false', which does not commit Protagoras to (M'') being false *simpliciter*.⁹⁵ This criticism is, essentially, the same as the criticism against argument [I], that what is true *in* someone's world is not necessarily true *of* that person's world. In this case the objection is that Protagoras' granting that (M'') is false *in* Socrates' world does not amount to admitting that (M'') is false *of* Socrates' world.

As in the case of [I], we must evaluate the argument under both the global and the qualified interpretations of Protagoras. Let us first take up QR, since most of the work for that case has already been done when evaluating [I] under QR. The key to understanding [III] under QR is, as with [I], the observation that (M'') being objectively true is inconsistent with it being false in a private world. Earlier we considered the scenario where (M'') is not true in *anyone's* world, but the number of worlds in which (M'') is not true, or false, has no bearing on the gravity of the inconsistency: even if Socrates is the *only* opponent of (M''), it remains the case that (M'') being false in Socrates' world rules out (M'') being true objectively.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ This objection has been put forward, with minor variations, by Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, 91–2; Chappell, 'Protagoras', 336–7; Fine, 'Self-Refutation', 152–3; Baghramian, *Relativism*, 33; and Wedin, 'Animadversions', 174–6. Wedin's version of the objection is discussed in some detail above, in relation to [I], to which it also applies.

⁹⁶ (M'')'s being objectively true is ruled out even if Socrates has no opinion on the matter, and (M'') simply fails to be true in Socrates' world: if (M'') were objectively

Since Protagoras admits that (M'') is false *for* Socrates, he must also admit that (M'') is false *simpliciter*. For (M'') is supposed to be true objectively under QR, and this is impossible given the existence of an anti-relativist. It turns out, therefore, that if Protagorean relativism is qualified, the exquisite argument succeeds in showing that this view is self-refuting. We must now see whether Protagoras can escape the exquisite argument by adopting global relativism.⁹⁷

The above strategy will not work for GR, since this view involves no objective truth that might generate any inconsistency. This creates the impression that the exquisite argument fails against GR, since we seem to have lost our vehicle for moving from a claim *in* a world to a claim *of* that world. On this view, whatever is true is true merely relatively, i.e. in a private world. Thus Protagoras' affirmation of (M'') is true in Protagoras' world, and Socrates' rejection of (M'') is true in Socrates' world, but there is nothing that is true outside of the private worlds, including (M'') itself.⁹⁸

true it would be impossible for it to be not true in some private world. Thus the exquisite argument needs no more than a single person who does not believe (M''), whether she consciously rejects it or has no opinion on it.

⁹⁷ Lee, *Responses*, 54–5, agrees with my contention that (M'') being objectively true is inconsistent with the measure doctrine, but she does not elaborate on why there is an unavoidable inconsistency here. She argues that Protagoras originally asserts (M'') as objectively true, and that the exquisite argument forces him to modify this view. Accordingly, 'Plato's argument against Protagoras is *ad hominem* in the sense that it shows that Protagoras cannot maintain his position consistently and has to give up his claim as he originally made it' (ibid. 56). I find this reading of the exquisite argument disappointing, despite Lee's comment that '[t]his is not necessarily a weakness in Plato's case against Protagoras' (ibid.). First, it is far from clear that (M'') is posited as objectively true, as I have explained. It would thus be easy for a Protagorean to shift to the GR interpretation of the view, whereby the exquisite argument would be neutralized. Second, the philosophical significance of the exquisite argument would diminish since it would be irrelevant to versions of global relativisms.

⁹⁸ Chappell, '*Theaetetus*', 127–30, offers an argument (different from mine below) as to why the move from (8) to (9) is legitimate, but I find it unconvincing. His argument turns on the notion that Protagoras' position can be understood as a 'reductive analysis' of *truth* as *truth-for*. Since Leibniz's Law warrants the substitutability of identicals, Chappell reasons, we should be able to insert 'true' wherever we find 'true-for'. Thus, he claims, for Protagoras to reject the equivalence between 'it is true-for-Socrates that (M'') is false' and 'it is true that (M'') is false' is to contradict his own reductive analysis: 'If . . . Protagoras' reductive analysis *does* succeed in establishing [the identity between truth and truth-for], then there can be no difference in the logical properties of truth and truth-for. Whatever you may say for the one, you may say for the other—and in particular, there can be no objection to rewriting any claim of the form "*p* is true for *X*" as "*p* is true"' (129). Chappell is right about the substitutability of the *analysandum* and *analysans* of a reductive analysis, but we

There is, however, a different problem that arises under GR: Socrates believes not merely that (M'') is false *for those who believe it to be false*, but rather that (M'') is false *simpliciter*.⁹⁹ It seems, then, that in granting the truth of Socrates' belief Protagoras would be granting that (M'') is false *simpliciter*.¹⁰⁰ Yet things are not so simple, and this line of thought has received some serious criticism. Chappell writes:

[E]ven if the belief that Protagoras is wrong '*purports to be something more than just true for those who happen to accept it*', how does that show that that belief is something more than just true for those who happen to accept it? Protagoras does not have to believe that the relativistic nature of appearances must be *evident* in those appearances. So he does not have to believe, either, that a non-relativistic appearance would be fatal to his doctrine of appearances.¹⁰¹

Accordingly, it is open to Protagoras to insist that his assent to Socrates' judgement goes no further than granting that Socrates' belief is true in *his* world.

This kind of defence of global relativism against the charge of self-refutation appears also in contemporary discussions on the subject. Bennigson, for instance, addresses a modern version of the self-refutation argument: suppose that there is a global absolutist framework,¹⁰² where all truth is absolute. According to this frame-

need to be careful about the directionality of reductive analyses, i.e. the fact that one thing is reduced to the other, and not vice versa. This matters because substituting the *analysandum* (truth) for the *analysans* (truth-for) carries the risk of sneaking back in the pre-analytic conception of the *analysandum*. In the case at hand, substituting 'truth' for 'truth-for' risks treating relative truth as absolute truth, which inverts the intention behind Protagoras' reductive analysis. Indeed, this illegitimate inversion is exactly what Chappell's argument depends on: to say that 'it is true that (M'') is false' takes us nowhere if it means nothing more than 'it is true-for-someone that (M'') is false'. The exquisite argument works only if 'it is true that (M'') is false' on the pre-analytic conception of 'truth'.

⁹⁹ Cf. N. Denyer, *Language, Truth and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (London, 1991), 100: 'the belief that Protagoras is wrong . . . purports to be something more than just true for those who happen to accept it'.

¹⁰⁰ McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*, 171, offers what is roughly the same argument in Plato's support, but an even earlier version can be found in S. Tigner, 'The "Exquisite" Argument at *Tht.* 171a', *Mnemosyne*, 24/4 (1971), 366–9 at 369.

¹⁰¹ Chappell, 'Protagoras', 336. An argument very similar to this can be found in Lee, 'Critique', 245.

¹⁰² The contemporary debate is focused on the sort of relativism according to which truth is relativized to conceptual frameworks/schemes, and not to individual agents. Nevertheless, the self-refutation argument functions in the same way, with

work, then, whatever is true is true in all possible frameworks—‘[a]nything less would not count as truth by the standards of the absolutist framework’.¹⁰³ It seems to follow that ‘if the denial of relativism . . . is true in the absolute framework, then it is true absolutely, i.e., true in every possible framework’.¹⁰⁴ This entails, of course, that global relativism is false *simpliciter*. Bennigson protests that the relativist ‘can *still* respond that the absolute truth of the negation of relativism is itself true only relative to the absolutist’s framework, not to the relativist’s’.¹⁰⁵ Bennigson thinks this is possible because:

[T]here can be a framework (an absolutist framework) according to which, for any sentence, its truth-value in any other framework will be the same as its truth-value in its own framework. To illustrate, consider two frameworks F_a (the absolutist framework) and F_r (the relativist framework), and a sentence s . From the standpoint of F_r , s is true in $[F_r]$, but false in F_a . However, from the standpoint of F_a , s is false in F_r , as well as in F_a . Then, on the simplifying assumption that F_a and F_r are the only two possible frameworks, relativism about s is true in F_r , while absolutism about s is true in F_a .¹⁰⁶

According to Chappell’s and Bennigson’s arguments above, the presence of an anti-relativist individual (or framework) does no damage to global relativism, since global relativism is capable of allowing that relativism is false in a private world (or according to a framework). The critical point here is that global relativism—in both Protagorean and contemporary versions—applies to second-order judgements concerning the thoughts of others. It is also allowed that A’s belief that p is true for A, while at the same time it is true for B that A’s belief is false.¹⁰⁷ All this can be the case even though no one has any access whatsoever to anyone else’s world—that is why the worlds are *private*.¹⁰⁸ The above defence of global relativism turns on the assumption that global relativism warrants extending this possibility to the relativistic thesis itself. The de-

the minor difference that we imagine not an individual opponent of relativism but rather an anti-relativistic framework.

¹⁰³ Bennigson, ‘Relativism’, 216.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 217.

¹⁰⁷ And likewise for frameworks in the contemporary version of global relativism; I make the point as it applies to the Protagorean version for the sake of brevity.

¹⁰⁸ On Protagorean relativism of fact, this means that the set of facts in B’s world that make A’s belief false has nothing to do with the set of facts that make A’s belief true in A’s world.

fence assumes, in other words, that we may substitute (M'') for p in the above sentence, thereby allowing that (M'') is true for Protagoras while it is true for Socrates that (M'') is false. This assumption, however, turns out to be highly problematic.

The problem is due to a feature of global relativism that is widely overlooked in the literature.¹⁰⁹ The above assumption rests on a fundamental tenet of GR, that the truth-value of (M'') is treated just like all other propositions.¹¹⁰ Accordingly, (M'') is no exception to the rule that truth is relative, which means that (M'') is true merely in the worlds of those who believe it. All propositions, including (M'') itself are, on this view, true if and only if they are believed by someone, and they are true *only* in this relativistic sense. A corollary of this position is that relativism and absolutism¹¹¹ are on a par with respect to truth, supposing that both views have adherents. Like the judgements that the wind is cold and that it is not, (M'') and its absolutist rejection are just two beliefs held in two distinct private worlds, each being equally true in the world in which each is held, and not true in any other sense. There is, in this sense, an *alethic* equivalence between the two propositions in each pair: the propositions that the wind is cold and that it is not cold are equally true, as long as each is believed by someone. Similarly, (M'') and its rejection are supposed to be equally true, as long as each view has a proponent.¹¹² But the purported *alethic* equivalence between global relativism and absolutism is unsustainable, because relegating absolutism to a private world destroys the equivalence conclusively in favour of relativism.

The two positions may appear equivalent if each is evaluated from the perspective of the private worlds (or frameworks) themselves, since absolutism is just as true *in* an absolutist world as relativism is true *in* a relativistic world. In Bennigson's terminology, relativism and absolutism appear to be equally true in the sense that

¹⁰⁹ As far as I am aware, this point has not been raised before.

¹¹⁰ It is in fact this tenet that distinguishes GR from QR: GR takes (M'') to apply to itself, being, like all other propositions, only relatively true (if someone believes it), whereas QR makes an exception for (M''), taking it to be objectively true.

¹¹¹ Here I follow Bennigson in contrasting relativism with absolutism for the sake of simplicity, though I believe that the opponent of relativism should be conceived as an objectivist, for reasons that I explain in note 113 below.

¹¹² Of course, there is also an *alethic* equivalence between unrelated propositions as long as they are believed by someone (or true in some framework). That is, there is an *alethic* equivalence between A's judgement that the wind is cold and B's judgement that tomatoes are tasty.

absolutism is just as true from the standpoint of F_a as relativism is true from the standpoint of F_r . But from our perspective, i.e. the perspective of those who are attempting an open-minded philosophical assessment of the two views, the scenario presented by these defenders of relativism is clearly a relativistic one where the truth of absolutism is farcical at best. For we are looking at a scenario where there are private worlds, and some of those worlds belong to fools who think there are no private worlds.¹¹³ We are asked to *assume* the existence of private worlds and to consider the truth-value of (M'') only in these worlds, somehow leaving aside the status of this assumption itself. In other words, we are asked to assume that (M'') is the case, but then pretend that this assumption has no truth-value, considering the truth-value of (M'') only in private worlds and thereby concluding that (M'') and its rejection are equally true. It seems clear to me that this line of reasoning is unsound, and that the purported *alethic* equivalence between (M'') and its rejection is untenable.

This problem can also be seen in another way, in the case of Protagorean relativism of fact, or any version of relativism about truth that is accompanied by a relativistic ontology. For such relativisms, the notion that the relativistic thesis itself is treated like any other proposition also means that relativism and its rejection are on a par ontologically. But this equivalence is impossible to sustain given the assumed state of affairs that there are private worlds. The global relativist might claim, for instance, that both relativism and its rejection are grounded by facts that obtain only for those who believe the view in question, in their private worlds. But here we confront an ontological inequality because of the background assumption that there *are* private worlds: whatever ontology the global relativist proposes for the relativistic private world and the anti-relativistic private world, the overarching assumption that these private worlds exist clearly tilts the ontological scale in favour of the relativistic thesis. This inequality is unavoidable as

¹¹³ I believe that the opponent of relativism should, in fact, be construed as endorsing objectivism rather than absolutism, since an absolutist may agree to the existence of private worlds, as long as the same truths happen to hold in all of them. An anti-relativist such as Socrates, however, would not agree that there are private worlds at all, since truth is independent of what we believe. The opponent imagined in the exquisite argument is not an absolutist, since an absolutist might, whereas the opponent clearly does not, agree to belief being necessary and sufficient for truth, as long as everyone happens to have the same true beliefs. (Cf. my discussion of Hales, 'A Consistent Relativism', in note 115 below.)

long as the relativist employs a consistent approach to ontology with respect to relativism and its rejection. Without such a consistent approach, however, the purported ontological equivalence would be meaningless. It appears, then, that there is no coherent ontology that the global relativist can present to account for her claim that there is an ontological equivalence between the positions of the relativist and her opponent.

It follows from the above that the fundamental tenet of global relativism, that (M'') is treated just like all other propositions, is unsustainable. Global relativism, then, cannot be what it is supposed to be, and the view turns out to be incoherent. But the crucial result for present purposes is that, since it is this tenet that underlies the key assumption in Chappell's and Bennigson's defence of global relativism, it turns out that this line of defence too is unsustainable.¹¹⁴ Given the failure of this defence, it is safe to conclude—at least until a more compelling defence comes along—that the exquisite argument is sound. What we find here is that the truth of relativism or its rejection cannot be reduced to being a merely relative truth. Protagoras cannot concede that Socrates is right in judging that '(M'') is false' and get away with this by consigning the truth of this judgement to a private world: if Protagoras grants (as he must under GR) that Socrates judges truly, then he cannot avoid the conclusion that Socrates' judgement is true not merely in his private world, but true *simpliciter*.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ The above also provides the ultimate rebuttal of the objection against the exquisite argument (as applied to global relativism) that Protagoras' granting that (M'') is false *in* Socrates' world does not amount to admitting that (M'') is false *of* Socrates' world.

¹¹⁵ A noteworthy recent view about the self-refutation argument against relativism about truth is that of Hales, 'A Consistent Relativism'. Hales, 34, borrows from 'a well-known theorem in modal system S5 [which] tells us that whatever is possibly necessary is necessary' ($P: \diamond \Box \phi \rightarrow \Box \phi$), suggesting that whatever is relatively absolute is absolute. This principle, according to Hales, leads to the self-refutation of the relativistic thesis that 'everything is relative' (36). However, Hales thinks that the 'more modest' thesis that 'everything that is true is relatively true' does not suffer the same fate (37), because it can be reconciled with some truths being absolute, where absolute truth is understood as truth in all worlds. Extra-perspectival truth is thus abandoned, but it is said to be possible that some propositions are true absolutely in the given sense. Hales grants that relativists may be uncomfortable with this concession, but he urges them to embrace what he sees as a reasonable compromise (38). Perhaps his move defuses the threat posed by the existence of absolutists, but it is silent against objectivists, who reject the whole notion of private worlds/frameworks (either completely or with respect to some range of propositions). Indeed, Socrates' position should be construed not as absolutist but rather

The exquisite argument, then, succeeds in showing that (M'') is self-refuting under both the global and the qualified interpretations—a dilemma from which Protagoras cannot escape. It should be clear that this conclusion applies as much to contemporary relativism about truth as it does to Protagorean relativism.¹¹⁶ I hope it has also become clear that the self-refutation argument Plato has given us is not the straw man that has been the target of much criticism: the exquisite argument does not simply assume, in an illegitimate and question-begging way, that we can move from what is true *in* a world to what is true *of* a world. It moves, rather, from what is true in a world (8) to what is true *simpliciter* (9) for good reasons, even though Plato does not explicate those reasons—that task is left to us. Nor does the exquisite argument function like those simplistic self-refutation arguments which '[announce] that to assert global relativism is implicitly to claim absolute truth for one's assertion, resulting in immediate self-contradiction'.¹¹⁷ Plato's argument does not *assume* that relativism about truth can be asserted only as an absolute truth, or that asserting relativism absolutely is by itself self-contradictory.¹¹⁸ The argument *shows*, rather, that relativism about truth, whether asserted absolutely or relatively, entails its own falsity given the existence of an opponent.¹¹⁹

as objectivist, as I argue above (in note 113). Supposing that someone holds such a view, global relativism remains guilty of self-refutation. (Baghramian, *Relativism*, 141, argues similarly against Hales's position.)

¹¹⁶ It should also be noted that the success of [III] secures the soundness of [I], since the condition that no one believes that (M'') is now satisfied: even Protagoras (or his followers) cannot believe that (M'').

¹¹⁷ Bennigson, 'Relativism', 215. Bennigson rightly protests against such arguments against relativism.

¹¹⁸ The exquisite argument *does* make two assumptions (one for each horn of the dilemma) for which I have offered support: (a) it is incoherent for relativism to be true objectively/absolutely if it is false in a private world; and (b) the judgement that relativism is false cannot be relegated to being merely true for the anti-relativist.

¹¹⁹ Thus the exquisite argument is also unlike the version of the self-refutation argument that runs as follows: if relativism is qualified (QR), then it accepts a non-relative notion of truth and is therefore inconsistent, and if it is global (GR), then it is unconvincing (Mandelbaum, 'Subjective', 36–7) or unintelligible (Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 123–4). Putnam argues that we cannot even grasp the notion of relative truth without grounding this notion via some absolute truth. If the relative truth of all other statements is not grounded by the absolute truth that all other statements are only relatively true, Putnam writes, 'our grasp on what the position even means begins to wobble' (121). To be sure, Plato does not disagree with Putnam's view that GR is incoherent, but this is not the conclusion of the exquisite argument. For a contemporary version of the self-refutation argument that

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I have argued that the exquisite argument constitutes a sound refutation of Protagoras. I am under no illusion that Protagoras must admit defeat, but I believe he can avoid doing so only at great expense. The key to Protagoras' ability to resist admitting defeat is, essentially, his unorthodox relationship with the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC).

As I explained in Section II, complementing the measure doctrine with Heraclitean flux seems designed to avoid violating PNC. Waterlow points out, however, that Protagoras' Heracliteanism also prevents him from violating PNC by contradicting *himself*:

For Protagoras, a contradiction can occur only when it is the same subject that holds both contradictory beliefs. But the Theaetetan Protagoras is a Heraclitean. He professes to hold that a subject is never the same from one instant to another. He can argue, therefore, that even if it seems that he, Protagoras, is guilty of inconsistency, the expression 'he, Protagoras' denotes a fiction. Really, there is only a succession of momentary subjects each with a belief of its own.¹²⁰

Since personal identity vanishes, so does the subject who could theoretically contradict herself. This makes it impossible for Protagoras to be inconsistent—there would have to be an enduring Protagoras for that—and Plato's arguments against him must fail. Indeed, as Chappell points out, 'so must any argument at all', since Protagoras can 'simply divide himself' between the premisses of an argument, so one could never reach the conclusion of the argument.¹²¹

Waterlow concludes from all this that the purpose of the exquisite resembles the original Platonic version (as far as GR is concerned), see Baghrarian, *Relativism*, 135–6.

¹²⁰ Waterlow, 'Inconsistency', 26–7.

¹²¹ Chappell, 'Theaetetus', 135. Of course, the Protagorean relativist is immune to being caught in a contradiction even without this strategy of self-division: there is no fact of the matter about what seemed to me to be the case a moment ago, and what is true for me now is only what seems to me to be the case now. Furthermore, it may now seem to me to be the case that p , and it may also now seem to me to be the case that, at an earlier time, it seemed to me to be the case that not- p ; but this commits me to no inconsistency at all. The truth-condition for any proposition p is that it seem to the agent in question to be the case that p (assuming biconditionality); the truth-condition for p is satisfied at one point in time, and the truth-condition for not- p at another—it is not the case that the agent is making inconsistent statements

argument is *not* to show that ‘Protagoras’ position ought for reasons of logic to be rejected by those who accept it’.¹²² Accordingly, the argument’s aim is not to establish *self-contradiction*, but rather a kind of *self-defeat*: ‘an opponent confronting Protagoras’ position confronts, so to speak, a dialectical nothing, offering no resistance’.¹²³ For ‘Protagoras’ vanishes as soon as he faces any opposition, and there is no hope of having an intellectually challenging exchange with him. The strategy of self-division, in other words, does not save Protagoras in any meaningful sense, as it reduces his position to one that excludes him from rational discourse. The same is true of other lines of defence that are available to Protagoras: squeezed into a corner, Protagoras could drop his apparent concern for PNC, since he is committed to PNC only in so far as, and as long as, it seems true to him.¹²⁴ Alternatively, he could deny any other assumption (or premiss) of whatever argument is launched against him.¹²⁵ In response to all three arguments [I]–[III] he could deny, for instance, the existence of opponents; once he is willing to do away with standards of rationality, nothing prevents Protagoras from looking Socrates in the eye and insisting that it seems to him that Socrates is a relativist too.

It should be clear that Protagoras’ ability to avoid self-contradiction is not a *strength* of his position: all of the above tactics come at the cost of excluding him from rational discourse. He can avoid the exquisite argument’s punch only at the cost of reducing himself to someone who can take no part in an intellectual exchange. This, after all, is all that a philosophical critique can hope to achieve, and is also what self-contradiction ultimately provides: as Sayre

about the same state of affairs. This means that my judging that p at t_1 and not- p at t_2 does not constitute a self-contradiction, since it may seem to me at t_2 that (and thus be true for me that) my view has always been not- p . This is obviously the case under GR, where no proposition whatsoever falls outside the domain of (M''). But it is also the case under QR, as well as any relativism that is not so restricted in scope as not to deserve the name. If, for example, (M'') itself is an exception to the rule it sets, and, furthermore, if we even have a whole set of objectively true meta-level propositions (for example, it being objectively true that, if the wind seems cold to me, it *is* cold for me), any proposition about what does, or did, seem to me to be the case remains within the realm of relative truths.

¹²² Waterlow, ‘Inconsistency’, 35.

¹²³ Ibid. 36.

¹²⁴ Under this option, self-contradiction does not entail self-refutation.

¹²⁵ The denied premisses can even be the implicit ones about what constitutes a valid argument, the rules of inference.

notes, what is essentially wrong with inconsistency is that it 'is not permissible in rational discourse'.¹²⁶ It seems to me, therefore, that the exquisite argument does not merely aim to establish this self-defeat as Waterlow suggests. The more attractive interpretation is that the exquisite argument is designed to pose a dilemma between self-contradiction and self-defeat of various sorts, all of which reduce Protagoras to 'a dialectical nothing'.¹²⁷ It turns out, then, that Plato has prepared *two dilemmas* for Protagoras: he is either a global relativist or a qualified relativist. On both readings, the exquisite argument shows that he refutes himself. Alternatively, he may in each case escape this self-refutation by resorting to various tactics, which lead to the same result, that Protagoras violates the conditions of rational discourse in such a way that he is fated to be that absurd figure sticking his head up from the ground and then running away. This result calls to mind what Aristotle has to say, in *Metaphysics Γ* 4–6, about the man who denies PNC: such a man is 'no better than a mere plant' since he says nothing and refuses to reason (1006^a13–15). Aristotle maintains that Protagoras belongs in this subhuman category because he believes that Protagoras' relativism commits him to denying PNC. Plato, however, adopts a more austere line and takes Protagoras to have lost his humanity on the basis of his relativism alone, whether or not he chooses to deny PNC.

We must conclude, therefore, that Plato's self-refutation argument against Protagoras is as successful as any self-refutation argument can be. The importance of this achievement can hardly be overstated, since the argument applies equally to most, if not all, contemporary versions of relativism about truth. Plato reveals the inescapable absurdity of the relativist's position, though he does not make it easy for the reader to see how exactly he is doing this. Fighting our way through Plato's dense arguments and irony is perhaps a fair price to pay for the insight his text provides.

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¹²⁶ Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, 88.

¹²⁷ Chappell, '*Theaetetus*', 136–7, defends a similar view, but sees this dilemma as being simply between self-contradiction and self-division, while I think the second horn of the dilemma is actually multi-horned, with several alternatives to self-contradiction.

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