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Ugo Zilioli

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE SOPHISTS: PROTAGORAS.

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A thesis submitted to
The Department of Classics and Ancient History
University of Durham

In accordance with the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2002



14 OCT 2002

Declaration.

I confirm that no part of the material offered has previously been submitted by me for a degree in this or in any other University. If material has been generated through joint work, my independent contribution has been clearly indicated. In all other cases material from the work of others has been acknowledged and quotations and paraphrases suitably indicated.

Abstract.

Ugo Zilioli, *The epistemology of the Sophists: Protagoras*, Ph.D 2002.

My thesis is on the epistemology of the sophist Protagoras. Through the reading of Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, I have reconstructed (a) Protagorean theory of knowledge, according to which Protagoras is an inter-subjectivist (as far as perceptions are concerned) and a moral relativist (as far as ethical judgements are concerned).

In Chapter 1, I first try to reconstruct the development of Protagoras' life. I list then Protagoras' few (extant) fragments, offering their different interpretations. Lastly, I deal with modern and most recent scholarship on Protagoras, ending the chapter with some considerations about the scholarly legitimacy of my thesis.

In chapters 2 and 3, I deal with the Protagorean section in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Through a detailed (and critical) analysis of Plato's exegesis of Protagoras' maxim "Man is the measure of all things", I first reconstruct the perceptual (and individualistic) side of Protagoras' epistemology and then the ethical (and collective) side of such an epistemology. At the end of chapter 3, Protagoras' theory of knowledge already reveals itself as a rather complete epistemology.

Such a (complete) picture of Protagoras' epistemology is reinforced in chapter 4, which deals with the Great Speech (mainly the myth) of the *Protagoras*. Through a close analysis of the core of the Great Speech, I confirm the ethical and collective reading of Protagoras' maxim that I have given in chapter 3. I end the chapter by providing some (modern) suggestions for taking Protagoras as a more serious epistemologist than he is actually thought of.

In the Conclusion, I sum up my whole reconstruction of the Platonic Protagoras and of his theory of knowledge, connecting it briefly with some features of fifth-century B.C Greek epistemology and, again, with some modern philosophical tenets.

For my parents,
and to Christopher Rowe,

sine quibus non

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When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour,
it seems like a minute.
But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute-
And it is longer than any hour.
That is relativity.

A. Einstein

Preface.

This thesis is the result of a three-year doctoral program undertaken at the Department of Classics and Ancient History of the University of Durham, under the supervision of Prof. C.J. Rowe.

The present work is on the epistemology of one of the most influential Older Sophists, Protagoras. The original plan of my doctoral research was wider than the one I actually pursued, since I first intended to study the epistemology of Protagoras, Gorgias and the historian Thucydides. I intended to attempt that because I wished to reconstruct in a more definite way, for myself and for other students of Ancient Greek philosophy, the (epistemological) background against which Plato had mainly to fight. I had to give up the ambitious project, since Protagoras turned out to deserve much more attention than I originally thought.

But in any case it has been an extremely rewarding experience to concentrate my philosophical capacities just on Protagoras' epistemology. Working on Protagoras has been hard work, but philosophically extremely challenging. The more I attempted to understand his fragments and the philosophical positions attributed to him, the more his philosophy, or at least his epistemology, turned out to be interesting, fascinatingly modern. In order to try to make sense of Protagoras' philosophical tenets, I needed to read a great deal of contemporary philosophy on relativism, subjectivism, personal identity. So much reading of current philosophy has opened me a wide field of philosophical interests that were unknown to me before. The study of Protagoras has—I hope—made me a stronger philosopher.

As I have already said, I had the luck of having Christopher Rowe as my supervisor. British reserve does not let me say publicly what I really owe to Christopher. He himself

would be embarrassed were I to speak too frankly of him. I have respect both for British reserve and (more, obviously) for him and so I shall keep to myself the various reasons for my gratitude and my affection for him. At any rate, I cannot avoid admitting that he has not been a standard supervisor. He has ever been an excellent philosophical stimulus for me, constantly showing appreciation for my work and making suggestions for improving it. Such excellent supervision has always gone along with his sincere concern for my benefit as a person. He has always done what he could do (and more) to put me in the condition of being a good student and a happy man.

If I have to say what I (hope to) have learned most from Christopher, I shall say, without any doubt, intellectual courage, that is the capacity, the strength and the ability to defend one's own ideas, once one is convinced that they are reasonable. I have often seen him (or read him) arguing for his own philosophical ideas, when he was well aware that they were unpopular. But he was reasonably sure that those ideas were right and he did not mind being, at least for a short while, a lonely voice. I have often seen him changing his opinions as well, whenever he found that some arguments were better than his; indeed, he has always encouraged philosophical discussion, to have better ideas winning over less reasonable ones. If it is true that philosophy is not a set of doctrines (to be safeguarded), but an activity (for making life go best), that is high-value philosophy.

I hope to have kept faith with what I have said before and that what I have just written will not make Christopher embarrassed. I do apologize but this time I cannot tone down what I have just said, without feeling at odds with myself. Let all this formality be done with, and let me say "Christopher, thanks for everything." Together with him, I wish to express my thanks to Beverlin Monique Hammett, who contributed to making my first year in Durham an unforgettable one. Her (our) friendship is one of the rare and precious things that one dare not think will happen in one's own life. Thanks also to Samantha Jane Newington, Maria Angelica Fierro and Elena Irrera, who have been close to me throughout my doctorate.

Back home, I have to say special thanks to my best friend, Michela Paradiso, who has been, as always, the person who most supported what I was doing. Her continuous attempt to understand the (bizarre) reasons for my doing philosophy, and thus to understand me more fully, is always a proof of the great friendship that we have and feel for each other. I have to express then my gratitude to my sister Annalisa, for her own special support, both intellectual and emotive. Thanks to Silvia: her troubles did not allow her to understand deeply my passion for doing philosophy, but I have always felt that she was close to me with her tender affection. Finally, thanks to Cristiana, who has come into my life as a wind of March. In a short time, her love has transformed my sentimental life, and thus my whole life, into a kind of flourishing landscape, continually illuminated by a persisting and corroborating sun. Her care for every aspect of my life has deeply moved me, together with helping me a great deal in preparing the final version of this thesis.

At last, but not obviously at least, I have to say my special thanks to my parents, to whom, together with Christopher Rowe, this thesis is dedicated. Without them, this thesis would simply not exist. Special and affectionate thanks to my father, who looks at me and I am sure is telling himself: "I will never understand why he is doing philosophy. What does all this mean?" Despite this lack of intellectual understanding, I have never felt him distant from my philosophical enterprises and, indeed, I have always felt his emotional support. Affectionate and special thanks to my mother too. She herself looks at me and thinks: "I am not very sure what he is doing, but I have the feeling it is a good thing. He is happy doing that. Would I have been so happy, had I had the possibility of doing all that?" She is an intelligent woman, and she is happy just to see her son doing what she would have liked to do. That is a proof of deep (maternal) love. I thank her for loving me so much.

Let me conclude this list by saying my thank you to Nigel and Heather Speight, Heather Rowe and to Cristina Mattioli, for their kind hospitality and much else besides.

As for more official acknowledgements, I have to thank the Department of Philosophy of the University of Turin, which awarded me a scholarship to do a Master of Arts by research. Thanks to the support of the Department of Classics and Ancient History of the University of Durham, which has awarded me a three-year departmental scholarship for living expenses, the Master's degree was upgraded to a doctorate. Nor would this have been possible, had not the Arts and Humanities Research Board awarded me a two-year fees-only scholarship.

Finally, let me express a more impersonal gratitude. As one may easily guess from what I have just now stated, my doctoral program would have been impossible without the support of British bodies. The United Kingdom has given financial help to a non-British citizen. British people may find this perfectly normal, but every Italian (or, at least, every Italian who has come in contact with the way things are in the Italian academic world) would find it quite odd. I did find it odd. For such a generosity, together with the warm welcome that has always been reserved to me in the last three years, I would like to express my gratitude to the United Kingdom as a whole.

“Solo chi dá luce, rischia il buio.” (Eugenio Montale)

Durham, April 2002.

Note to the Reader.

The abbreviations for Platonic dialogues (and for all the other ancient Greek philosophical texts quoted) are those of Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition, with a revised supplement (Oxford 1996). To indicate the Lexicon in the thesis, I shall use the abbreviation *LSJ*. The abbreviations for Latin authors and works are those of P. Glare, *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1992). I shall use the abbreviation *FHG* for *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, ed. P. Müller, 5 vols, Paris 1841-70 and *DK* for *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels, revised by W. Kranz, 6th edition, Berlin 1951.

As for the translations of the Greek quoted, essentially from the *Theaetetus*, the *Protagoras*, and Protagoras' fragments, I shall use the following translations:

— Plato, *Theaetetus*, translated by M.J. Levett, revised by M.F. Burnyeat, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990.

— Plato, *Protagoras*, translated with notes by C.C.W. Taylor, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.

— R.K. Sprague, *The Older Sophists. A complete translation by several hands of the fragments in Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972. Protagoras' fragments are translated by M.J. O'Brien.

I shall indicate every time I do not follow the translations quoted above. For ancient Greek texts other than the *Theaetetus*, the *Protagoras* or Protagoras' fragments, I shall indicate the name of the translators between brackets.

I shall use the following abbreviations for periodicals:

<i>BACAP</i>	<i>Proceedings of The Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy</i>
<i>C&M</i>	<i>Classica et Mediaevalia</i>
<i>JHPH</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Philosophy</i>
<i>Ph.R</i>	<i>Philosophical Review</i>

I shall use the following abbreviations for the scholarly works I have mostly quoted in the present work:

<i>Intr</i>	Burnyeat's <i>Introduction to Plato's Theaetetus</i> , Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990.
<i>Commentary</i>	J. McDowell, <i>Plato's Theaetetus</i> , Oxford: Clarendon, 1973.
<i>PTK</i>	F.M. Cornford, <i>Plato's Theory of Knowledge</i> , London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935.
<i>PRT</i>	C.C.W. Taylor's commentary on the <i>Protagoras</i> , Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.

As for bibliographical references, I shall adopt an author/number system, e.g. Ackrill [4]. See the bibliography at the end for precise bibliographical references.

When doing examples or speaking generally, I shall always say 'he' or 'his' and I shall not use the female pronoun or adjective.

1 Life, fragments and scholarship.

Non v'è interpretazione [di Protagora] cui non se ne contrapponga un'altra puntualmente rovesciata, non v'è filosofema protagoreo che non sia stato inteso in modi reciprocamente escludentesi.¹

S. Zeppi

Those who study ancient philosophers, especially the philosophers before Socrates, have to deal with the problem of the sources: few are available, often late ones, sometimes contradicting one another. So little for sure is known about the life and the writings of these thinkers and Protagoras is no exception to the rule.

1.1 Life.

As far as the life of Protagoras is concerned, the main biographical source is Diogenes Laertius and his *Lives of the Philosophers*. Protagoras is said to have been born in Abdera (although Eupolis makes him a native of Teos)² and to have been the lawgiver of Thuri. The so called agnosticism of Protagoras caused him to be exiled from Athens and his books to be burned.³ It is not clear if it was the exile itself that caused his emigration to

¹ [76], 1.

² See 80DKA11. In his *Vitae Sophistarum* 1.10.1 (=80DKA2), Philostratus confirms Abdera as Protagoras' birth place.

³ See 80DKB4. Philostratus (*Vitae Soph. cit.*, 1.10.2) claims that Protagoras had been taught by the Persian Magi and that such teaching made was behind his agnostic view on the gods' existence.

Sicily: Diogenes does not explicitly correlate the condemnation of Protagoras with his travel to Sicily, but Philostratus does.⁴

As for Protagoras' death, Diogenes, following Philochorus,⁵ says that while Protagoras was travelling to Sicily his ship sank and he drowned, aged ninety; on the other hand, Apollodorus⁶ (Diogenes adds) reports that Protagoras died at seventy, after teaching successfully for forty years.⁷ Except for a little other information (e.g., he was the first to exact fees for teaching), this is all that we know about Protagoras' life. The actual development of his life is therefore rather obscure.

The most authoritative scholarly attempt to understand the real development of the Sophist's life is still the one offered by J.S. Morrison, more than fifty years ago.⁸ Relying upon Diogenes' account, integrated with some Platonic hints about Protagoras' life (mostly, *Meno* 91e, *Prt.* 317c and *Hp. Ma.* 282d-e), and emphasising the incoherence of Athenaeus' report,⁹ Morrison gives the following outline of Protagoras' life:¹⁰

Born at Abdera not before 490 or later than 484.

Set up as public teacher at Athens not before 460 or later than 454
(Protagoras is then 30).

Left Athens for Thurii 444, his *acme*: Protagoras is 40-46.

⁴ See Philostratus, *Vitae Soph. cit.*, 1.10.3; S.E., *M.* 9.55-56; Cic., *De natura deorum*, 1.23.63. On the problem of the burning of the books and Protagoras' subsequent exile, see L. Piccirilli [53].

⁵ See *FHG* 328 F 217; Philostratus (*ibidem*) agrees with Philochorus.

⁶ See *FHG* 244 F 71.

⁷ Plato (*Meno* 91e) reports the same information.

⁸ See also J.A. Davison [15]; Guthrie [131], 262-269; Untersteiner [71] 7-14; Capizzi [6], 218-234; Kerferd [36], 42-44.

⁹ See 80DKA11.

¹⁰ See Morrison [44], 7: what is in brackets is mine. For a different outline, see J.A. Davison [15].

(From Thurii to Sicily?)

Returned to Athens

dramatic date of *Protagoras* 433 (Protagoras is 51-57).

Left Athens (decree of Diopieithes) 430 (Protagoras is 54-60).

(Sicily again?)

Returned to Athens 422 (Protagoras is 62-68).

Died on the way to Sicily not before 421 or later than 415
(Protagoras is nearly 75).

In the light of Protagoras' claim in the *Protagoras* (317c),¹¹ he should have been around fifty in 433, the most probable dramatic date of the Platonic dialogue; then in the *Meno*, Plato says that Protagoras' teaching lasted for forty years and that he lived for seventy years.¹² On this basis, Protagoras should have been nearly thirty in 460-454, and this may have been a good age for him to go to Athens for the first time and start teaching there. Were this dating right, he would have had enough time to build up a reputation sufficiently strong for him to be asked to be the lawgiver of Thurii.

Without doubts Diogenes is right (9.50) in following Heraclides Ponticus (fr. 21 Voss) and saying that Protagoras was the lawgiver of Thurii, the colony founded by

¹¹ Protagoras speaking: "And yet I have been practising the craft for many years, and indeed I am a good age now and I am old enough to be the father of any of you" (*Pr* 317c1-3).

¹² The tradition of a life of ninety years (Diogenes and 80DKA3) seems to be false: see Morrison [44], 4.

Pericles in the south of Italy. The relationship between the man who led Athens in its most powerful days and Protagoras, a man who was the most influential thinker of the age, is well-established. There are hints of it in the Platonic dialogues¹³ and Plutarch, who speaks of a day-long conversation between the two as well as reporting Protagoras' comment about Pericles' attitude toward the death of his sons,¹⁴ seems to show a familiarity between the two men.¹⁵ If Pericles and Protagoras were actually close, it would be quite likely that Pericles should ask Protagoras, in many respects the leader of the emerging movement of the Sophists, to write the laws of the new and most important colony of Athens, almost a symbol of the incredible power gained by Athens in the Greece of the fifth century B.C.¹⁶

After Thurii, in light of some allusions in *Hp.Ma.* (281a-b and 282d-e), Protagoras is likely to have spent time in Sicily before his second known visit to Athens (433 B.C.: the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*). Because of the bad fortune of his friend Pericles just after the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, it is likely that Protagoras left Athens again;¹⁷ such a decision may have been hastened by the plague, which devastated the city around 430/429 and which caused Pericles' death. We do not know where Protagoras went after this second departure and before his third visit to Athens but Morrison is probably right in thinking that "it may conjectured that he [*sc.* Protagoras] went to Sicily, where he had stayed before 433 and whither he turned when he had to leave Athens for the third time."¹⁸

¹³ See *Prt.* 315a, 320a, 329a for instance.

¹⁴ See *Plu., Per.* 36.5 (=80DKA10) and 80DKB9.

¹⁵ On the relationship between Pericles and Protagoras, see N. O'Sullivan [51] and I.S. Mark [45].

¹⁶ On the foundation of Thurii, see D.S. 12.10 and again *Plu., Per.* 11; recently V. Ehrenberg [23]; J.V. Muir [47]. Herodotus and Empedocles are also said to have been attracted there and this may have been an additional reason for Protagoras to go.

¹⁷ On the decree of Diopiteus, which proposed to impeach those who did not accept the gods and was probably thought up against Pericles' *entourage*, see *Plu., Per.* 32.1 (on which, Kerferd [36], 21); K.J. Dover [22]. For the religious attitude of Pericles, see *Plu., Per.*, 8.9.

¹⁸ Morrison [44], 6.

As for this third visit of Protagoras to Athens, the passage of Athenaeus¹⁹ reports that Protagoras came to Athens not before 423 and not later than 421. Alcibiades had recently returned to the political stage, and Protagoras may have returned to Athens to help him and influence his strategy (although there is no evidence for that).

While accusing Alcibiades of the mutilation of the Herms (415), the peace party may have attempted to get rid of Protagoras himself by accusing him of *asebeia* and forcing him to escape again to Sicily (at that time he might have been around seventy). Diogenes' report (9.54) that Protagoras was accused by Pythodorus, one of the Four Hundred, does not mean that the sophist was under accusation *during* the time of the Four Hundred (411). The most probable date of his last departure from Athens thus remains 415, such dating being consistent with what was said above about the duration of Protagoras' life. Philochorus and Philostratus speak of Protagoras' drowning and it is quite likely that he died that way.

1.2 Fragments.

If little for sure is known about Protagoras' life, unfortunately there is the same lack of knowledge about his writing. At the end of his chapter about Protagoras, Diogenes gives a list of the works of the Sophist.²⁰ As modern scholarship has already stressed,²¹ such a list

¹⁹ See 80DKA11.

²⁰ See D.L. 9.55. The titles listed are: *The Art of Debating, On Wrestling, On Mathematics, On Government, On Ambition, On the Virtues, On the Original State of Things, On Those in Hades, On Human Errors, Direction, Trial over a Fee, Contradictory Arguments in Two Books.*

²¹ See DK, *ad loc.*, and Untersteiner [71], 17: of course, the most relevant absence is Protagoras' *Truth* (= *The Down-Throwers?*: see below, p.7 n. 26). Untersteiner's attempt ([71], 18-25) to show that all the titles listed by Diogenes correspond to different sections of a single work of Protagoras (that is, *Contradictory Arguments*) is unfruitful. Every attempt devoted to establishing what Protagoras really wrote, not to say the

of twelve titles is incomplete and its length contrasts astonishingly with the low number of extant Protagorean fragments.

Of the sixteen Protagorean fragments listed by the Diels-Kranz edition of the Presocratics, one (80DKB12), given under the heading 'Poorly Attested', is dubious. The indirect sources are greater in number: we have thirty testimonies on Protagoras and his philosophy, many of them from Plato, Aristotle and Sextus. The more recent editions of Protagoras' fragments and testimonies, Untersteiner and Capizzi,²² do not alter significantly the picture given by the Diels-Kranz edition, which thus far remains the standard edition for Protagoras. A new textual discovery does not seem to provide certain or significant Protagorean material: the so called "new" Protagorean fragment, unearthed during the second world war, has been rejected by many scholars as spurious and so far we have no evidence that it is really Protagorean.²³

The most famous and troubled fragment of Protagoras is the Homo-Mensura fragment (=80DKB1). It is reported by Sextus (*M.* 7.60), Plato (first at *Tht.* 152a3-4 and then at many other *loci* in *Tht.* 152a-186e; *Cra.* 385e) and Aristotle (*Metaph.* K.6.1062b12);²⁴ it reads:

evolution of his thinking, is doomed to fail, I think, since the number of his extant fragments is too small to infer the development of his thought.

²² See M. Untersteiner [70], and Capizzi [6]. Untersteiner's most relevant addition to DK edition is a passage of Cicero (*leg.* 1.16-17); for the reasons for this addition, see M. Untersteiner [69].

²³ The alleged new fragment is found in a work of Didymus the Blind. It runs: "It is manifest (*phainetai*) to you who are present that I am sitting; but to a person who is absent it is not manifest that I am sitting; whether or not I am sitting is non-evident (*adelon*)" (Paul Woodruff's translation, in [41]). Although the new fragment may offer interesting comparisons with other relevant Protagorean fragments (80DKB1 and 4, for instance) and ancient philosophical interpretations of Protagoras' epistemology (Plato's *Theaetetus*), still what Schiappa ([61], 151) has written about the fragment remains true: "While the new fragment reveals how Protagoras came to be understood by later Hellenistic philosophy, it cannot be taken as seriously as *ipsissima verba*." See also J. Meier [43], who believes that the fragment really is Protagorean; more cautious are J. Mansfeld ("Protagoras on Epistemological Obstacles", in Kerferd [36], 51-53) and Woodruff himself [41].

²⁴ See also 80DKA14 (=S.E., *P.* 1.216); 80DKA16; 80DK19 (=Arist., *Metaph.* 10.1.1053a35).

πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν,
τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

Of all things the measure is the man, of things that are that they are, and of things that they are not that they are not.²⁵

Seduced by the oracular ambiguity of this fragment, which is said to be at the opening of Protagoras' *The Down-Throwers*,²⁶ modern scholarship has produced a huge amount of studies on the subject, many of them contradicting one another.²⁷ The main problem is the real meaning of *chremata*,²⁸ *metron*,²⁹ *anthropos*³⁰ and, above all, of *hos*:³¹ does the relative adverb mean 'that', or 'how', or both? According, then, to the meaning given to *hos* and to the other words, scholars deliver different interpretations of the

²⁵ On the translation, see the useful remark of Mansfeld (in Kerferd [35], 43): "I gladly welcome the suggestion that 'the things that are' denote not only existing things, but also such things as, in modern parlance, are the case."

²⁶ S.E., *M.* 7.60; while Plato (*Tht.* 161c) says that the maxim is at the beginning of Protagoras' *Truth*: see Untersteiner ([70], 24) for the attempt to identify *The Down-Throwers* and *The Truth*. On the oracular style of this fragment, see O'Sullivan [190], 47-48.

²⁷ For different interpretations of 80DKA1 in modern scholarship, see A. Neumann [160]; L. Versényi [186]; F. Decleva-Caizzi [114]; Untersteiner [71], 115-137; R.F. Holland [133]; Capizzi [6], 104-27; Guthrie [131] 188-92.

²⁸ For the word, see Untersteiner [70], 115-117; Gomperz [206], 201-2; 251-3; D.K. Glidden [129], 209-212. See also Anaxag. 59DKB1, 4, 12.

²⁹ See Untersteiner [71], 117-23; Gomperz [206], 203-204; Capizzi [6], 109; N.O. Bernsen [83]. On Sextus' uses of *metron* (= *criterion*) see G. Cortassa [110]; on Plato's uses of *metron* and its cognates, see *Plt.* 269c; *Phlb.* 66a; *Ti.* 39b; *Lg.* 716c; for his uses of *criterion* and its cognates, see *Tht.* 178b, *R.* 9.582a; *Lg.* 6.767b.

³⁰ See Untersteiner [71], 126-128; Gomperz [206], 234-239.

³¹ See Untersteiner [71], 123-126; Guthrie [131], 189-90; G. Calogero, *Enciclopedia Treccani*, vol. 28, s.v. 'Protagora'; C.H. Kahn, "The Greek verb 'to be' and the concept of Being", *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966), 245-65.

Protagorean maxim, making it a manifesto of an individualistic epistemology based purely on perceptions³² or—conversely—of a global and highly developed theory of knowledge.³³

Very similar in its syntactic form to the Homo-Mensura fragment is the other well known Protagorean fragment, that on the gods (=80DKB4). It will have been the best known of Protagoras' sayings, since it is quoted or paraphrased by a high number of ancient sources: Eusebius (*P.E.* 14.3.7) and Diogenes (9.51) report it in its most complete form (though in different forms) but Hesychius, Sextus and Cicero also quote it.³⁴ The fragment, which is said to have come from the opening of Protagoras' *On the Gods*, runs:

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἢ τ' ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχύς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life.³⁵

Diogenes reports the fragment without the clause 'or what form they might have', which is, on the other hand, quoted by Eusebius, Sextus, Cicero and Philodemus. Except for Diogenes, none of the sources quotes the last and significant part ('for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life'). Despite

³² See Zeppi [76], 25-71 and Gigante [205], 237-242.

³³ See particularly Untersteiner [71], 65-85 but also Vlastos [240], 7-23 and Schiappa [61], 117-131.

³⁴ See 80DKA3; Sextus, *M.* 9.55-56 (=80DKA12); Cic., *ND*, 1.23.63 (=80DKA23) but also 1.12.29. Philostratus (*Vitae Soph. cit.*, 1.10.2), Philodemus and Diogenes of Oenoanda (=80DKA23) and Plato (*Th.* 162d) mention the fragment.

³⁵ On the text of the fragment, see Mansfeld, in Kerferd [36], 40; C.W. Muller [48]. I am quoting Mansfeld's translation of the fragment.

that, modern scholarship generally supposes that the quotation in Diogenes is genuine, as it does for Eusebius' clause about the gods' form: each expresses an aspect of the theological problem typically taken into account by Greek thinkers of sixth/fifth century B.C.³⁶

Although in antiquity the fragment on the gods was as famous as the homo-mensura dictum, modern scholarship nonetheless provides much less discussion of it than of the Man the Measure maxim. Nowadays scholars tend to agree that the fragment is not a profession of atheism (as some ancient commentators thought),³⁷ but that it expresses more or less a sort of theoretical agnosticism about the existence of gods. People are not able to *know* if gods exist or not, such matter being beyond their knowing capacities.³⁸ Newer tendencies in modern scholarship attempt to show how the fragment may be read as a sort of anthropological motto, whose detailed explanation may be found in Protagoras' myth in the *Great Speech* (Pl., *Prt.*, 320c8-324d1). On this new approach, Schiappa writes: "Concerning the gods" did not begin a text refuting traditional religion by defending

³⁶ Eusebius' sentence about the form of the gods closely recalls Hdt. 2.53; see also Xenoph. 21DKB23: the two main subjects of the theological speculation in the fifth-century B.C. were the *existence* of the gods and their *form*. *Adelotes* reminds us of the very famous dictum of Anaxagoras, *opsis gar ton adelon ta phainomena* (=59B21ADK, on which see H. Diller, "opsis adelon ta phainomena", *Hermes* 67 (1932), 14 ff.) It is known that Anaxagoras was very close to Pericles and so it is likely that Protagoras knew him and his philosophy. Another interesting passage, which sounds very close to the Protagorean fragment on gods (especially to its second sentence) but which has not been given any attention, is Hdt. 2.3-4. Here the historian speaks of the human impossibility of knowing anything certain about the gods. Although he does not give an explanation for that impossibility, such an attitude may be understood in light of his epistemological belief, according to which we are able to know what we directly see or by examining what is reported to us. On the relationship between Herodotus and Protagoras, see A. Dihle [21], 207-220.

³⁷ See 80DKA23.

³⁸ Some scholars do not agree completely with this existential-only reading of the fragment, very much because of the influential study of Kahn on the Greek verb 'to be' (see C. H. Kahn, *The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973). See Kerferd ([36], 165-67) for a reading of the fragment in line with the homo-mensura dictum.

agnosticism, but rather served as an introduction to a different approach to religion, best described in contemporary terms as anthropological.”³⁹

Two other Protagorean epistemological fragments are 80DKB6a and b, the Two-*logoi* fragment and the Weaker/Stronger *logoi* fragment respectively. The Two-*logoi* fragment, quoted by Diogenes (9.51) and paraphrased by Seneca and Clement,⁴⁰ reads:

καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις.

[Protagoras] was the first to say that on everything there are two *logoi* opposed each other.⁴¹

While scholars have long disputed the real meaning of the fragment, nonetheless most of them agree in taking it as a purely rhetorical fragment: Protagoras was a teacher of rhetorical skills, and this fragment puts in words the practice of debating he actually taught to his pupils.⁴² Other scholars, on the other hand, think that such an interpretation

³⁹ See Schiappa [61], 148: the new ‘anthropological’ reading of the fragment has the merit of trying to combine the interpretation of the fragment with that of the Great Speech, which is usually taken as contradicting the fragment (for instance, see A Levi [219]).

⁴⁰ See 80DKA20, where it is stated: “Every argument has an opposite argument, say the Greeks, following Protagoras.” A parody of the fragment may be found in Ar., *Nu.*, 889ff. Seneca (*Epistulae* 88.43) says that “Protagoras ait de omni re in utramque partem disputari posse ex aequo et de hac ipsa, an omni res in utramque partem diputabilis sit” (“Protagoras declares that one can take either side on any question and debate it with equal success, including the question itself whether both sides of any question can be debated”.) This testimony has been thought of as not trustworthy by some scholars (see Gomperz [206], 143) while others, who take it as genuine, agree in saying that Seneca has widened it (see Untersteiner [70], *ad loc.*).

⁴¹ Here I do not follow O’Brien’s translation because I find it misleading in rendering *logos* with ‘argument’ and *pragma* with ‘issue’.

⁴² See B. Smith [66]; L. Versenyi [239], 18; Guthrie [44], 182. The so called rhetorical interpretation of 80DKB6a is strengthened by Seneca’s words, which undoubtedly have a rhetorical colour. It has been already said, on the other hand, that that testimony is dubious, very likely expressing the way Seneca understood the actual words of Protagoras. Another point of strength for the rhetorical interpretation is the treatise *Dissoi*

underestimates the real core of the fragment, whose purely philosophical weight is thought of as being much heavier. According to these interpreters, the real meaning of the fragment is that on every 'thing', there are two opposite accounts. On every single thing, or experience, or fact, men (or a single man) may have two different and opposite perceptions, explanations, or generally accounts, which are at first mental and private and later linguistically shared with others.⁴³

The same controversy between rhetorical and philosophical interpretations takes place also in relation to 80DKB6b. This very short fragment comes from Aristotle's *Rhetorica* (2.24.1402a23), the only source that quotes it,⁴⁴ and it reads:

Logoi. This tract, possibly datable to about the end of fifth century B.C., is a sort of exercise-book for the art of rhetoric in which the author attempts to show how it is always possible to state twofold arguments on the same matter. Some scholars tried to ascribe the paternity of this work to Protagoras (see Gomperz [206], 188-96; G. Ryle [169], 115-17 and 124-5), thereby emphasising the rhetorical side of his teaching. But, again, there is no evidence whatsoever that *Dissoi Logoi* are Protagoras' (see Untersteiner [71], 463-474, with rich bibliography on the subject).

⁴³ See Schiappa [61], 89-102; Untersteiner [71], 35-53; to some extent, Guthrie ([131], 182n) and Kerferd ([36], 84) share the above exegesis of the fragment. This interpretation of the fragment is based upon a different translation of *logos* and *pragma*. While the rhetorical exegesis renders *logos* as 'argument' and consequently takes *pragma* as 'issue' or 'question', the philosophical interpretation of the fragment translates *logos* in its wide meaning of 'account' so that *pragma* may be taken as covering many features of 'reality', e.g. 'object', 'event', 'experience'. Such an interpretation seems to be more careful in handling the philosophical lexicon of fifth century B.C. (see Schiappa [61], 90-92 and Kerferd [36], 83). Besides, the philosophical exegesis of 80DKB6a may find an authoritative echo in Plato's Defence of Protagoras (*Tht.* 166a-168c5), on which see below, pp. 70 ff. On this very last point, see Untersteiner [71], 79-137; A. T. Cole [108], 34-37.

⁴⁴ See also 80DKA21. Before Aristotle, there are two indirect references to this fragment, neither of them explicitly connecting it to Protagoras. The first reference is Pl., *Ap.* 18b9-c1, 19b5-6, where "making the weaker (*hetton*) *logos* the stronger (*kreitton*)" is one of the charges brought against Socrates by his accusers. The other pre-Aristotelian indirect source of 80DKB6b is Ar., *Nu.*, 112-115 (=80DKC2), where we read: "[B]oth arguments (*logoi*) can be found among them, the stronger (*kreitton*), whoever he is, and the weaker (*hetton*)" (for the opinion that here Aristophanes is referring to Protagoras, see Guthrie [131], 371).

τὸν ἥττω δὲ λόγον κρείττω ποιεῖν τοῦτ' ἔστιν.

[This is what one means] by making the weaker *logos* the stronger.⁴⁵

The rhetorical interpretation of the fragment renders it in a way that clearly portrays Protagoras' teaching as a sort of verbal gymnastics, where pupils are taught to use words cleverly in order to build up a very convincing and strong discourse on any matter.⁴⁶ The philosophical interpretation, on the other hand, reads the fragment together with the Two-*logoi* fragment: between two different *logoi* on the same 'thing', Protagoras is able to teach people how to make the weaker account the stronger one.⁴⁷ If a man is not comfortable with a sense-perception or with whatever account of reality makes him feel bad, the sophist

⁴⁵ The O'Brien translation reads: "making the weaker argument stronger." It is useful to remind oneself that the quotation from *Rh.* is in a section where Aristotle is speaking of the wrong use of the argument from probability. After the quotation, the text reads: "Thus, people were rightly angry at the declaration of Protagoras; for it is a lie and not true but a fallacious probability and a part of no art except rhetoric and eristic" (tr. G.A. Kennedy).

⁴⁶ See A. Sesonske [177]. The strong point of the rhetorical interpretation is obviously its being so consistent with Aristotle's understanding of Protagoras' statement. Aristotle's decision to insert Protagoras' quotation in a work on the art of rhetoric, together with his remark on it, shows that he took Protagoras' words as emphasising a rhetorical ability the Sophist was very proud of. Nonetheless, nothing prevents us from taking Aristotle's interpretation as *his* (and only his) understanding of Protagoras' words. The lack of other sources does not allow us to make any substantial comparison with other ancient interpretations of the fragment. On the other hand, we know about Aristotle's attitude toward the sophistic movement, i.e. about his way of filtering the Sophists' doctrines—like everyone else's—through his own ideas (see C. J. Classen, "Aristotle's picture of the Sophists", in Kerferd [35], 7-24).

⁴⁷ The scholars who agree with this interpretation are the same ones who share the philosophical interpretation of 80DKB6a: see Schiappa [61], 107-114; Untersteiner [71], 79-114; A.T. Cole [108], 34-37 and Kerferd [34]. The philosophical interpretation indicates two ancient sources which may be thought of as corroborating such an interpretation, viz. Pl., *Th.* 166a-168c5 (Defence of Protagoras) and Ar., *Nu.* (especially 112 ff and 889ff). Both sources seem to provide a reading of the fragment alternative to that given by Aristotle: especially the analysis of the Defence offers very strong hints of a solid philosophical rendering of 80DKB6. I shall deal with this claim at length later on, pp. 71 ff. See also Untersteiner [71], 79-8; Zeppi [76], 77-89.

claims to be able to change such an account and to make that man go from the pernicious condition to a good and beneficial one, in such a way that he can enjoy better things, events, experiences.⁴⁸

Lastly, there is another epistemological dictum that scholars nowadays tend to ascribe to Protagoras⁴⁹ but which is not listed under the fragments in the Diels-Kranz edition, namely the Impossible to Contradict slogan (=80DKA1, 19). It announces that

οὐκ ἔστιν ἀντιλέγειν

it is impossible to contradict.

Two important sources, Plato and Aristotle, provide testimonies for this dictum and clearly attribute it to Protagoras.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, it has been widely shown that the Impossible to Contradict slogan (or versions of it) were shared by many different thinkers,⁵¹ with very different purposes, and it is quite hard to understand all the various meanings given to the idea.⁵² As for Protagoras, he may have used it primarily in accord with his homo-mensura fragment. That is, he may have used such slogan by stressing the idea (call it relativistic or inter-subjectivist or what you like most) which we find expounded in the *Theaetetus* that if the wind is cold *for me* and not *for you*, this means difference but not contradiction.⁵³

⁴⁸ See below, pp. 47-57, for my reading of Protagoras' Defence in the *Theaetetus*.

⁴⁹ See Schiappa [61], 135-140; Binder-Liesenborghes [3]. *Contra*, Untersteiner [71], 135, n. 41.

⁵⁰ See Pl., *Euthd.* 285b-c; Arist., *Metaph.* 4.4.1007b18-23; 4.5.1009a6-17; 11.6.1062b13-19; there is an echo of the dictum in Isoc., *Helen* 1.

⁵¹ See again Pl., *Euthd.* 286c1; Arist., *Metaph.*, 5.29.1024b32; *Top.* 104b21

⁵² See H.D. Rankin, "OUK ESTI ANTILEGEIN", in Kerferd [35], 25-37.

⁵³ See Kerferd [36], 90-91. In commenting on the Impossible to Contradict slogan, Plato says that the slogan means that there is no falsehood (*Euthd.* 286c6); the same conclusion is reached in *Thi.* 167a5-d3 and 170d2-172c, where Plato claims that Protagoras' homo-mensura thesis inevitably denies the possibility of falsehood.

Having discussed the epistemological fragments,⁵⁴ we may now briefly look at Protagoras' educational fragments, which have been accorded much less attention than the epistemological ones because of their lesser philosophical density. There are three of Protagoras' fragments that hint at educational ideas: 80DKB3, 10 and 11. The most interesting one is B3 and reads:

“Φύσεως καὶ ἀσκήσεως διδασκαλία δεῖται” καὶ “ἀπὸ νεότητος δὲ ἀρξαμένους δεῖ μανθάνειν”.

[In the work *Great Speech* Protagoras said that] "teaching requires natural endowment and practice" and "they must learn starting young."

This fragment is often read together with Stobaeus, *Flor.* 3.29.80 (=80DKB10), which says:

It is, therefore, evident that in Plato's interpretation, the *ouk estin antilegein* dictum is strictly connected with the Man the Measure fragment. Aristotle seems to share this view as well. In *Metaph.* 4.5.1009a6-17, he underlines that there is no place for falsehood in Protagoras' epistemology, whilst the other Aristotelian passages indicated above (*Metaph.* 5.29.1024b32) emphasise the link between the homo-mensura fragment and the Impossible to Contradict dictum. On the possible contradiction between the Impossible to Contradict slogan and the Two-*logoi* fragment, see Kerferd [36], 93-96.

⁵⁴ There is another fragment that may be thought of as epistemological, that is 80DKB7 (=Arist., *Metaph.* 3.2.997b34-998a5). The passage reads: "Nor is it true to say that mensuration has for its object perceptible magnitudes which are also perishable, for then it would perish when they did. But on the other hand astronomy surely does not have for its object perceptible magnitudes nor does it deal with the heaven that we see. For perceptible lines are not such as the geometer speaks of either, for nothing perceptible is straight or round in that way; for the circle touches the straight edge not at a point, but as Protagoras said it did when he refuted the geometers, nor (...)" (O'Brien's translation). As we can easily see, the passage does not provide a meaningful Protagorean sentence, nor it is possible to grasp the real ground on which Protagoras might have refuted the geometers. This testimony has been therefore generally taken merely as evidence of Protagoras' attitude toward the power of sense-perceptions (see also D.L. 9.51; Untersteiner [70] *ad loc.*; Zeppi [76], 36-37).

ἔλεγε μηδὲν εἶναι μήτε τέχνην ἄνευ μελέτης μήτε μελέτην ἄνευ τέχνης.

[Protagoras] said that art was nothing without practice and practice nothing without art.

The last meaningful educational fragment we have of Protagoras is B11,⁵⁵ which reads:

Education does not sprout in the soul unless one goes to a great depth.⁵⁶

There is no modern relevant scholarship on these, one might say, simpler fragments: to my knowledge, Untersteiner is the only scholar who attempts to establish a philosophical link between the educational fragments and the epistemological ones.⁵⁷ In antiquity Protagoras' educational views (indeed those of all the Sophists) attracted instead a great deal of attention, especially from Plato, whose *Protagoras* is partially devoted to the

⁵⁵ The original Greek is lost and only a Syriac translation is available; the above English translation is based on the German version of the passage, by J. Gildemeister and F. Bucheler (for all this, see DK, *ad loc.*). To be strictly accurate, there is another educational passage of/on Protagoras (80DKB12), but it is not thought of as being genuine (see Untersteiner [70], *ad loc.*). It is again a Greek-Syrian text, rendered into German by Ryssell (*Rheinisches Museum* 51 (1896), p. 539, n32). It goes: "Protagoras has said: 'Toil and work and instruction and education and wisdom are the crown of glory which is woven from the flowers of an eloquent tongue and placed on the heads of those who love it. The tongue's use is not effortless, to be sure, yet its blossoms are abundant and ever fresh, and the onlookers and those who applaud and the teachers rejoice, and the students make progress and the fools are annoyed- or perhaps they are not even annoyed, since they are not intelligent enough'."

⁵⁶ On the depth of the soul, see Heraclit. 22DKB45 and also Democr. 68DKB117.

⁵⁷ See Untersteiner [70], 77-78; 92-93; [71], 93-94. Relying upon his understanding of the Weaker/Stronger *logoi* fragment, according to which there are two levels of knowledge, he takes 80DKB3 as expressing the lower level of knowledge and 80DKB10 as expressing the higher level of theoretical knowledge.

problem, whether virtue is teachable.⁵⁸ In spite of that, however, in the *Protagoras* itself there are very few hints at Protagoras' method of education that might help us in gaining a deeper understanding of his educational fragments.⁵⁹

Protagoras' remaining alleged 'fragments' are few and very unattractive. 80DKB2 says that Protagoras wrote a book entitled *On being*, against "those who propose being as one",⁶⁰ while 80DKB5 claims that Plato's *Republic* is already contained in Protagoras' *Contradictory Arguments*.⁶¹ On the other hand, 80DKB8 refers to a Platonic passage that hints at a book of Protagoras';⁶² 80DKB6 is about Protagoras' writing down and discussing *loci communes* as well as about the episode of Euathlus.⁶³ The two last fragments are 80DKB9 and 7a. The first is Protagoras on Pericles' attitude toward the death of his sons,⁶⁴

⁵⁸ On this problem, see C.J. Rowe [231], 409-429.

⁵⁹ See Pl., *Prt.* 323c3-324d1; 325c5-326e5: these are perhaps the only two ancient passages that show an echo (a lexical echo in the first passage) of Protagoras' extant fragments on education. Some scholars (Untersteiner [70], p. 92, n. 11) find another hint of Protagoras' educational fragments in *Tht.* 167b-c, where Plato likens the professional teacher to a gardener (the lexicon of 80DKB11 recalls the activity of the farmer and so there is parallel drawn between the agricultural activity and that of the teacher).

⁶⁰ See 80DKB2. On Protagoras' anti-Eleatic attitude, see Zeppi [76], 39-40; Schiappa [61], 121-125; G. Giannantoni [127], 236.

⁶¹ See 80DKB5(=D.L. 3.37), where Aristoxenus and Favorinus are quoted. On this claim, see Gomperz [206], 180-181; Untersteiner ([71], 49) and, for a resumé of the different interpretations of the passage, Zeppi [76], 22-24.

⁶² See Pl., *Sph.* 232d-e. On the passage, see Untersteiner [70], *ad loc.* (where *Sph.* 232b-d is added). See also S.E., *M.* 55-59.

⁶³ See 80DKB6. As for the episode of Euathlus, see also D.L. (9.56) who writes: "When he [*sc.* Protagoras] asked Euathlus his disciple for his fee, the latter replied, 'But I have not won a case yet.' 'Nay' said Protagoras, 'if I win this case against you I must have the fee, for winning it; if you win, I must have it, because *you* win it'" (tr. R.D. Hicks).

⁶⁴ See 80DKB9. Pericles' attitude toward the death of his relatives is described also in Plu., *Per.* 36.7-8. The fragment reads: "For though his young and beautiful sons had died within a period of only eight days he bore it without grieving. For he maintained his tranquillity of mind, a fact which served him well every day by bringing good fortune, calming distress, and raising his reputation among the people. For at the sight of the manly way he endured his sorrows all judged him high-minded and brave and superior to themselves, knowing well their own helplessness in like circumstances."

while the second seems to be a brief note of Protagoras about the incapacity of mathematics for really grasping truths (although the actual meaning of the fragment is far from evident).⁶⁵

1.3 Scholarship on Protagoras.

As I have briefly pointed out, Protagoras' few fragments have attracted the attention of many modern scholars, who have delivered a highly conflicting picture of Protagoras' epistemological positions. Ancient philosophers also displayed a considerable interest in Protagoras' philosophy, since Plato devoted a whole dialogue, the *Protagoras*, to the Sophist, as well as a long section of the *Theaetetus*, while Aristotle and Sextus refer to Protagoras many times in their works. As often happens in philosophy, ancient interpreters (if such a word may be used in referring to Plato, Aristotle and Sextus) seem to offer a more vivid and coherent picture of another ancient philosopher, namely Protagoras in this case, than that delivered by modern studies. But, "prima il dovere, poi il piacere" (as we say in Italian). Before I enter into the treatment that Ancient philosophers reserved to Protagoras, let me deal with modern scholarship.

Everyone who has dared check a bibliography of Protagoras knows the huge quantity of studies and articles devoted to the Sophist of Abdera.⁶⁶ Whilst I was working on Protagoras in London, I must confess that I spent many afternoons in the Joint Library in Senate House, browsing among the shelves. I did that just to find the most recent

⁶⁵ See 80DKB7a: the fragment should be read together with 80DKB7. Untersteiner ([70], 84-85), following other scholars, has added another passage concerning Protagoras' supposed aversion toward the abstractions of mathematics (Simp., *in Ph.* 1108.18).

⁶⁶ On Protagorean bibliography, see the up-to-date one put together by C.J Classen, "Bibliographie zur Sophistik", *Elenchos* 6 (1985), 78-105; 128-138. See also Schiappa [61], 218-234.

discussions on Protagoras and so to satisfy my curiosity about the everlasting problem of the real meaning (if there is one; at least a coherent one) of Protagorean thinking.⁶⁷ In fact this dispute seems to have no real winner and scholars' interpretations are still in open conflict. I will not here offer a sketch of all the exegeses given of Protagoras' philosophy: for the aim of the present work, it will be sufficient to have a look at the most recent examples.⁶⁸

But before doing that, I shall quote a long passage by A.T. Cole, which offers an exemplary sketch of the slippery, Protean Protagoras one may find both in ancient philosophy and in modern scholarship. Cole writes:

For some scholars Protagoras is simply an hypocrite; a second group of interpreters makes him the victim of a kind of philosophical schizophrenia; a third assume that his doctrine was distorted and misunderstood by the vast majority of later commentators. According to the first theory, Protagoras was shrewd enough to realize that a frank avowal of his subjectivism would be unpopular, that he must always accommodate the character of his discourses to the prejudices and moral sensibilities of his audience. The Platonic Protagoras is, therefore, simply part of the public image which the doxographers' Protagoras sought to create for himself. The second theory regards the doxographers' Protagoras as an epistemologist unconcerned with drawing any practical conclusions from his theoretical investigations into the character of knowledge, thought, and discourse, and the Platonic Protagoras as a moralist and politician equally unconcerned with finding a theoretical justification for the practical programs he adopted or advised. The two halves of the tradition concerning him are therefore a reflection of two unconnected aspects of his thinking. The third theory requires us to believe that the doxographers misunderstood the man-measure principle—that the measure to which Protagoras referred was man the individual but some norm of human nature by which individual

⁶⁷ A.T. Cole [108] has denied that it is possible to reconstruct a coherent picture of Protagoras' doctrine.

⁶⁸ For a good sketch of the various interpretations of Protagoras, see Capizzi [6], 248-271, updated by F. Decleva-Caizzi ([114], 11-24).

peculiarities and aberrations as well as the entire content of man's experience might be measured and judged. It follows that the real Protagoras was the Platonic Protagoras—the Western world's first humanist rather than its first relativist.⁶⁹

What Cole says is true, but more recent works added more to this excellent picture of Protagorean studies. The most recent full treatment of Protagoras is the study of E. Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos. A study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1991). Although it is published under the heading 'Studies in Rhetoric/Communication', the aim of this book is to attempt to rescue Protagoras from the status of pure *rhetor*, which is often assigned to him. Through a deep analysis of the extant fragments, Schiappa shows the philosophical weight of Protagoras' philosophical positions, emphasising how they should be taken as an answer to the new cultural (political and educational) climate of the fifth century B.C. Another similar attempt to give Protagoras a philosophical density is made by Mario Untersteiner, in the section on Protagoras in his book, *I Sofisti* (1949, 2nd edition 1966). Despite an evident violence perpetrated on ancient Greek in some important translations,⁷⁰ his whole interpretation of Protagoras' philosophy is nevertheless a coherent one and not lacking a solid base. For the Italian scholar, the Sophist offers a sophisticated epistemology, in so far as he allows the trustworthiness of perceptual knowledge, while also thinking that there is a superior kind of knowledge, which develops and balances the purely perceptual one.⁷¹ Stelio Zeppi's *Protagora e la filosofia del suo tempo* (1961) is another book-length study on Protagoras, unjustly underestimated. The author attempts to build up a general reconstruction of Protagoras' philosophy, emphasising the inner coherence between the epistemological positions of the Sophist and the practical ones. One

⁶⁹ A.T. Cole [108], 20-21.

⁷⁰ Above all, see his rendering of 80DKB1: "l'uomo è dominatore di tutte le esperienze, in relazione alla fenomenalità di quanto è reale e alla nessuna fenomenalità di quanto è privo di realtà" (p. 65).

⁷¹ On Untersteiner's reconstruction of Protagoras' doctrine, see Kerferd [36], 21.

of the features of Zeppi's work that contrasts with Untersteiner's and Schiappa's is the reduction of Protagorean epistemology to a theory of sense-perceptions,⁷² which, however, does not seem to do full justice to the real Protagorean position on the matter.

These are the most recent book-length studies on Protagoras⁷³ and they offer the hope that the deeper one goes in excavating Protagoras, the more coherent his philosophy will turn out to be.⁷⁴ By contrast, when scholars are discussing the sophistic movement as a whole, or a single subject of Protagorean speculation, the result is (generally speaking) a kind of underestimation of the potential philosophical strength of Protagoras. Examples of this underestimation are H. Gomperz's *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (1912) and A. Levi's article *The Ethical and Social Thought of Protagoras*.⁷⁵ However, if we turn our attention from modern scholars to ancient interpreters (again, if we may call them that), we immediately understand that the ancient philosophers who dealt with Protagoras found in his doctrine strong philosophical positions, worthy of the highest consideration and presenting an extremely hard challenge. This was, at least, the position of Plato, who dealt with Protagoras in a much wider and deeper way than Aristotle, whose *Metaphysics* nonetheless

⁷² See Zeppi [76], 25-72. As Zeppi's studies are not well known, it may be useful to draw the reader's attention also to S. Zeppi [246], 143-158 ("Antifonte critico di Protagora"); [191], 337-344.

⁷³ There are two other recent studies on Protagoras' philosophy, but so far it has proved impossible for me to check them. Both of them are unpublished dissertations: V. Di Benedetto [19] and M. Gagarin [25].

⁷⁴ Unfortunately Protagoras cannot "stick up his head from below as far as the neck just here where we are" (*Tht.* 171d1) and say whose interpretation is the closest one to his philosophy.

⁷⁵ *Mind* 49 (1940), 284-301 ([219] in my bibliography). What is said above is obviously a rough generalisation, which nonetheless helps to give shape to the whole secondary literature through the dichotomy Protagoras coherent philosopher/Protagoras fake philosopher (orator, politician). Doubtless, there are relevant exceptions: Kerferd's book on the sophistic movement attributes many significant philosophical positions to Protagoras as well as to the other Sophists. Moreover, among the huge number of articles on Protagoras, many of them, although not offering a global view of his philosophy, expound the philosophical importance of Protagoras. See, for instance, the acute articles of M.F. Burnyeat on Protagoras ([93], [95], [98], [100]).

includes many critical references to Protagoras,⁷⁶ and than Sextus Empiricus, whose *Adversus Mathematicos* 7.60-64 and *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.216-218 are mainly about Protagoras' homo-mensura dictum.⁷⁷ The time for “il piacere” has now come.

1.4 Ancient Interpreters of Protagoras.

Plato, Aristotle and Sextus deal with Protagoras in different ways and, above all, with different intensity: Plato is doubtless the one who reserves for the Sophist the widest and deepest treatment. As has been briefly pointed out, the *Protagoras* is concerned with the problem whether virtue is teachable, the famous claim of all the Sophists and thus apparently of Protagoras, who, in such a dialogue, must face Socrates' objections on that issue. The *Theaetetus*, a Platonic dialogue on knowledge, has a large Protagorean section (152a-186e), which I claim to be by far the best source (if not the only serious one) for understanding Protagoras' (epistemological) positions.⁷⁸ It is not only the length of Plato's handling with Protagoras that makes it the most valuable source for an understanding of Protagoras' thinking; it is also the depth and the philosophical breath of this treatment that makes it the starting (and closing) point of any serious modern attempt to grasp the real meaning of Protagoras' philosophy. We are thus driven to face the real *punctum dolens* of the whole Protagorean (and Presocratic) question: is it the real Protagoras that we are

⁷⁶ For Protagoras in Aristotle, see *Metaph.* 3.2.997b32-998a5; 4.4.1007b18-23; 4.5.1009a6-17; 9.3.1046b29-1047a11; 10.1.1053a31-1053b3; 11.6.1062b13-19; *Po.* 19.1456b15-19; *Rh.* 2.24.1402a23-28; 3.5.1407b6-7; *SE* 14.173b17-25.

⁷⁷ There is another passage from Sextus, concerning Protagoras' on gods dictum, i.e. *M.* 9.55-56.

⁷⁸ The Protagorean section runs from *Tht.* 152a to 186e, i.e. 35 pages Stephanus out of 69 pages in total. There are two other relevant hints at Protagoras in the Platonic corpus, namely *Euthd.* 286b-c, and *Cra.* 385e-386d (429d, indirect reference). The Sophist is also mentioned in *Meno* 91d-e and *Hp.Ma.* 282d-e.

reading in Plato's dialogues, or Plato's Protagoras? Are we doomed always to see Protagoras through Plato's eyes, or may we have a chance, even a small one, of seeing him directly, as he really was, and understanding the real meaning of his (philosophical) ideas?⁷⁹

The question is hard to answer and the whole problem hard to solve. On the one hand, the extant Protagorean fragments are obscure in their almost oracular style and we do need ancient interpreters, who probably had read much more of Protagoras than is nowadays available, and to whose ears those short sentences would have sounded more meaningful than they sound for us today. On the other hand, if we listen to the voices of those ancient interpreters, we do not know how accurate and trustworthy their understanding of Protagoras was. In the case of Protagoras possible comparisons between Plato's, Aristotle's and Sextus' voices do not seem to provide any further help towards clarifying the situation. Plato's testimonies on Protagoras, in fact, appear to have strongly influenced those of Sextus, whose account of Protagorean positions betrays its origin in the *Theaetetus*.⁸⁰ For his part, Aristotle dealt with Protagoras only in a few places but, above

⁷⁹ The problem 'Plato or Protagoras' has been widely discussed but always as a part of an attempt to test the authenticity of some individual passages (the Great Speech in the *Protagoras*, the Defence in the *Theaetetus*, for instance) rather than in order to provide an overall description of Plato's whole treatment of Protagoras. This has been attempted by J.P. Maguire ([149], [222]) who on the one hand shows Plato's manipulation of Protagorean positions in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Protagoras* but who, on the other hand, recognises Plato as delivering a sufficiently trustworthy testimony. See also Farrar ([202], 53-98, especially 71-81), who considers the degree of authenticity in Plato's account higher than Maguire does.

⁸⁰ Although this is a controversial point, still there is evidence that Sextus' account, at least in *P.* 1.216-218, is based upon the *Theaetetus*. *Contra*, see Burnyeat [94], 46: "After Plato, however, in Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, and the later sources generally, Protagoras is understood rather differently: not as a relativist but as a subjectivist whose view is that every judgement is true *simpliciter*—true absolutely, not merely true for the person whose judgement it is." Recently, see P. Woodruff, "Rhetoric and relativism", in A.A. Long [41], 302-304; Untersteiner [71], 67-73. G. Cortassa ([110], 783 ff), attempts to demonstrate the existence of an ancient tradition that took Protagoras as a skeptic.

all, in a brief way and in order to focus his attention mainly on the logical consequences of some Protagorean ideas.⁸¹

It seems therefore that the problem is indeed hard to solve. Plato seems to be the only witness of Protagoras' thinking, the others depending upon him. Is Plato reliable, so far as Protagoras' philosophical positions are concerned? There seem to be some good reasons to think of Plato as a faithful witness to Protagoras' doctrine. For one thing, Plato seems to show a wide knowledge of Protagorean ideas, since *every* important extant fragment of Protagoras is either stated openly (as the homo-mensura fragment is) or hinted at in the Platonic corpus.⁸² On the other hand, relying upon the Platonic testimonies, one may reconstruct a picture of Protagoras' doctrine that is striking for its coherence—or so I shall claim.⁸³ These two elements, namely the (highly probably, wide) knowledge of

⁸¹ The problem about Aristotle's sources for Protagoras has not been faced by modern scholarship so far; in his handling of Protagoras, however, Aristotle seems to be independent of Plato (see Decleva-Caizzi [114], 30-31). *Contra*, see Maguire ([149], p. 122, n. 18), who writes: "If we cannot elicit it from here [namely the Defence of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*], we know nothing at all of Protagoras' 'epistemology', since Aristotle and Sextus contribute nothing of importance which could not have been derived from the *Theaetetus*."

⁸² 80BDK4 is hinted at at *Tht.* 162e1, while 80DKB6a is recalled at *Tht.* 154e1-2. The whole Defence of Protagoras may be read, I will claim below (pp. 70 ff) as a Platonic comment on 80DKB6a-b. For its part, *Euthd.* 285b-c may be taken as an hint at the problematic Impossible to Contradict dictum. As far as the educational fragments are concerned, all of them are variously echoed in *Prt.* 323c3-324d1; 325c5-326e5.

⁸³ It is important here to be more clear about the coherence I am ascribing to Plato's picture of Protagoras. As I shall hope to demonstrate in the following chapters, the reconstruction of Protagoras' doctrine one may propose from the reading of the *Theaetetus* and the *Protagoras* is a coherent one. At least, I hope to be providing an understandable picture of Protagoras' thinking from Plato's testimonies. This does not mean that such a picture will be so strong that it cannot be refuted, or that it will be complete in its details. Like any philosophical theory, the Protagorean picture one may draw from Plato will have its weakness and may have strong objections raised against it. But, again, it will be a coherent reconstruction, although different from the one Plato ascribes to Protagoras. That is, the coherence is double-sided: one person may say that this theory is coherent but false, whilst another that it is coherent and true. At any rate, the very fact that in dealing with Protagoras Plato has offered a reconstruction of his philosophy, together with a critique and (alleged) refutation, should not allow scholars to put the accent more on the *pars destruens* of Plato's handling of

Protagoras displayed by Plato and the inner (although as yet still to be proved) coherence of his portrait of Protagoras' doctrine, may allow us to say that Plato is more likely to be a trustworthy witness of Protagoras' philosophical positions than not.⁸⁴

We may become more confident that Plato is a trustworthy witness when we get closer to his own treatment of Protagoras (especially the one offered in the *Theaetetus*). In this dialogue, I claim, there are many hints that allow us to say that we are being faced with genuine Protagorean material. In our attempt to understand which material is really Protagorean, Plato himself—so I shall argue—will help us to see the Protagoras who is lying beneath his (Plato's) words. There are, in fact, reasons to say not only that Plato knows when he is reading Protagoras beyond the literal evidence of what Protagoras actually said, but also that Plato makes the reader aware of when that happens. An example of this Platonic approach toward Protagoras' thinking in the *Theaetetus* is the Flux-theory section,⁸⁵ where Plato is clear in implying that he is departing from Protagoras' own

Protagoras than on the *pars construens*. This underestimation of the *pars construens* of Plato's Protagoras is a rather common attitude in the secondary literature on Protagoras for two likely main reasons. First, Plato's attempt at refuting Protagoras (I mean, *Tht.* 170a3-171c7) is philosophically quite fascinating; secondly, the articles written about this alleged refutation are (if that is possible) more fascinating than Plato's own argument. On this last point, see the very influential and well-known article of M.F. Burnyeat on Protagoras' self-refutation in the *Theaetetus* ([93]), which has been followed by many other important articles on the subject (above all, see G. Fine [123], critical towards M.F. Burnyeat's article).

⁸⁴ On the high degree of authenticity of the Platonic Protagoras, see Burnyeat [94], 45: "According to Plato, whose account in the *Theaetetus* has by far the best claim to authenticity, this pronouncement [*sc.* the man-measure maxim] introduces a form of relativism."

⁸⁵ What I here call the Flux-theory section is *Tht.* 152d-157d. It has been emphasised by many scholars that the connection between Protagoras' homo-mensura thesis and the Flux-theory is made by Plato (see Cornford, *PTK*, 36 and J. Meier [155]). Nobody, at least to my knowledge, has pointed out instead that *Plato himself alludes* to the link between the two theories as something arbitrary (to some degree), established by himself. He seems to do that, I claim, when, just before expounding the Flux-theory, he refers to Protagoras as someone speaking in riddles (152c7-11), and again to his truth as a veiled truth (155d10). Generally speaking, Protagoras appears as a kind of obscure riddler, who needs an interpreter to be understood. Plato is suggesting that he is such an interpreter and delivers his own personal understanding of Protagoras' homo-mensura

positions and saying something Protagoras did not say (but that he thinks Protagoras would have shared or would have had to share).⁸⁶

Although there is no strong evidence that Plato is a reliable interpreter of Protagoras, it is more likely therefore that he is such than not. At any rate, we may understand when he is manipulating Protagoras' own positions for his own philosophical purposes. If we apply to him a Principle of Charity today so common in the field of philosophical studies, we may take Plato as the only ancient (and modern?) Protagorean interpreter who deserves serious attention from among those who long to reconstruct Protagoras' thinking.

1.5 The plan of the present work.

After this introductory chapter on Protagoras' life and fragments and on modern and ancient treatment of him, the real Protagorean *plous* starts. The next two chapters will have to do with Plato's treatment of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. As already said, this Platonic dialogue is by far the best source for any attempt to reconstruct Protagoras' epistemology and so the core of this work will be a close analysis of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*. Through such an analysis, I will try to provide an understandable and coherent

thesis, by connecting it with the Flux-theory. On this Platonic attitude and technique, see below, pp. 31-35 and J. Mansfeld [148], 136-7.

⁸⁶ A general technique that Plato displays when he is dealing with Protagoras is the following one. He first provides genuine Protagorean material, he then analyses it, and he lastly draws some philosophical consequences that contradict Protagoras' first asserted position. In doing so, Plato seems to suggest that Protagoras' theories, which may be taken as true at a first glance, drive us to accept some false consequences (ones Protagoras was not aware of) that thus affect the truth of those theories. Protagoras himself would therefore have accepted such absurd consequences, had he been a good enough philosopher to draw them for himself. On this Platonic technique, see below, pp. 39-40 and 110-113.

picture of Protagoras' doctrine that I will later assess as confirmed or not by the other Platonic dialogue devoted to Protagoras, the *Protagoras*. For the purposes of the epistemological aim of this work, the *Protagoras* will deserve less attention than the *Theaetetus*, its parts of interests for us being only the *Great Speech* and some other short passages. The final chapter will be a brief one, which draws some conclusions on Protagoras and Protagoras' epistemology.

It is now time start the very challenge with Plato and his Protagoras.

Thoughts are private, in the obvious but important sense in which property can be private, that is, belong to one person. And knowledge of thoughts is asymmetrical, in that the person who has a thought generally knows he has it in a way in which others cannot. But this is all there is to the subjective. So far from constituting a preserve so insulated that it is a problem how it can yield knowledge of an outside world, or be known to others, thought is necessarily part of a common public world. Not only can others often learn what we think by noting the casual dependencies that give our thoughts their content, but the very possibility of thought demands shared standards of truth and objectivity.¹

D. Davidson

The *Theaetetus* is a Platonic dialogue of such an extraordinary beauty and complexity that the reader is often captured by it. The dialogue itself deserves to be called a philosophical masterpiece, on the problem of knowledge, and there is no doubt that many of the epistemological problems that still trouble modern scholars nowadays have been put forward by Plato himself here, for the first time and with a striking clarity.

Although Burnyeat's and McDowell's recent works are quite impressive for the depth and breadth of their analysis of the whole dialogue,² the so-called Protagorean section³ has some shadow-areas still not lit by a full understanding. This partial failure to grasp the whole meaning of the Protagorean section is probably due to the nature of the approach made by scholars. They have tried to understand the role that such a digression plays in the economy of the whole dialogue, rather than reconstruct the (Platonic) picture of

¹ D. Davidson [255], 52.

² See Burnyeat, *Intr.*, and McDowell, *Commentary*. See also Cornford, *PTK*; Bostock [87] and L. Brown [89].

³ The dialogue, a discussion on knowledge between Socrates, Theaetetus and Theodorus, is 69 Stephanus pages long. The Protagorean section goes from 151e to 186e (35 pages, i.e. 51% of the whole dialogue), its core being 151e-179b.

Protagorean epistemology.⁴ The latter is the target of the following pages, the hope being that Plato's fascinating cleverness in argument will not prevent us from fully understanding the meaning of the Protagorean section.

2.1 *The Maxim as a Protagorean Theory of Perception.*

'The cow is there' said Ansell, lighting a match (...). He said again, 'She is there, the cow. There, now.'

'You have not proved it.' said a voice.

'I have proved it to myself.'

'I have proved it to myself that she isn't', said the voice. 'The cow is *not* there.'

'She's there for me,' he declared. 'I don't care whether she's there for you or not.'

⁴ According to Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 8-9), so far the scholar most sensitive to the Protagorean section, two alternative readings of *Tht.* 151e-184a are available. He writes: "To sum up this reading (call it reading A): perception is something of which Protagoras and Heraclitus give a true account. But nothing of which these theories are true can yield knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is not perception. Now for a rival reading (call it Reading B) (...) Plato does not accept the theories of Protagoras and Heraclitus. Theaetetus is made to accept them because, having defined knowledge as perception, he is faced with the question, What has to be true of perception and of the world for the definition to hold good? The answer suggested is that he will have to adopt a Protagorean epistemology, and that in turn will commit him to a Heraclitean account of the world (...). [Socrates] shows that the three-in-one theory they have elaborated (Theaetetus' first-born child) leads to multiple absurdities, culminating in a proof (179c-183e) that if the theory were true it would make language impossible. Thus the structure of the argument is that of a *reductio ad absurdum*: Theaetetus→Protagoras→Heraclitus→the impossibility of language. Hence Theaetetus' definition is impossible." Of course, "[These] are not the only possible interpretations". I find myself more inclined to accept Reading B, although for the present work establishing what material is really Protagorean in the *Theaetetus* is more essential than reconstructing Plato's own reasoning and its role in the economy of the whole dialogue. I take it that the latter may prejudice the former.

This short philosophical dialogue begins E.M. Forster's novel, *The Longest Journey*, and it may be read as a kind of introduction to or summing up (though literary) of the first part of the Protagorean section (151e-160e). Protagoras comes into the dialogue for the first time at 151e8. His maxim is quoted and briefly explained (151e8-152c6), then a Theory of Flux follows as a sort of ontological basis for the maxim (152c7-153d6). Lastly, a quite complicated and problematic Theory of Perception is expounded, with the claim that it expresses the most genuine meaning of Protagoras' maxim (153d7-160e4).⁵

After Theaetetus' statement that knowledge is perception, Socrates recalls Protagoras, saying that he meant the same when he affirmed that

πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι,
τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not (Burnyeat/Levetz translation, modified).⁶

Socrates offers, as a kind of explanation of such an obscure statement,

ὡς οἷα μὲν ἕκαστα ἐμοὶ φαίνεται τοιαῦτα μὲν ἔστιν ἐμοί, οἷα δὲ σοί,
τοιαῦτα δὲ αὖ σοί· ἄνθρωπος δὲ σύ τε καὶ γώ

that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you—you and I each being a man⁷

⁵ On this first part of the Protagorean section, above all see M. Matthen [151]. See also M.F. Burnyeat [93]; R.M. Dancy [113]; G. Fine [121].

⁶ 152a3-4, deleting Burnet's quotation marks.

In order to make Theaetetus understand Protagoras' dictum more clearly, Socrates delivers the famous example of the wind.⁸ The same wind can be perceived in two different and opposite ways—it can be cold for me and not-cold (warm) for you, or very cold for me and slightly cold for you. Therefore, the wind is to us, as each of us perceives it.⁹

⁷ 152a6-8. This may be taken as a further Protagorean quotation, rather than Socrates' explanation of Protagoras' maxim. See McDowell (*Commentary*, 119) where he takes it as a further Protagorean quotation because of the similar wording at *Cra.* 386a1-3; see also Cornford, *PTK*, p. 32, n.1 and Maguire [149], 137.

⁸ This example is usually taken as Protagorean. See J. Mansfeld [148], 134, where he lists those scholars who think the wind-example is Protagorean (on the other hand, Mansfeld thinks it is not). See also Maguire [149], 120; G.B. Kerferd [138], 21.

⁹ 152b1-152c3. On the passage, see McDowell (*Commentary*, 120), where he writes: "I take the argument of this passage to be as follows. Generalizing what Protagoras says about the case of the wind, we obtain the following principle (not explicitly stated): (1) If something appears *f* to someone, then it is *f* for him (for appropriate substitutions for *f*). Now in the case of predicates of the appropriate sort: (2) Something's appearing *f* to someone is the same thing as his perceiving that thing as being *f* [...]. From (1) and (2) we infer: (3) If someone perceives something as being *f*, then it is *f* for him."

The problem concerning the real ontological status of the wind is summarised by Cornford, *PTK*, 33-36 (see also G.B. Kerferd [138], 21-22 and McDowell, *Commentary*, 121). Socrates asks: "in that case are we going to say that the wind itself is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras and say it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold?" (152b6-8). Two possible interpretations of the position here attributed to Protagoras are available: (1) the wind in itself is cold and warm (that is, not-cold), or (2) the wind in itself is neither cold nor warm (not-cold). (1) is perfectly consistent with the maxim. As Cornford puts it, "'Warm' and 'cold' are two properties which can co-exist in the same physical object. I perceive the one, you perceive the other. 'The wind is cold *to me*' means that the cold is the property that appears to me or affects me, though it is not the property that appears to or affects you. To say simply that 'the wind is cold' would naturally be taken to imply that it is not warm. But in fact it is both; so you add 'to me', meaning that I am aware of that property, though you are aware of the other" (*PTK*, 33-34). (2) is consistent with Protagoras' maxim as well (see again Cornford, *PTK*, p. 34, n.1). It looks however too close to (be a consequence of) the Theory of Flux (which Plato is going to deliver and which *he* claims to be the ontological background of the epistemology of Protagoras (see below). Maguire offers a third answer that seems to me the best one. He writes: "The fact is, however, that the formula itself says nothing about the nature of the object. It denies the existence of a knowable thing-in-itself, the same for all, but its emphasis is all on the knowability (...). [Protagoras'] point would have been neither that the wind in itself is both warm and cold, nor that it is neither warm nor cold; but simply that the condition of the external object does not change, and yet it is perceived differently by different percipients and therefore *is* different (for them)" ([149], 120).

It is generally agreed among scholars that all this may be taken as genuine Protagorean material:¹⁰ the maxim, the explanation of it in 152a6-8, and the example of the wind lead us into the first rudiments of Protagoras' epistemology. Up to this point, the maxim has been read as referring to perception only, namely to sense-perceptions: I know what appears (*phainetai*) to me, and what appears to me is what I perceive through my senses (*aisthanomai*); Socrates himself says as much when he proposes that "*phainetai aisthanesthai estin*" (152b12). Such a reading of the maxim seems to be reasonably Protagorean and Plato does not look to have been too cavalier in dealing with Protagoras up to this point.¹¹ We may infer Plato's awareness of being so far a reliable witness of Protagorean things from his following warning about what he calls Protagoras' Secret Doctrine.

2.2 Protagoras' Secret Doctrine: a Heraclitean Theory of Flux and a Platonic Theory of Perception.

After introducing the maxim and the example of the wind, Socrates expounds a Heraclitean Theory of Flux, which he claims to be the real ontological background of Protagoras' epistemological formula. He begins his new discourse by calling the Theory of Flux he is going to deliver a 'Secret Doctrine' of Protagoras: "Was Protagoras one of those omniscient people? Did he perhaps put this out as a riddle for the common crowd of us,

¹⁰ For the maxim, see above, pp. 7-8; on 152a6-8, see above, p. 30, n. 7; on the example of the wind, see the previous footnote.

¹¹ Some scholars (Maguire [149], especially 116-17; McDowell, *Commentary*, 119-120; G. Fine [121], 213-214) give emphasis to the narrowing of the meaning of *phainomai* effected in this first part of the Protagorean section. Here the verb is taken in its strict perceptual sense of 'to perceive through the senses', leaving aside its other main meaning of 'to appear to the mind', 'to be mentally manifest' (*LSJ*, s.v.; Annas-Barnes [80], 23).

while he revealed the truth as a secret doctrine to his own pupils?" (Burnyeat/Levetz translation modified).¹² Socrates' actual word is "*einixato*" and the verb *ainissomai* means 'to speak darkly or in riddles'.¹³ As Jaap Mansfeld has pointed out, "riddles, just as oracles, are ambiguous statements admitting of several interpretations, i.e. a first and perhaps obvious (...) and a second, by far less obvious."¹⁴

In other words, Plato is likely to be saying this: Protagoras' maxim is a riddle and, being such, it may have many interpretations. The first available is that already offered, a literal and 'simple' one (probably Protagoras' elucidation of his own words or, at least, something very close to it). But then a second interpretation, less simple and more far-seeing, which will show the wider philosophical implications of Protagoras' maxim (implications he was not aware of) and which I (Plato) am going to deliver. In this way, Plato is warning his readers that Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, i.e. the Theory of Flux along with the Theory of Perception developed hereafter, is *his own* interpretation of Protagoras' epistemological formula.¹⁵

¹² Ἐὰρ' οὖν πρὸς χαρίτων πάσσοφός τις ἦν ὁ Πρωταγόρας, καὶ τοῦτο ἡμῖν μὲν ἠνίξατο τῷ πολλῷ συρφετῷ, τοῖς δὲ μαθηταῖς ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔλεγεν; (152c8-11).

¹³ *LSJ*, s.v.

¹⁴ Mansfeld [148], 136. In this part of the Protagorean section, Socrates refers to oracular language on two other occasions: at 154d10, when he speaks of "veiled truth", and at 156a3, where he speaks of "mysteries".

¹⁵ This seems to strengthen the suggestion that the previous and first reading of the maxim is genuinely Protagorean in its core. See *contra* Mansfeld [148], 137-8. From the same remark about Plato's oracular allusions, Mansfeld and I curiously reach opposite views on the authenticity of the example of the wind and, generally speaking, of the first reading of the maxim. Mansfeld's comment, according to which "if the true account of Protagoras' principle is nothing but interpretation, then also the earlier elucidation by means of the example of the perceived wind *possibly* (my emphasis) is nothing but *interpretation*" (137), does not seem to me to be conclusive. Nothing prevents us from assuming that when he delivers the first reading of the maxim, Plato offers an interpretation of it but the Protagorean interpretation, i.e. Protagoras' elucidation of his own words. Such an elucidation may perhaps be supposed to be too obvious and too simplistic to Plato's eyes so that Socrates, a kind of philosophical Pythia, was nearly forced by his divine mission to make Protagoras and his followers aware of essential philosophical consequences they could not see.

There is no doubt, in fact, that the claim that Protagoras taught his pupils this Secret Doctrine is a Platonic claim, first and more importantly because of Plato's own admission that he is interpreting, but also because we have no historical evidence whatsoever that Protagoras shared with Homer, Heraclitus, Empedocles and others a kind of Theory of Flux.¹⁶ This Secret Doctrine seems to be nothing other than the theory according to which “nothing is anything or any kind of thing. What is really true, is this: the things of which we naturally say that they 'are', are in process of coming to be, as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say they 'are', since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be” (152d-e). Drawing such a connection between Protagoras' epistemological position and the Theory of Flux, Plato makes Socrates develop a Theory of Perception that might show the real philosophical consequences of Protagoras' maxim. That is, the dissolution of physical objects into perceived ideas as well as of the self into a series of perceptions, the impossibility of deciding the epistemological priority between dreams and real life, finally the impossibility of having a language at all.¹⁷

After a preparatory passage where Socrates makes some connections between the human eye, motion and colour,¹⁸ he then turns back to Protagoras' theory, to “discover the veiled truth in the thought of a great man [*sc.* Protagoras]—or perhaps I should say, of great men.”¹⁹ According to Socrates, Protagoras' theory is consistent with the Flux-principle,

¹⁶ As Plato, or rather his Socrates, claims (152e2-6). The Protagorean fragment 80DKB2, according to which Protagoras wrote a book entitled *On Being* against “those who propose being as one” (see above, p. 16), looks to be a testimony too weak to infer that Protagoras was a Heraclitean. On the unanimity of scholarship about the falsity of this claim, see McDowell, *Commentary*, 120-121; Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 12; Dancy [113], and above, p. 24, n. 85. On the two different versions of Heracliteanism one may find in the *Theaetetus*, see G. Fine [121], 224-226.

¹⁷ For the claim that the Theory of Flux makes language impossible, see 179d-183b.

¹⁸ 153d-154d.

¹⁹ 155d9-11. Before getting to the actual (for him) core of Protagoras' theory, Plato speaks again of oracular allusions, of a 'veiled truth'. Once more, his readers need to be reminded that what will follow is his own understanding of Protagoras' words.

which states that “there is nothing but motion” and that “motion has two forms (...) distinguished by their powers, the one being active and the other passive.” Then, “through the intercourse and mutual friction of these two there comes to be an offspring infinite in multitude, but always twin births, on the one hand what is perceived (*aistheton*), on the other, the perception of it (*aisthesis*), the perception in every case being generated together with what is perceived and emerging along with it.”²⁰

In the light of this Theory of Perception, a link between the object of the perception and the perceiver is established, such a link making the object knowable for the perceiver and the object be perceived by a subject. All this, however, is nothing but temporary, limited to the very moment when these two elements, the object and the perceiver, come across each other. The object (with its particular features at time t_1) and the perceiver (with his particular features at the same time t_1) create an occasional and temporary connection. At a different time, say t_2 , the object and the perceiver necessarily change their features in a way that the perception he now has of the object is different from before (now he perceives the object as cold while before the object was warm for him).²¹ Furthermore, at t_2 the object may be perceived as cold by one perceiver and hot by another, in such a way that the appearances they respectively have of the object are different, ‘conflicting’.²²

²⁰ 156a5-b1. I will not go into the details and the further development of this fascinating Theory of Perception (on which see *Thi.* 156c-157a and Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 16-18) because it is only marginally relevant to our topic. It is worth emphasising, however, that Socrates includes what we nowadays call feelings in the category of perceptions: “For the perceptions we have such names as sight, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling hot; also what are called pleasures and pains, desires and fears, and there are others besides” (156b2-6). It is assumed, therefore, that when we speak of perceptions in this chapter and in the following ones, we mean sense-perceptions, but also feelings.

²¹ 154a3-8. Here Socrates speaks of differences in terms of sense-perceptions among different men (or of sense-perceptions of a single man at different times) and between men and animals. On this standard sceptical issue, see S.E., *P.*, 1.40-89.

²² On the problem of Conflicting Appearances in Ancient philosophy, see M. Burnyeat [98]; G. Fine [122]. As for the suggestion that Conflicting Appearances may be not a problem, see below, pp. 45-6.

In other words, “[the perceiver] must necessarily become percipient of something when [he] become[s] percipient (...). And it [*sc.* the object] again, when it becomes sweet or bitter or anything of that kind, must become so for somebody.”²³ If this statement is true, the object becomes knowable only for the one who is perceiving it at a particular time, so that the object is dissolved into a series of perceived ideas.²⁴ The perceiver, on the other hand, is in motion (like the object of his perception) and has different perceptions at different times, but every perception is private to him and unerring (being the perception of what *is* for him at that very moment).²⁵ In this way, the perceiver may be described as having a series of different perceptions, without any criteria to decide the epistemological priority among them: if this is the case, how may he say that the perception he has when he is dreaming are false? Or that the perceptions he has when he is ill are less legitimate than those he has when he is healthy? There is nothing to show that the states of being awake and healthy are, epistemologically speaking, superior to the states of being asleep and ill. Man is thus nothing more than the series of his unerring perceptions.²⁶

For the first time in the history of philosophy, we find here a clear focus on the problem of Personal Identity.²⁷ If the world “out there” is nothing more than a vast array of processes where the object of our perception as well as ourselves is always in motion and if we know something when we perceive it, the sole epistemological criterion we seem to

²³ 160a8-b1. For a further development of this fascinating Theory of Perception, see 182a-e.

²⁴ I owe this Berkeleyan remark to M. Burnyeat [100].

²⁵ “Then my perception is true for me—because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not (...). How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought about what is – or what is coming to be—how can I fail to be a knower of the things of which I am a perceiver?” (160c7-13).

²⁶ On dreams/real life, see 157e-158d (of course, see S.E., *P.*, 1-100-109). On the perennial appeal of this problem, see especially J.L. Austin [249], 42 and N. Malcolm [268]. On illness/health, 159b-159e; on false perceptions and beliefs, 158a1 and b2.

²⁷ On Personal Identity before Plato, see Epich. 23DKB2. On this issue in Ancient philosophy, see C. Gill [259]; D. Sedley [277]; M.M. McCabe [270].

have for defining ourselves and our personal identity over time is our perception, at the only and very moment we are having it.²⁸ This is the real meaning of Protagoras' *homomensura maxim*, says Socrates (160b-c), after discussing with Theodorus the example of himself being ill and healthy. If the number of active and passive factors in the process of becoming is infinite and if such factors mixed together may generate different things on every occasion, it may well happen that we will have two different Socrateses at two different times, one ill and the other healthy. Let us think of Socrates drinking wine. If the sense object finds him healthy, the wine Socrates is drinking will taste sweet to him; on the other hand, if the sense object finds Socrates ill, the perception generated will be bitterness.²⁹ Everything being in motion and changing, what remains certain in this inevitable process is that "our being is, by Necessity's decree, tied to a partner; yet we are tied neither to any other thing in the world nor to our respective selves."³⁰

We are not tied to "our respective selves": here a problem is raised concerning our identity over time, and we can find no criterion³¹ for allowing us to say we are the same persons over time. If we try to see a kind of physical continuity between Socrates now and Socrates later, we will have trouble since Socrates' body as well as his brain are involved in the process of becoming (to this extent, Socrates is like all the other objects "out there" in

²⁸ Burnyeat, *Intr*, 19.

²⁹ 159a-e.

³⁰ 160b5-7.

³¹ With 'criterion' here I mean what Parfit meant in Parfit [275], 202: "Many writers use the ambiguous phrase 'the criterion of identity over time'. Some mean by this 'our way of telling whether some present object is identical with some past object'. But I shall mean *what this identity necessarily involves, or consists in*". It may be useful to remind the reader of the two commonest criteria used nowadays (at least, in analytic philosophy) for stating one's personal identity over time: roughly speaking, physical (or bodily) continuity and psychological (or inner) continuity. The first criterion is defended by Reductionists like Wiggins [282] and Williams [280]. The psychological criterion was put forward first by Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, chapter 27) and is nowadays defended by H.P. Grice [261]; A. Quinton [273] and, to some extent, by Shoemaker [278] and Parfit [275].

the world). To quote Parfit's example (which recalls the *Sorites Argument*),³² Socrates may be thought of as a heap of "something" that the process of becoming keeps altering in such a way that there will be a point in such a process where Socrates is a new Socrates, a different person.³³

If, on the other hand, we try to find a kind of psychological continuity between the two Socrateses, we are faced with similar problems. The psychic life of Socrates seems to be atomised into a series of moments, each one independent of every other, just as each is characterised by its own peculiar perception. Since it is memory that makes us aware of our own continued existence over time and therefore it is memory that mostly provides psychological continuity, we might say that in one's psychic life each moment may be related to another through memory. In our Protagorean case, however, the psychic life of Socrates is so fragmented that memory itself appears to be too weak to guarantee a trustworthy link between the different and atomised psychic moments of such a life.

Perception (at the very moment he is having it) therefore seems to be the only certainty Socrates has in the perennial flux of things. In order to do its job of providing a criterion of identity over time, memory for its part needs to be able to bring back now the very same perceptions Socrates had in the past. That is, if six months ago Socrates felt a strong pain, say, because of breaking up with his girlfriend, memory should be able to bring back for him the same pain he had six months ago. To put it in a paradoxical way, he should be able to cry now the same tears he cried six months ago. It is hard, however, to concede such a power to memory, which seems to be able to make us remember

³² On the *Sorites Argument*, what in Latin is called *Acervalis ratiocinatio*, on whether there is a point at which a heap of something is or ceases to be a heap, see Cic. *Acad.* 2.28, 92 ff and D.L. 2.108; 8.82.

³³ See Parfit [275], 232-3. Whether there is a point at which one thing or person ceases to be the same thing or person it/he was before is a problem widely discussed in the philosophy of Personal Identity: see R.M. Chisholm [254]. Parfit denies that such a point exists or, at least, may be known (*ibidem*).

experiences we had in the past but not to live these experiences again.³⁴ The very same point about this limitation of memory seems to be hinted at by Protagoras himself at 166b, where the Sophist is complaining of the way Socrates has questioned Theaetetus about the meaning and consequences of his (Protagoras') own maxim. Recalling a short dialogue that Socrates and Theaetetus have previously had about memory and knowledge, Protagoras states: "Now, to begin with, do you expect someone to grant you that a man's present memory of something which he has experienced in the past but is no longer experiencing is the same sort of experience as he then had? That is very far from being true."³⁵ Protagoras seems to be right in stressing such a limitation on memory; nonetheless in the Protagorean world so far described memory needs to be that kind of powerful memory if we want it as a criterion for guaranteeing personal identity over time. Memory can be nothing less than that: if perception is what matters and provides us with our identity, memory needs to be able to recreate wholly our past perception in the present. If it is able to do that, the "pieces" of our identity (i.e. those provided by our perceptions) may be unified into a whole that still retains the Protagorean truthfulness of every single affection of ours.³⁶

Neither the physical nor the psychological criterion seems to be providing a good solution for the problem of Personal Identity in the Protagorean world as so far described. Nothing better comes from the Cartesian suggestion that there might be a kind of

³⁴ On memory in the *Theaetetus*, see 163d-164b and, above all, 191a-195b (the Wax Block Section). See also, and obviously, August., *Confessiones*, liber X.

³⁵ 166b1-4. As for the Greek, the passage presents some problems well defined by Rowe *et alii* [164].

³⁶ Again, Parfit [275], 262-63, suggests a fascinating alternative view on this aspect: what matters is not the very fact that now we are (at least, to some respect) the same person we were one week ago. What really matters is the holding of a psychological connectedness or continuity between two different stages of one's life, in a way that I am now psychologically continuous with a person who may be me but also somebody else. To quote Parfit: "I call this the view that personal identity is what matters. This is the natural view. The rival view is that personal identity is not what matters. I claim: what matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or continuity, with the right kind of cause. Since it is more controversial, I add, as a separate claim: in an account of what matters, the right kind of cause could be any cause" (p. 215).

immaterial entity that has continued existence over time, call it soul or whatever of a “spiritual” sort you like.³⁷ There is no hint at all in the Protagorean section of the *Theateteus* up to this point that Protagoras spoke of a soul; moreover, the Theory of Perception so far built up seems to suggest that even if there is a soul, it is nothing compared to our perceptions. That is, Socrates’ psychic life is the history of his sense-perceptions and feelings and that is enough, nothing more fundamental lying behind these affections. The absence of such an entity beyond simple affections is the radical criticism that Plato puts forward when he tries to refute the thesis that knowledge is perception.³⁸ In glossing the *Theaetetus*, moreover, Diogenes says that for Protagoras the soul is nothing more than perceptions.³⁹ So it seems that Protagoras was supposed by Plato and ancient commentators to underestimate the importance of the soul as well as misunderstanding the essential role such an entity plays in the process of knowledge. *Rebus sic stantibus*, in the Protagorean world so far pictured Socrates does not have any criterion for stating his personal identity over time and he is therefore left with his self dissolved into the series of his unerring and private perceptions.

This anticipation of the very modern problem of Personal Identity may prove so attractive to the reader that he is likely to forget that it all seems to be a purely Platonic interpretation of Protagoras’ epistemological maxim and that Protagoras seems not to have any epistemological need of the Heraclitean Theory. Plato here sets forth a theory of Flux that he claims to be the ontological basis of Protagoras’ formula. But not only is the Theory of Flux, along with the Platonic Theory of Perception, inessential to Protagoras’ maxim, but it may also be read as *contradicting* Protagoras’ dictum. As briefly pointed out, the Theory of Flux will turn out to make language impossible and, if everything is in motion, Socrates

³⁷ See Descartes’s *Meditations* (especially the first, the second and the sixth).

³⁸ See 184b-186e. On this passage, see J.M. Cooper [109].

³⁹ See D.L. 9.51. See also Socrates’ remark at 184d, where man is compared to a Wooden Horse with a number of senses sitting inside us, without any “single form, soul or whatever one ought to call it, to which all these converge.”

makes clear that we cannot use the verb 'to be'. We cannot say 'A is B' because by the time we have said 'A is B', both A and B are something different. In other words, in order to allow 'A is B' to be true, A should be stably B but, according to the Theory of Flux, this is impossible: we cannot say 'A is B' because it is *false* that 'A is B'.⁴⁰ The Theory of Flux therefore entails the falsity of 'to be'. But this move seems not to be allowed by Protagoras' maxim. Declaring that "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you", the maxim states a sort of impossibility of objective truths and falsehoods, but still allows for a kind of truth (i.e. for each perceiver).⁴¹ That is, it proclaims a kind of epistemological incorrigibility that is not consistent with the Theory of Flux (as it has been understood here). That the Theory of Flux is at least epistemologically inessential for Protagoras' maxim seems to be recognised by Plato himself, in so far as, when he attempts to refute the Heraclitean Theory of Flux and Protagoras' maxim, he needs two different refutations, at two different times. Strictly speaking, the refutation of one of the two does not logically imply the refutation of the other.⁴²

⁴⁰ I owe much of this reasoning to R.M. Dancy [113], 84-5.

⁴¹ Dancy ([113], 64) calls this epistemological position 'Incorrigibility'.

⁴² Plato's attempt to refute Protagoras' maxim begins at 170a and stops at 171d (on this attempt, see the articles quoted below, p. 101, n. 50). The refutation of the Theory of Flux, for its part, begins at 179d and stops at 183b. On the logical friction between Protagoras' epistemological position and the Heraclitean theory of Flux, see G. Fine [121], 222: "If Protagoras denies that there are any absolute truths, either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere, then there is no need for him to appeal to an ontology of change to solve the problem of conflicting appearances. For denying that there are any absolute truths dissolves the problem all on its own: the seeming conflict disappears once it is explained that the seemingly conflicting utterances are merely relative truths (...). Nor does relativism about truth carry with it a commitment to a Heraclitean ontology or to any other ontology. Indeed, so far from being committed to a view about how the world is, relativism about truth denies that there is an absolute truth about how the world is. Not only, then, does relativism about truth not imply (H) (*sc.* The Theory of Flux), and not only does it not need to appeal to (H) in its support, but, more strongly, (H) actually seems to conflict with relativism about truth. For (H) takes it to be an absolute truth that the world is in constant change, whereas relativism about truth denies that there are any absolute truths."

2.3 'Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy'.

Leaving aside the (Platonic) Theory of Flux and taking into account the little but reasonably certain Protagorean material found at the very beginning of the Protagorean section, we may then build up a coherent and reasonable picture of Protagorean epistemology. If it is true that "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you", the main feature of Protagorean epistemology seems to be that of talking about the knowability of things and states of affairs more than about their ontological status.⁴³ From an ontological point of view, then, Protagoras is very unlikely to have denied the existence of the world "out there".⁴⁴ Were all this correct, it would be not unfair to sum up Protagoras' position this way: there is a real world of public objects⁴⁵ out there and I do not assume this world is in motion or stable, such a problem being of no interest for me. This world is perceived by different perceivers (and by the same perceiver, at different times) in different ways (according to their variable dispositions),⁴⁶ each of

⁴³ See Maguire [149], 120.

⁴⁴ As Myles Burnyeat has pointed out ([100], 32), one of the main features of Greek philosophy is its belief in the existence of a world "out there". "Greek philosophy is perfectly prepared to think that reality may be entirely different from what we ordinarily take it to be (...). It may be that each of us lives in his own private reality, as Protagoras, had he seen as far as Plato should have said (...). But all these [Greek] philosophers, however radical their scrutiny of ordinary belief, leave untouched - indeed they rely upon - the notion that we are deceived or ignorant about *something*. There is a reality of some sort confronting us; we are in touch with something (...)." See also Matthen [151], 35.

⁴⁵ On public objects/private truths, see Matthen [151], 48-57; contra see G. Fine [121], 226.

⁴⁶ If it is true that Greek philosophy tends to "leave untouched (...) the notion that we are deceived or ignorant about *something*", it is true as well that it mainly works on the conditions of the perceiving subject, in order to make sense of the problem of Conflicting Appearances. If I feel A as sweet while you feel it as bitter, this means that you and I have two different dispositions (*hexeis*). In this first part of the Protagorean section, Socrates seems to have emphasised more the side of the percipient than that of the object (158e-160a deals with two different Socrateses, the one ill and the other healthy). As we will see, in his Defence (166a-168c5) Protagoras himself will stress the disposition of the percipient, claiming that the sophist can change such

these different perceptions being a private appropriation of public objects (let us say a private truth about a public object).⁴⁷ The privacy of these appropriations makes all them equally legitimate and equally true: the wind we are now perceiving is warm for me and hot for you, and that is all.

As far as perceptions are concerned therefore, the perceiver always knows what he perceives and this knowledge is private to him and unerring. This epistemological position, which it is better not to label,⁴⁸ requires effort to refute, since it is hard to say that my perceptions and feelings are not true for me. If I taste the wine I am drinking as sweet, I am allowed to say 'This wine is sweet for me' nor can anybody tell me I am wrong in tasting the wine as sweet. Plato himself seems to have been aware of the strength of this position.

dispositions (when they are bad and unhealthy for the people who are having them). Thus, it seems perfectly reasonable to say that Protagoras gives emphasis to the conditions of the perceiver more than to the object of the perception. Medical writers, who were flourishing in his time and were very much concerned with changing the *hexis* of their patients, may have influenced him. On this alleged influence, see Maguire [149], 121 (n.14 for references to Greek medical texts): "For Protagoras, the phenomena may be as stable as one pleases. For him, all that need change is the disposition (*hexis*) of the percipient (and that not as a continual flux); and to substantiate this he had no need to go to Flux-theory (which he no doubt rejected along with all other speculation) but only to medical writers."

⁴⁷ The privacy of which we are talking here is different from the one Socrates deals with when he delivers the Theory of Flux. A perception may be private for the perceiver if (1) there is a common and public object and the perceiver perceives it in a way that depends upon his personal and momentary dispositions. Or (2) not only the varying dispositions of different perceivers make these different perceivers have different perceptions but also the object of the perception itself is different for different perceivers, nothing common and public being out there to be perceived (for example, because everything is in motion). The privacy we are ascribing here to Protagoras is the first kind of privacy (whilst Socrates, in expounding the Heraclitean Theory of Flux, is more concerned with the second one).

⁴⁸ I will not attempt here to label this epistemological position. Protagoras has been called relativist, pragmatist, realist, subjectivist, infallibilist, and more. To avoid the details of such an empty labelling, it is better to grasp the real philosophical Protagorean position than to classify it. Just to give names to the labelling mentioned above: Protagoras is a relativist for R. Bett [84], a pragmatist for Schiller in his *Studies in Humanism*, an "extreme realist" for E.R. Dodds (*The Ancient Concept of Progress*, Oxford 1973, 95), a subjectivist for M.F. Burnyeat ([94], 45-6) and Dancy ([113], 64-67), an infallibilist for G. Fine ([121], [122]).

Before refuting the Theory of Flux, at the end of the Protagorean section, he makes Socrates say that “so long as we keep within the limits of that immediate present experience of the individual which gives rise to perceptions and to perceptual judgements, it is more difficult to convict these latter of being untrue (...). Perhaps it is not possible to convict them at all; perhaps those who profess that they are perfectly evident and are always knowledge may be saying what really is.”⁴⁹

Such a position of epistemological self-sufficiency⁵⁰ may be misleadingly thought of as implying a kind of solipsism. One might infer from such a position that I am the sole existent in this world and that I cannot have either any real clue about other people’s sensations and beliefs or any possibility of communicating (substantially) with them. Solipsism, however, does not seem to follow from the epistemological position I have ascribed to Protagoras. Think of this case, for instance. I have been out for a while during a cold winter day, without my gloves. I am now at home, washing my hands before dinner; my sister is beside me, waiting her turn. The water appears to me very hot indeed and I can not stand it so I tell my sister to wash her hands first because the water is too hot for me. She does that and, turning her face, replies: “Too hot? This water is too cold, actually.” That water has caused different perceptions in my sister and me and it is true that I feel the water hot while my sister has the opposite perception of the same water. This does not imply however that I do not *understand* her comment about the coldness of the water. I perceive the water differently from her but still I can understand that she has a different perception and what kind of perception she has.

⁴⁹ 179c2-d1; see also 171d9-172b7. Some scholars have read this remark, along with the whole Theory of Flux section, as something expressing Plato's own position about the sensible world. Above all, see G. Nakhnikian, "Plato's Theory of Sensation", *Review of Metaphysics* 9 (1955/56), 129-148; 306-327 and Luc Brisson, "Plato's Theory of sense-perceptions in the *Timaeus*: how it works and what it means", *BACAP* 13 (1997), 147-176.

⁵⁰ See 169d5-6, where Plato calls this position 'autarkic': "Now let us see whether we were right or wrong in holding it to be a defect in this theory that it made every man self-sufficient in wisdom."

This point about understanding others' perceptions seems to be true also if we consider feelings, which Socrates himself includes in the category of perceptions.⁵¹ Think of darkness, for instance, and the feelings it may cause. I am in my room, around midnight, almost in complete darkness, looking at the moon through my open window. I like the dark, as it makes me feel relaxed and quiet; I am enjoying it. My friend, who was reading in the other room, suddenly comes into my room to say goodnight. As soon as she comes in, she asks if she can turn the light on. She says that she is not comfortable in the dark because it makes her anxious and insecure; she is frightened by the dark. Thus, the dark produces two different feelings: I am happy with it, my friend has fear of it.

Epistemologically speaking, she is perfectly right when she says that her perception of fear is private and true for her. I am not feeling the fear she is suffering from the darkness we are both facing nor am I allowed to say that her perception is wrong (I can feel her being uncomfortable). However, such privacy in her perception of fear, along with its being unerring, does not prevent me from understanding that my friend is feeling fear. Although in the same situation I am having a quite different perception (which is mine and true for me), nonetheless I am able to understand that something different from my perception is going on in my friend's soul. I think I can have such an understanding for two main reasons. First, I do know the sensation we are used to calling 'fear', since I have had fear many times in my life (for instance, being myself a runner, I experience fear every time I run competitively) and I can remember such a sensation. Then, I can recognise the signs of fear in somebody else, according to what he or she says and does, from the expressions of his or her face, from many other signals.

I am therefore able to understand my sister's remark about the coldness of water as well as my friend's feeling when she is in the dark. It seems that we have a *real* understanding of each other's inner life: when a person is told about other people's

⁵¹ See above, p. 34, n. 20.

experiences he does understand what they are telling him.⁵² This happens—I argue—because we speak the same public language and cannot construct and use a private language for defining things and state of affairs. We may have a private perceptual world, where we store our perceptions and feelings, but we can not pretend to have our own language for describing such a private world.⁵³ If we now turn back to the picture we have drawn of Protagoras' epistemology so far, two things seem to be public in the perceptual process. That is, the object that the perceiver perceives is “out there” and therefore public;

⁵² A more precise statement would be “when a person is told about other people’s experiences, more or less he understands what they are telling him.” That is, I am pretty aware of the many misunderstandings that occur in our daily life, but I do not think that that such misunderstandings occur affects my argument here. Our daily experience tells us that we misunderstand each other, but also that we understand each other. I claim that such an understanding is made possible by the reasons I am now illustrating in the main text.

⁵³ This is not the right place to be detailed on such a point. Of course, on the impossibility of having a private language for defining our own inner world, see L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 241 ff (on this epistemological issue, above all see the brilliant book by Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rule and Private Language*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981). The Principle of Charity allows us to suggest that Protagoras might agree with those affirming the public inevitable dimension of language. Although there is no historical evidence of Protagoras sharing this thesis, it seems that we have some small evidence for claiming that he was very much concerned about language. Diogenes (9.53) reports that Protagoras was the first in antiquity who classified the different part of language; Diogenes insists on Protagoras’ attention to language and linguistic activities (*ibid.*, 52) and we will see shortly Protagoras claiming to be able to change a bad and unsatisfactory man’s condition into a better state by means of *logoi* (167a5-6). Apart from these literary hints, we should keep in mind that Protagoras was a Sophist, a man whose main source for living was his ability to speak (to teach his pupils, to persuade public audiences, etc.) and who could assess every day the centrality of language in every human activity. On Protagoras and language, see *Prt.* 322a.

Lastly, as far as Protagoras’ epistemology is concerned, what kind of consequences may we draw from language being public? We may think again of the Theory of Flux and of the Theory of Perception that Plato develops thereafter and ascribes to Protagoras. The privacy of perceptions (together with their being unerring) is the main feature of that (Platonic) Theory of Perception and it may be seen as the feature of an epistemology indissolubly linked with the very idea that all is in motion, as Plato showed. Such a privacy, however, may be alternatively looked at as a feature of another kind of epistemology, one perfectly consistent with the idea that there is a stable world to know “out there” and that, at least, we have a common and public language for defining such a world (this makes clear again how logically unessential the Theory of Flux is for Protagoras’ epistemology, at least for the epistemology built up so far). See above, pp. 39-41 .

public too is the language the perceiver uses to define and make sense of his perceptions and feelings, although his very perceptions and feelings remain private to him and unerring. Let me put it more clearly. If the privacy of perceptions may produce private perceptual worlds, nonetheless such private worlds do not condemn the perceiver to live an entirely solipsistic life. These (different) private worlds are such in their core but they are not totally secret or wholly hidden, for they are exposed to the eyes of other people, who are perfectly capable of making sense of them. The perceiver can perfectly well understand perceptions and feelings of other people, even if such perceptions and feelings are different from his.⁵⁴

All this makes Protagoras' epistemology (I mean the epistemology we have seen in this first part of the Protagorean section) look consistent with a certain degree of objectivity, in a way that makes the general label of perceptual relativist applied to Protagoras seem to be too vague and misleading. Let us call the Protagorean position so far reconstructed 'perceptual cohabitative autonomy' (PCA). Protagoras would agree with us if we said that there is a world "out there" and that you and I might (and would, indeed) perceive something in that world in different ways. Protagoras would agree, too, if I said that I may be perceiving something now in a way different from the way I perceived it before. This, however, does not create any problem of Conflicting Appearances, to the extent that it is not a problem if you and I do have different perceptions. Let us say that you perceive as cold the wind I perceive as warm. You are right in your perception as much as I am right in mine; you have no need at all to persuade me that I am wrong in my perception

⁵⁴ The kind of privacy I am here ascribing to Protagoras' Theory of Perception is not an epistemological privacy, but rather, say, the privacy of the owner. As Davidson has said ([255], 52: see above, at the beginning of this chapter), "Thoughts are private, in the obvious but important sense in which property can be private, that is, belong to one person. And knowledge of thoughts is asymmetrical, in that the person who has a thought generally knows he has it in a way in which others cannot. But this is all there is to the subjective. So far from constituting a preserve so insulated that it is a problem how it can yield knowledge of an outside world, or be known to others, thought is necessarily part of a common public world. Not only can others often learn what we think by noting the casual dependencies that give our thoughts their content, but the very possibility of thought demands shared standards of truth and objectivity."

nor have I any need of persuading you that you are wrong in yours. Both of us are perfectly right in our own perceptions, which are different mainly because our “dispositions” towards the world “out there” at that very moment are different. That is all, and there is no conflict between us because there is no clash between your life and mine if we perceive differently. You and I have our own perceptual worlds and our own private lives, but in any case we are able to understand each other’s lives. As far as perceptions and feelings are concerned, that is all we need.

Problems arise when there is disagreement not about how we perceive something, but when we speak of ethical issues. Since ethics concerns the rules of our acting and of our living together in a community, there is a problem of “cohabitation” if you think right what I think wrong. To put it straight and in modern terms, there is a real problem if you think it right to pay taxes whilst I think it wrong (because, for instance, I think that the government does not do anything for me). In this case, may we allow your opinion and mine be both true? Of course, we may not. If it seems reasonable to say that both our different perceptions of something are legitimate and true, it seems that we cannot allow the same position as far as ethical issues are concerned. Is Protagoras likely to put forward such a subjectivistic thesis in ethics as well? To try to answer to such a question, we shall now turn to the second part of the Protagorean section, the so called Defence of Protagoras, where the Maxim is applied not to a single percipient but to the whole of society, to the *polis*.

2.4 Protagoras’ Defence.

The passage from the maxim taken as a Protagorean Theory of Perception (i.e. the theory that proclaims the perceptual cohabitative autonomy of perceivers) to the maxim

read as a Protagorean Theory of Society may be found in the Defence of Protagoras (166a-168c5), a speech delivered by Socrates in defence and on behalf of Protagoras.⁵⁵ As we have seen, Socrates has offered a first interpretation of Protagoras' words that sounds genuine in its core; then he has added a kind of ontological basis for Protagoras' maxim that has driven Protagoras' epistemological position to (too Platonic) philosophical consequences. Even if we apply to Protagoras the Principle of Charity and so take his maxim as a Theory of Perception without any ontological connection to a Heraclitean ontology, in any case the sophist must face an inevitable and dangerous objection about his own claim to be a teacher and a *sophos*. This objection is the one that Socrates sets forth at 161d2-e1: "If, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual himself can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct: how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men and worth large fees?" Socrates' objection makes a real point, and one might think that Protagoras' epistemological position has been heavily compromised; but surprisingly, we will be given a defence of Protagoras' own position that has itself a real and substantial philosophical strength.

At the beginning of the Defence, Socrates' Protagoras sums up the meaning of his maxim, that is, the meaning given to the maxim hitherto:

ἐξέλεγξον ὡς οὐχὶ ἴδιαι αἰσθήσεις ἐκάστῳ ἡμῶν γίνονται, ἢ ὡς ἰδίων γιγνομένων οὐδέν τι ἂν μᾶλλον τὸ φαινόμενον μόνῳ ἐκείνῳ γίνοιτο, ἢ εἰ εἶναι δεῖ ὀνομάζειν, εἴη ᾧ περ φαίνεται.

⁵⁵ On the Defence of Protagoras, see A.T. Cole [107] and [108]; G. Vlastos [240], especially xx-xxiv; Farrar [202], 66-75.

try to refute (my maxim by showing) that each man's perceptions are not his own private events; or that, if they are his own private events, it does not follow that the thing which appears 'becomes' or, if we may speak of being, 'is' only for the man to whom it appears.⁵⁶

However, the privacy of perceptions, together with their being unerring, does not imply either that there is no possible comparison between different perceptions. As I have argued before, we can understand other people's perceptions and feelings; if this is the case, we may be able to produce comparisons between our perceptions and those of other people or between our perceptions now and our different perceptions later or before. This comparison does not seem to concern the truthfulness of perceptions, as every perception is *true* for those who have it. Protagoras states:

μέτρον γὰρ ἕκαστον ἡμῶν εἶναι τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ μὴ, μυρίον μέντοι διαφέρειν ἕτερον ἑτέρου αὐτῷ τούτῳ, ὅτι τῷ μὲν ἄλλα ἔστι τε καὶ φαίνεται, τῷ δὲ ἄλλα. καὶ σοφίαν καὶ σοφὸν ἄνδρα πολλοῦ δέω τὸ μὴ φάναι εἶναι, ἀλλ' αὐτὸν τοῦτον καὶ λέγω σοφόν, ὃς ἂν τινι ἡμῶν, ᾧ φαίνεται καὶ ἔστι κακά, μεταβάλλων ποιήσῃ ἀγαθὰ φαίνεσθαι τε καὶ εἶναι.

Each one of us is the measure both of what is and of what is not; but there are countless differences between men for just this very reason, that different things both are and appear to be to different subjects. I certainly do not deny the existence of both wisdom and wise men: far from it. But the man whom I call wise is the man who changes 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.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ 166c3-7.

⁵⁷ 166d1-7.

Because of the obscurity of this answer, we are immediately given a kind of explanation:

οἶον γὰρ ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν ἐλέγετο ἀναμνήσθητι, ὅτι τῷ μὲν ἀσθενοῦντι πικρὰ φαίνεται ἃ ἐσθίει καὶ ἔστι, τῷ δὲ ὑγιαίνοντι τὰναντία ἔστι καὶ φαίνεται. σοφώτερον μὲν οὖν τούτων οὐδέτερον δεῖ ποιῆσαι—οὐδὲ γὰρ δυνατόν—οὐδὲ κατηγορητέον ὡς ὁ μὲν κάμνων ἀμαθῆς ὅτι τοιαῦτα δοξάζει, ὁ δὲ ὑγιαίνων σοφὸς ὅτι ἀλλοῖα, μεταβλητέον δ' ἐπὶ θάτερα· ἀμείνων γὰρ ἢ ἕτερα ἔξις. οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἐν τῇ παιδείᾳ ἀπὸ ἑτέρας ἕξεως ἐπὶ τὴν ἀμείνω μεταβλητέον· ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἰατρὸς φαρμάκοις μεταβάλλει, ὁ δὲ σοφιστῆς λόγοις.

For instance, I would remind you [*sc.* Theodorus] of what we were saying before,⁵⁸ namely, that to the sick man the things he eats both appear and are bitter, while to the healthy man they both appear and are the opposite. Now what we have to do is not to make one of these two wiser than the other—that is not even a possibility—nor is it our business to make accusations, calling the sick man ignorant for judging as he does, and the healthy man wise, because he judges differently. What we have to do is to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is *better*. In education, too, what we have to do is to change a worse state into a better state; only whereas the doctor brings about the change by the use of drugs, the professional teacher does it by the use of *logoi* (Burnyeat/Levett translation, modified).⁵⁹

Eventually, Protagoras concludes this part of his new reasoning in this way:

⁵⁸ 159d-e.

⁵⁹ 166e1-167a6: the emphases belong to Burnyeat/Levett.

ἀλλ' οἶμαι πονηρᾶς ψυχῆς ἔξει δοξάζοντα συγγενῆ ἑαυτῆς χρηστὴ ἐποίησε δοξάσαι ἕτερα τοιαῦτα, ἃ δὴ τινες τὰ φαντάσματα ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας ἀληθῆ καλοῦσιν, ἐγὼ δὲ βελτίω μὲν τὰ ἕτερα τῶν ἐτέρων, ἀληθέστερα δὲ οὐδέιν.

This, in my opinion, is what really happens: when a man's soul is in a pernicious state, he judges things akin to it, but giving him a sound state of the soul causes him to think different things, things that are good. In the latter event, the things which appear to him are what some people, who are still inexperienced, call 'true'; my position, however, is that the one kind are *better* than the others, but in no way *truer* (Burnyeat/Levett translation, modified).⁶⁰

Summing up his position from these three passages, Protagoras affirms that (1) the wise man exists. (2) He is the person 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.” (3) In doing that, he is like the doctor who should be able to make his patients feel better, the only difference being their different means of gaining the same satisfactory result (respectively by drugs and by *logoi*). Finally (4) he does not claim that his own perceptions, feelings and beliefs are truer than those of his patient, they are only better.⁶¹

⁶⁰ 167b1-4: emphases of the translators (I have substituted ‘who are still inexperienced’ for Levett’s ‘who are still at a primitive stage’).

⁶¹ See Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 23: “This [*sc.* the Defence] is the passage that F.C.S. Schiller seized upon for its persuasive recommendation of the pragmatist point of view (p. 1). Protagoras’ central claim is that the expert (doctor, teacher, etc.) is one who effects an improvement in our perceptions, feelings, or thoughts. According to the Measure Doctrine, whatever we think or feel is true for each of us: so the state of mind which results from the expert’s ministrations is not *truer* than our previous state of mind. But it is *better* (167ab). Schiller supposed that by ‘better’ Protagoras meant that one is better adjusted to life and the world around (rather as when one’s eyesight is improved) (...). Schiller’s interpretation is widely shared. The meaning of ‘better’ is disputed: is it that which is most in accordance with the state of mind of a healthy subject, or that which most

This picture of the wise man is very interesting, though peculiar and problematic. The wise man is compared to the doctor, and we are taken back by Protagoras' own words to the example of the two Socrateses, the ill and the healthy. As pointed out before,⁶² there is nothing to ensure that the state of being healthy is, epistemologically speaking, superior to the state of being ill. In other words, the doctor cannot "make one of these two [*sc.* the sick man and the healthy one] wiser than the other—that is not even a possibility—nor is it our business to make accusations, calling the sick man ignorant for judging as he does, and the healthy man wise, because he judges differently."⁶³ However, what the doctor has to do is "to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is *better*." He knows⁶⁴ that being healthy is better than being ill, he recognises a sick man and so he attempts to make his patient change his bad dispositions (*hexeis*)⁶⁵ into a good one by means of drugs.

Like the doctor, the wise man knows the impossibility of declaring an epistemological priority between two different perceptual or judgmental conditions: "what never happens is that a man who judges what is false is made to judge what is true. For it is impossible to judge what is not, or to judge anything other than what one is immediately experiencing; and what one is immediately experiencing is always true."⁶⁶ Nonetheless,

agrees with the perception and thought of one's fellows, or that which is most advantageous to the organism, or that which will seem better in the future?" See F.C.S. Schiller [63]. Further, on the meaning of 'better', see Cornford (*PTK* 73): "What 'sounder' means is left obscure. It does not mean 'normal', for that would set up the majority as a norm or measure for the minority. It can only mean more useful or expedient: a sound belief is one that will produce better effects in the future. 'Better effects', again, must mean effects that will seem better to me when the sophist has trained me."

⁶² See above, p. 35.

⁶³ 166e4-167a1.

⁶⁴ Let me use the verb 'know', although I am well aware that this usage raises problems for the kind of epistemology I have so far ascribed to Protagoras. I shall say in the Conclusion why Protagoras may be expected to *know* things.

⁶⁵ See 167a4-6.

⁶⁶ 167a6-b1.

like the doctor again, the wise man is able to “change the appearances—(he is) 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.” He knows that a good disposition (*hexis*, again) of a man's soul is better than a pernicious disposition and he tries to change the pernicious state of this man into a good one by means of *logoi*. Such a man, therefore, may have better *phantasmata* than the ones he had before, not truer ones.

But how will the *sophos* come to know that another man needs help with his own *phantasmata*? And how can he change a bad *hexis* into a good one, or in other words how can he replace other man's bad *phantasmata* with better ones? It is worth remembering that the Defence is a kind of defence of the exegesis of the maxim already given. That is, Protagoras has to try to make the epistemology of his maxim compatible with the possibility of wisdom. As far as the first question is concerned, the maxim has declared the privacy of one's perceptions and their being unerring and each and every person is therefore the sole epistemological judge of his own sensations and feelings. Nothing detailed or illuminating, on the other hand, is said in the Defence about the way the *sophos* might understand that somebody needs his help and thus nothing prevents us from saying that the man unhappy with his own perceptions should make himself known to the wise man. Since he is the only *metron* of his perceptions, it is the man himself who will decide whether the state of his soul is good or bad and so ask, if necessary, for advice from the wise man. It has been previously pointed out that there is no real problem concerning Conflicting Appearances, to the extent that you may be happy with your perception whereas I may be happy with mine. But of course, it may also happen that you are not happy with your perception. Just before racing, you see me quiet and determined whilst you have fear. You would like to have my feeling, instead of yours. If we could go back to Protagoras' time, you might want to make yourself known to him and ask for advice how to change your bad sensation of fear.

If this may be a simple and good answer to the first question (further, an answer that is perfectly consistent with the maxim), still it is more difficult to answer the second question. One might say 'OK, I am not happy with my *phantasmata* but what can the wise man do for me and how?' In changing a worse *hexis* into a better one, what does the *sophos* change? Going back to the maxim, we need to remember that up to now the maxim has dealt with perceptions (and feelings),⁶⁷ and in referring to them, Plato has always used *phainomai* as synonymous with *aisthanomai*.⁶⁸ *Phainomai* is used in the Defence as well, at the beginning, when the privacy of perception stated by the maxim is recalled.⁶⁹ After that, there is a lexical shift from *phainomai* to *doxazo* (and then from *doxazo* to *dokeo*)⁷⁰ and this shift takes place at the crucial point of the Defence, when the wise man is compared to the doctor. Now, *doxazo* is said in referring to what hitherto we were used to calling simply perceptions and it therefore seems that Plato is making clear that the focus of the discussion is moving from immediate perceiving to mediated judging. To quote Maguire, "[Plato] introduces then *doxazei* in the sense of judging the fact of a sensation (167a2); extends it to include at least judgements based directly on perception, and by implication other kinds too (a6, 7, 8, b1, 2)."⁷¹ The reader is thus left with an ambiguity about the actual nature of the things that Protagoras is claiming to change in a man's soul; it seems possible however to make sense of this ambiguity.

In order to do that, it may be useful to give an example that could show how a way of perceiving and judging things might be changed by teaching, or at least by an interaction with another (wiser) man. To remain within the limits of my personal life (which seems to

⁶⁷ See 156b4-5.

⁶⁸ See 152b12 and c1, where *phantasia*=*aisthesis*. See also above, p. 30.

⁶⁹ *Phainomai* is used 7 times in 15 lines (166c6-166e4), in referring to perceptions and sensations.

⁷⁰ *Doxazo* is used 6 times in 9 lines (167a1-167b2), whilst *dokeo* 3 times (167c3-7). On *dokeo*, see below, p. 69.

⁷¹ See Maguire [149], 118.

be what one knows better, according to what we have said so far),⁷² I shall give this example. I am a competitive runner and I am used to running against other people: I do it (1) first to go beyond my physical and emotional limits; then (2) to beat my rivals. Now I am more satisfied if I achieve my personal best and I come 4th than if I come 2nd but without achieving my personal best. Now I am happy with this idea but when I was younger, the desire of beating others was much stronger. Then, all of a sudden, this desire became pernicious for me, as it created a sort of competitiveness with which I was uncomfortable (I can now still remember the intensity of the fear I was used to feeling before running). My trainer, an old athlete who has successfully become a great trainer, started talking to me about his own competitive experience. He told me that when he could run, he ran against others but also against himself and his own limits. He taught me another way of judging my competitive activity and slowly I have come to understand that the real and noble meaning of my running lies mainly in this kind of fight against myself. After being taught that way, all my pernicious perceptions and feelings disappeared and I really started enjoying my running activity again, with a wide range of good and healthy sensations: satisfaction, joy, etc. I could myself describe this as the coming of a new and good era for me.⁷³

Although rough and very general, this experience of mine seems to provide a good example of what may be thought of as 'changing one's *phantasmata*.' Of course, the teaching of a *sophos* involves *logoi* and in this it has its main intellectual feature. It does not follow that such teaching has no actual effect on our way of perceiving things and of having sensations. After being taught in a certain way, I may come to see things in a

⁷² To put forward a personal example is so untypical of British reserve, but I find the idea of making an example taken from my life very much in harmony with the kind of epistemology we have drawn so far.

⁷³ I hope that this example may provide the meaning I am ascribing to the 'better' of the Defence. I find my understanding of 'better' and of the whole Defence rather similar to the one offered by Cornford (*PTK*, 72-3) and Cole [108]. On the many exegetical problems raised by the Defence, see Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 24-27.

different way than before so that my whole approach to the world is different.⁷⁴ The shift from *phainomai* to *doxazo* may therefore be seen as Plato's warning that Protagoras' teaching deals with perceptions but it also involves a kind of more 'intellectual' activity.⁷⁵ There is, nonetheless, nothing obscure about the relation between this kind of teaching and Protagoras' maxim. We have seen that nothing prevents us from assuming that the man unhappy with his own *phantasmata* should decide that his 'soul' is in a pernicious state and so ask for advice from the wise man: he is the only *metron* of his own (unsatisfactory) perceptions. After being taught, such a man is the one who can say he is happy with his new perceptions and feelings; he is the one who can state that after being taught he is better than before; again he is the sole judge of the satisfactoriness of his new sensations.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ On the very idea that teaching mainly aims at changing the 'taste' of the learner, see L. Wittgenstein's remark (*Culture and Value*, p. 17e): "A present-day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it" (P. Winch's translation).

⁷⁵ Plato fails to make explicit the way the Sophist carried out his teaching. In his edition of the *Theaetetus*, Campbell says that the idea of education expounded here is the same as the one expressed in the *Protagoras* (for resemblance between the Defence and the *Protagoras*, see especially *Prt* 313a-314b; 318a; 318e-319a). This might be true but we have no solid ground for asserting it. We have almost no indications about Protagoras' actual method of teaching, except for the three educational fragments and an echo of them in the *Protagoras* (323d-324a; especially 323d7). The three fragments (see above, 14-6) are: "Teaching requires natural endowment and practice" and "they must learn starting young" (80DKB3); "[Protagoras] said that art was nothing without practice and practice nothing without art" (80DKB10); "Education does not sprout in the soul unless one goes to a great depth" (80DKB11). Another passage in the *Protagoras* (*Prt* 323d7) says that "when it comes to the good qualities that people acquire by deliberate choice (*epimeleia*), and by practice (*askesis*) and teaching (*didache*) (...)." These few words do not say much. In Protagoras' opinion, teaching seems to have been a process involving both natural capacities in the learner and his desire for practice. Moreover, Protagoras seems to have thought that practice requires hard work and that time is needed before the teaching may produce results. On all this see W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 2, 286-332 (in the English translation by G. Highet, Oxford 1947).

⁷⁶ See A.T. Cole [108], 25: "The activity of physician or sophist can be thought of as an improvement of a man's eyesight through experimentation with different lenses. The oculist's services are required once a patient becomes for some reason or another dissatisfied with the way things look to him, either because what he sees is less varied and detailed than what he once perceived or because the act of seeing causes him discomfort. Whatever the cause, he is someone for whom things as they appear are unsatisfactory (...). While

It seems therefore that the Defence is perfectly consistent with (PCA), the epistemological position ascribed to Protagoras so far. The perceiver has perceptual autonomy in his own perceptions and feelings and is the judge of them, although he may well change such apprehensions with the help of the *sophos*. On the other hand, the *sophos* himself has the same perceptual autonomy that allows him to have different (and good) perceptions. Their perceptual autonomies then may be said as cohabiting, since one allows the other and vice versa. They may be said as *happily* cohabiting, for they are two autonomies in dialogue. This means that (PCA) is now (PDCA): the cohabitation between the different autonomies of different perceivers may now be a dialogical cohabitation.⁷⁷ That is, we have again drawn a picture of the Protagorean epistemology in which the privacy of perceptions and feelings does not lead to any kind of solipsism. We have done so mainly by offering a reasonable reconstruction of Protagoras' epistemological position, different from Plato's own. We have argued that Plato says that such and such is Protagoras' theory, but that nothing prevents us from saying that from Plato's own words on Protagoras' epistemology, we can build up a different and coherent picture of Protagoras' theory of knowledge. In other words, up to now we have had indirect arguments for stating a non-solipsistic Protagorean position; by contrast, with the Defence we seem to have been provided with direct grounds for stating this non-solipsistic position.

the oculist is experimenting with one lens after another, the patient continues to be the only person able to decide whether or not there has been any improvement, just as at the outset he was the only person able to decide that his situation needed improvement."

⁷⁷ See above, 46.

2.5 Personal Identity: a Digression.

That the Defence offers such a non-solipsistic position may be further confirmed, if we turn back to the problem of Personal Identity previously raised.⁷⁸ We left there a Socrates with his self wholly dissolved into the series of his unerring and private perceptions. Socrates has neither a physical nor a psychological criterion for saying he is the same person over time. Memory itself appears to be too weak to guarantee a trustworthy link between the atomised psychic moments of Socrates' life nor can he call on any help from the Cartesian suggestion of an immaterial entity in order to provide for continued existence over time. To recall Plato's own example, Socrates is the Socrates with sweetness when he is healthy, on the one hand; on the other he is the Socrates with bitterness, when he is ill. Socrates is the judge, the *metron*, of the things that are and of those that are not in the physical world "out there", and one might suppose that for Protagoras things go in the same subjective way as far as our inner life is concerned. Socrates is himself the sole *metron* of what he is and of what he is not. He, and only he, can be the spectator of his inner life and thus see the perennial flowing of his own perceptions. He is the sole judge of his perceptions that over time build up his fragmented self and is therefore doomed to live an entirely solipsistic life that nobody else can share.

As far as Personal Identity is concerned, the position just illustrated above may be ascribed to Protagoras, *only until* one reads the Defence, because it is actually inconsistent with the Defence. In the Defence in fact there is a perceiver who is not satisfied with his perceptions and feelings. Because of his dissatisfaction, he asks help from another man, the *sophos*. By means of *logoi*,⁷⁹ i.e. using words perfectly understandable by the unsatisfied perceiver, the wise man is able to make such an unsatisfied perceiver change his pernicious

⁷⁸ See above, pp. 36 ff.

⁷⁹ I take for granted that here '*logoi*' mean 'words', although this is not so evident. See below, pp. 70 ff.

state into a better one. By interacting with the wise man, the perceiver is able to acquire a new way of looking at things and is therefore able to have different perceptions. The perceiver is now faced with a new and more satisfactory perceptual world that remains private for him but is perfectly understandable by the wise man. For his part, such a wise man has done a good deal to build up this new perceptual world. To the extent that having a new and different perceptual world means, at least in the Protagorean world, being a new and different person, it is not pointless to say that the wise man has helped in some way the unsatisfied perceiver to change his identity.

This new way of dealing with one's personal identity makes a real point of contrast with the picture of the Protagorean man previously described. This new approach to the problem replaces a kind of solipsistic man, who could not find (among his changes and modifications) any criterion for stating his personal identity over time, with a non-solipsistic man, who is changing his personal identity over time in a public way (that is, by interacting with other people). If we read the Defence from the point of view of the problem of Personal Identity, we thus have a confirmation that the Protagorean man seems not to be a solipsistic man, trapped in his one-man world. If this is the case, let me spend few more words on the point. As Plato has marvellously taught us in the *Theaetetus*, digressions may offer the reader the possibility of taking a break from the very point of the discussion, before turning to it with a fresher mind. Of course, I am hardly claiming that my philosophical reasoning is as dense as Plato's, but the reader may need a break too in this case, for different reasons, for instance because bored by my seemingly endless historical reconstruction. Let us now have this short pause.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Except for offering a digression from the very point of this inquiry, the other (if not, *the*) main reason for which I shall concentrate a bit more on personal identity is that I find this epistemological issue, so debated today, as continuously present in the back-stage of the Protagorean section (and this happens, I claim, for the first time in the history of philosophy). The passage already discussed about the two Socrateses (159b-160d) remains, as far as I can see, the first serious philosophical treatment of the problem of Personal Identity over time. This problem is again recalled later in the final part of the Protagorean section (184b-186e). Whilst

As far as the new Protagorean man's personal identity is concerned, this different approach does not seem to solve the problem of offering good criteria for saying that he is the same person over time. Nevertheless, one may argue, this new Protagorean man could be in a rather better position than the old one. Like the latter, the former seems to have neither a physical nor a psychological criterion for saying he is the same person over time. The same remarks put forward for the old Protagorean man about the unavailability of physical and psychological criteria for asserting his personal identity over time seem to be still valid also for the new Protagorean man. He can see his personal identity changing according to the events of his life and the persons he happens to meet. In any case, he cannot say what makes him now the same person he was before. There seems to be not much in the way of grounds for saying that the Protagorean man may find criteria for asserting his personal identity over time in the web of the relationships he has and of the social rules he follows.⁸¹ Yet, although he lacks a good criterion of this sort, the new Protagorean man seems to be in a much better condition than that of the old Protagorean man. The former does not seem to be trapped in a solipsistic world, where having or not having a personal identity does not really matter. He is put in contact with other people and his identity changes, as interacting with others always implies. He seems to change his identity according both to his private and personal needs and to where living with others takes him. In doing so, he does not need a criterion for his personal identity. I suggest that for the new Protagorean man, the solution to the problem of Personal identity suggested by Derek Parfit might be valid.

trying to refute the thesis that knowledge is perception, Socrates offers a comparison between a man taken as a Wooden Horse (see 184d) and a man provided with a "single form", call it soul or mind. I understand this, namely that beyond all our perceptions, feelings and thoughts, there is a single perceiving mind, as Plato's own answer to the problem of personal identity raised at 159b. ff. Among the many philosophical themes for which the *Theaetetus* is a pioneering work, there is also—or so I claim—Personal Identity.

⁸¹ For a social construction of the self (an approach quite untypical of British analytic philosophy), see G.H. Mead [271]; E. Goffman [260].

In *Reason and Persons*, Parfit claims that, as far as Personal Identity is concerned, what really matters is the holding of a relation of psychological connectedness between two different selves, ascribed to the same person.⁸² The person I am now and the person I will happen to be tomorrow are not the same person and we do not need to be the same person. My self today and the self ascribed to me tomorrow are not identical but they hold relations of weak psychological connections between them. Such a psychological connectedness may be compared to the one we are likely to find between two friends who (to many extents) feel, think and act in the same way, although being two different persons. This solution to the problem of Personal Identity might, I propose, be a good one for the new Protagorean man of the Defence, rather than for the Protagorean individual we first met.

⁸² See Parfit [275], part Three, 199-350 and Parfit [273], where his views on Personal Identity are summed up and briefly but completely expounded. As far as psychological connectedness or continuity is concerned, see particularly [275], p. 206: "I can now define two general relations: *Psychological connectedness* is the holding of particular direct psychological connections [and] *Psychological continuity* is the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness. Of these two general relations, connectedness is more important both in theory and in practice. Connectedness can hold to any degree. Between X today and Y yesterday there might be several thousand direct psychological connections, or only a single connection (...). For X and Y to be the same person, there must be over every day *enough* direct psychological connections (...). When there are enough direct connections, there is what I call *strong* connectedness." See also p. 262: "Like several Reductionists, I claim [:] *Relation R* is what matters. R is psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity, with the right kind of cause. I also claim [:] In an account of what matters, the right kind of cause could be any cause." Lastly, Parfit compares his view on Personal Identity, i.e. that Relation R is what matters and not personal identity, to the rival one that personal identity is what matters. He writes (p. 263): "Call personal identity *PI*. When some relation holds uniquely, or in a one-one form, call this fact *U*. The view that I accept can be stated with this formula: $PI = R + U$. Most of us are convinced that *PI* matters, or has value. Assume that R may also have value. There are four possibilities: (1) R without U has no value; (2) U enhances the value of R, but R has value even without U; (3) U makes no difference to the value of R; (4) U reduces the value of R (but not enough to eliminate this value, since $R + U = PI$, which has value) (...). R without U would still have at least most of its value. Adding U makes $R = PI$. If adding U does not greatly increase the value of R, R must be what fundamentally matters, and *PI* mostly matters just because of the presence of R. Since U can be plausibly claimed to make a small difference, *PI* may, compared with R, have some extra value. But this value would be much less than the intrinsic value of R. The value of *PI* is much less than the value that R would have in absence of *PI*, when U fails to hold."

The latter has a psychic life so fragmented that it is hard to ascribe any kind of psychological connectedness between his momentary perceptions. Since he is trapped in a solipsistic world, he is not in a good position to understand that what we might call his different selves over time may be seen as being friends of each other. The new Protagorean man of the Defence seems to be provided with a more stable psychic life, for his new way of perceiving is a pondered one, i.e. gained through a kind of thoughtful interaction with the *sophos*. Above all, he has learned how to interact with other people, how to be friends to other people. He is surely in a position to think of what we have called his different selves over time as if they were friends of each other. Since friends always want each other's benefit, he does not need to be worried about his changes over time. Differently from the radical and solipsistic old Protagorean man, the new Protagorean (and Parfitian) man may look at the person he will be tomorrow with love and care and vice versa. That is enough: there is no "deep further fact" to be defended and safeguarded, there is no loss to be avoided or prevented.⁸³ The new Protagorean man just lives, with others; still he retains his own and peculiar individuality but such an individuality no longer means isolation and solipsism.⁸⁴

⁸³ See Parfit [275], 281: "Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others."

⁸⁴ I am very well aware the solution here proposed (or, at least, the possibility that this could be a solution for the problem) may raise further difficulties. The main objection I can think of is that it is hard in Greek philosophy to explain one's relation to oneself by using or relying upon one's relation to another (see, for instance, Aristotle's treatment of friendship in both of his *Ethics*). In other words, the solution here advanced is too 'modern'. It might be so, but still I find this solution very much consistent with the kind of Protagorean epistemology I have been constructing so far. Secondly, Personal Identity in Ancient Philosophy has been so neglected an issue in modern philosophical scholarship that it could be misleading, not to say wrong, to assume that Greek philosophers would have not understood Parfit's solution, if they had known it.

My digression is now over. I hope to have demonstrated, via the debate over Personal Identity, that what Protagoras is said to be claiming in the Defence may be taken as a clear and undoubted epistemological hostility to solipsism. If this is the case, it reinforces the attribution of the epistemological position of 'Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy' to Protagoras, insofar as this position avoids solipsism. With the kind of (Parfitian) solution to the problem of Personal Identity I have just now suggested for Protagorean individuals, we are back to the very core of the Protagorean epistemology and faced with one of its most compelling and difficult points. How may the individual, with his epistemological (as well as non-epistemological) autonomy, be combined with the society he lives in? How is the individual related to his society, with its rules and laws to be followed? That is, indeed, a crucial point of the whole Protagorean epistemology, which has mainly been taken, up to the Defence, by Plato himself as a purely 'individualistic' epistemology, i.e. one that proclaims the absolute epistemological superiority of individual perceptions. Up to now, we have seen, first, an individual well provided with his perceptual autonomy; then, two individuals with their perceptual (dialoguing) autonomies. We have not had so far any hints at the role (if any) played by society in Protagoras' philosophy. The question we have previously raised about the way the individual and his community are related is still unanswered. But (as often happens in a Plato's dialogue), as soon as we are assailed by questions, we are surprisingly offered suggestions to answer the very questions we have been asking. In the Defence, for the first time in the whole Protagorean section, we find Socrates talking of the 'polis'.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ On the second part of the Defence, see McDowell (*Commentary*, 163-68), quoted at length below, pp. 68 ff.

2.6 The Maxim as a Protagorean Theory of Society.

Protagoras' wise man claims not only to be able to change the appearances and make one's bad *hexis* become a better one, but he also claims to be able to make "wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious one." When Socrates was dealing with individual cases, he set forth a comparison between the doctor and the *sophos*; now that he is dealing with the city, he puts forward a comparison between the gardener and the wise and efficient politician. Let us read the original:

καὶ τοὺς σοφοὺς, ὦ φίλε Σώκρατες, πολλοῦ δέω βατράχους λέγειν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μὲν σώματα ἰατροὺς λέγω, κατὰ δὲ φυτὰ γεωργοὺς. φημὶ γὰρ καὶ τούτους τοῖς φυτοῖς ἀντὶ πονηρῶν αἰσθήσεων, ὅταν τι αὐτῶν ἀσθενῇ, χρηστὰς καὶ ὑγιεινὰς αἰσθήσεις τε καὶ ἀληθεῖς ἐμποιεῖν, τοὺς δέ γε σοφοὺς τε καὶ ἀγαθοὺς ῥήτορας ταῖς πόλεσι τὰ χρηστὰ ἀντὶ τῶν πονηρῶν δίκαια δοκεῖν εἶναι ποιεῖν.

Nor, my dear Socrates, should I dream of suggesting that we might look for wisdom among frogs. I look for wisdom, as regards animal bodies, in doctors; as regards plant-life, in gardeners - for I am quite prepared to maintain that gardeners too, when they find a plant sickly, proceed by causing it to have good and healthy, that is true perceptions, instead of bad ones. Similarly, the wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ 167b5-c4. The first sentence, that about frogs, must be read in accordance with 161c4-5, where Socrates says to be astonished that Protagoras' *Truth* does not begin by proclaiming that "'Pig is the measure of all things', or 'Baboon' or some yet more out-of-way creature with the power of perception." On this Socratic irony, see also below, p. 142.

The comparison between the gardener and the wise (political) man is slightly different from the previous parallel between the doctor and the *sophos*, and this for the following main reason. As pointed out, we had there an unsatisfied perceiver who could make his dissatisfaction known to the wise man. For his part, the *sophos* could act with the unsatisfied perceiver according to his (the perceiver's) new needs, the perceiver remaining the *metron* of his new satisfactoriness. In other words, the dialectic between the unsatisfied perceiver and the wise man was both ways. Things seem to work differently when the *sophos* has to deal with a *polis*. The gardener takes care of his plants; when he finds one of them sick, he tries to proceed "by causing it to have good and healthy, that is true perceptions, instead of bad ones." The dialectic between the gardener and his plants seems to be one way; his activity cannot be based upon the reactions of the plants to his treatment. It seems that, although the plants are said to have true perceptions, they themselves cannot proclaim the satisfactoriness of their new state. If this is true, the comparison between the gardener and the wise (political) man suggests that the activity of the latter is one way too. The *sophos* has to deal with a body, the *polis*, that may be taken as a living entity with true perceptions (that is, judgements); on the other hand, such an entity does not seem to be able to understand by itself when it is sick and needs a treatment to improve it and its perceptions. It is the *sophos* who first has to understand this and then instil wholesome things into this body but with no immediate certainty that the instilled 'things' are actually felt as good by it.

Pointing out such a difference between the two kinds of comparison, some scholars have come to say that "we have in *Theaetetus* 166d-67c not one Apology but two, developed along different and, in one sense, contradictory lines."⁸⁷ The two comparisons

⁸⁷ See A.T. Cole [107], 112. He writes: "If the utilitarian character of the doctrine presented here is clear, so too is the incompatibility of its comparison of orator and sophist with Protagoras' earlier likening of the sophist to a doctor. The doctor's services are only required when the patient is in actual pain or otherwise dissatisfied with a condition which seems to him *poneron*; the city on the other hand may be perfectly contented with its institutions and still requires the advice of the orator if he becomes aware of something

actually seem to set out two kinds of action (carried out by the *sophos*) that might be thought of as slightly different. But in fact there is no solid ground for saying that the two ways of acting of the *sophos* are in contrast and that one of these contradicts Protagoras' maxim.

The *polis* obviously cannot feel the kind of dissatisfaction the individual is used to feeling when things go wrong. The *polis* might be thought of as being dissatisfied when its individuals, i.e. all the people who live in that city or have the right to vote (an important distinction that is not however relevant here), or a majority of them, are not happy with the way political things are going. For instance, a *polis* may be said to be dissatisfied when the majority of its people are not happy with some of its laws. They might be not happy with the law that allows a foreigner to teach and earn money for it in their own city; better, they might be not happy because there is no law that forbids that. Such dissatisfaction may reveal itself in many ways, as many Sophists (not to say Socrates, who was of course famously not paid for it) could well have understood in the course of performing their activity. To some extent, it is therefore wrong to say that the *polis* cannot make its dissatisfaction known.

It seems to be wrong, too, to think that the dialectic between the *polis* and the *sophos* is strictly one way. The wise (political) man, or one like Protagoras, is likely to want to persuade the *polis* that it is better for it to have foreigners who teach to its students. He will try to do that, say, by talking to those who do not agree, attempting to show them

harmful in them which the city does not perceive (...). Finally, and perhaps most important, given the ostensible purpose of the whole speech, the account of the orator's function is incompatible with the man-measure principle as enunciated at the outset (166d...), whereas what had preceded, pertaining to the doctor, was not. The patient remains the only measure of what is good and bad for him throughout the process of cure described in 167b (...). Things never cease to be exactly as they appear to him. But the city that submits to having its views of the right and honourable changed in the interest of expediency (...) is acknowledging that a thing may be *chreston* and yet seem otherwise until its true character has been pointed out by an expert" (110-111). Such a position on the Defence as double-sided is confirmed in Cole [108], 22-27 and 33-35. See also Burnyeat (*Intr*, 26-27) on the discrepancies between the two examples.

the benefits of such an opportunity. In other words, he will try to persuade people directly so to be able to modify the general attitude on the issue.⁸⁸ Since Plato will be shortly offering a long Digression on the contrast between the philosopher and the man of the law-court (who is clearly meant to be Protagoras),⁸⁹ nothing prevents us from assuming that the wise (political) man is thought of as being able to act directly in assemblies (where legislative decisions need to be taken). At any rate, acting both on people and/or in assemblies, the (political) wise man might face a reaction. People may still disagree with him or eventually agree with him, whilst assemblies may reject or accept his suggestions and ideas. In other words, people and assemblies must state their own satisfaction or dissatisfaction about the *sophos*' proposals. In any case, they remain the *metron* of their own judgements, like the single perceiver in the case of his individual perceptions.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ That Protagoras' doctrine could very well allow (and indeed urge) such a freedom of action for the wise man is argued below, pp. 77 f.

⁸⁹ 172c-177c.

⁹⁰ See Maguire [149], p. 126, n. 22: "That to which something 'appears' in the state is the legislative authority, whether monarchic, oligarchic, or the majority; the 'appearance' could be quite different for everybody else in the state. It might well be the case that, in accord with Protagoras' principle, what appears to them is, for them; but that fact does not emerge when the 'appearance' is ascribed to the state." Again, p. 28: "Despite the sudden injection of just in 'seems just' (167c4-5) of the preceding sentence, the state is the same as the sophist's pupil with respect to the man-measure principle (...). The only difference from the pupil is that the phantasmata of the state form a restricted class and have a name: 'the just'." On the substantial homogeneity of the Defence and its respect of Man the Measure principle (*contra* Cole and Guthrie), see Maguire [149] and Cornford, *PTK*, 72-74. See also McDowell (*Commentary*, 165-66) who offers a possible homogeneous reading of the whole Defence. He writes: "When we revert to less abstract formulations, we see that there are two different ways in which the above skeleton [*sc.* 1, All judgements are true for those who make them and 2, Some people are wiser than others] can be filled out. These two different ways correspond to the two different conceptions of the things which appear to someone (...). Corresponding to the two different conceptions of the things which appear, we find two different accounts of the kind of substitutions performed by the wise man. (i) One kind of substitution is credited to the doctor, at 166e1-4. When one is sick, what one eats appears bitter to one, and therefore is bitter, and hence presumably unpleasant, for one. When one is healthy, on the other hand, what one eats appears sweet to one, and therefore is sweet, and hence presumably pleasant, for one. What the doctor does is to change one from the first state to the second (...). (ii)

On Protagoras' behalf, Socrates himself seems to make clear that the action of the *sophos* in individual cases and his action in collective cases are perfectly in accordance one another. Socrates says:

ἐπεὶ οἷά γ' ἂν ἐκάστη πόλει δίκαια καὶ καλὰ δοκῆ, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι αὐτῇ, ἕως ἂν αὐτὰ νομίζη· ἀλλ' ὁ σοφὸς ἀντὶ πονηρῶν ὄντων αὐτοῖς ἐκάστων χρηστὰ ἐποίησεν εἶναι καὶ δοκεῖν.

Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just.⁹¹

The action carried out by the *sophos* here is very similar to the one previously described, in relation to individual cases. Instead of making an individual change his pernicious state by replacing his bad *phantasmata* with better ones, here the wise man is able to make the city change its pernicious (note the use of the same adjective, *poneron*) conventions by replacing them with wholesome, better ones.⁹² Together with the perfect

A different kind of substitution is credited to the politician, at 167c2-7. When a community is unregenerate, harmful things appear just to it, and therefore are just for it; after improvement by the wise man, beneficial things appear just to it, and therefore are just for it (...). Note that one could construct an account of the wisdom of the doctor different from that (i), but parallel to the account of the wisdom of the politician in (ii). In this different account, the idea would be that sickness is a worse state than health, not because it involves unpleasant tastes, which is presumably the point in (i), but rather because it makes harmful food seem to one to be pleasant, and therefore tempt one to eat it."

⁹¹ 167c4-7.

⁹² The common feature of the two actions is once more described by Maguire [149], 129: "If, then, all the analogies are discrepant in details, and the analogy of the rhetor, in particular, provides nothing new, it seems safest to concentrate on the one thing the four *sophoi* [*sc.* the doctor, the Protagorean *sophos*, the gardener, the Protagorean politician] have in common: that they manifest their wisdom by changing the *hexeis* of their

parallel drawn between individual and collective cases, the passage above declares again that the city is the *metron*, as far as ethical judgements are concerned.

That the *polis* could be the *metron* of ethical judgements was not clear in Protagoras' maxim, at least until the second part of the Defence. Up to now the maxim had to do with individual perceptions and feelings; now its meaning has widened so as to include ethical judgements formulated not by a single man but by many of them, taken as a whole. Socrates makes explicit the new and wider application of the maxim at the very end of the Defence,⁹³ where he says that

ὡς ἀληθῶς σκέψη τί ποτε λέγομεν, κινεῖσθαί τε ἀποφαινόμενοι τὰ πάντα, τό τε δοκοῦν ἐκάστω τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι ἰδιώτη τε καὶ πόλει.

You will genuinely try to find out what our meaning is when we maintain (a) that all things are in motion and (b) that for each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be.

“That for each person and each city, things are what they seem (*dokein*) to them to be”: the lexical shift we noticed above⁹⁴ from *phainomai* to *doxazo* is now made complete with the further change from *doxazo* to *dokeo*. *Dokeo* has the general meaning of ‘to seem’, both to the senses and to the mind.⁹⁵ Thus, *dokeo* may be the right verb to indicate both perceptual apprehensions and judgements (be they ethical judgements or any kind of beliefs not directly attached to or derived from sense-perceptions). The new meaning of Protagoras' maxim makes it valid both for the individual and for the *polis*: the perceptual

charges for the better.” On the utilitarian reading of the Defence, see Cole [107], 110 and [108], 27; *contra* see Maguire [149], 27-28.

⁹³ 168b4-6.

⁹⁴ See above, 54-55. See also Maguire [149], 118-119.

⁹⁵ *LSJ*, s.v. After the Defence, Protagoras' maxim is recalled or quoted or referred to always with the use of *dokeo* or its cognates. For example, see 170a3-4; 172b5-9; 177c6-8.

sphere has its *metron* in the person who has such and such perceptions, ethical judgements have their *metron* in the *polis* that has such and such moral views.⁹⁶

The Defence therefore ends with such an important widening of the meaning of Protagoras' maxim. Now the maxim concerns not only single individuals but also the *polis*. The *sophos* is likely to be acting in two slightly different but perfectly compatible ways, when he is dealing with an individual and/or with a community. Although the second part of the Defence has shed light on Protagoras' position on the *polis* and its ethical judgements, it is not wholly clear how a community could be the measure of such ethical judgements "for so long as that convention maintains itself." However, before reading the final part of the Protagorean section in order to find answers to this question, we had better try to grasp how much genuine Protagorean material there is in the Defence.

2.7 *The Defence and two Protagoras' fragments: B6aDK and B6bDK.*

If we found some textual support for rejecting the claim that Protagoras' Secret Doctrine was really his own doctrine,⁹⁷ we lack such grounds for claiming that the Defence contains, or does not contain, genuine Protagorean material. On this issue, the scholarship tends to consider the Defence authentically Protagorean, at least in its core.⁹⁸ On the other

⁹⁶ This point that at first glance seems to be rather reasonable, then raises further problems, on which see below, 91-94. As Burnyeat has pointed out (*Intr*, p. 23, n. 31), "a modern philosopher would distinguish among relativism between those that make truth relative to the judgement of an individual and those that make it relative to the standards prevailing in a group. The *Theaetetus* simply admits collective subjects on a par with individual ones, leaving aside questions about the relation between the judgement of the collective and the judgements of the individuals composing it."

⁹⁷ See above, 32-33.

⁹⁸ Scholars who hold the authenticity thesis are Campbell in his edition of the *Theaetetus*, xviii-xxx [102]; Cornford (*PTK*, 72); Gomperz [206], 261 ff; Kerferd [36], 134; Untersteiner [71], 102-103; Farrar [202], 71;

hand, the arguments for holding the authenticity thesis are not as strong as one would wish them to be; at times, such arguments are so weak as to be virtually non-existent.⁹⁹ A better chance of detecting the authenticity or otherwise of the Defence might be offered—so I now propose—by an external comparison, i.e. a comparison between the Defence itself and two genuine fragments of Protagoras, namely B6aDK (the Two *logoi* fragment) and B6bDK (the Weaker/Stronger *logoi* fragment). We saw earlier that the ‘Man is the Measure’ maxim is first stated and then followed by the example of the wind, generally taken as genuine by scholars. The Defence may play (or, at least this is what I claim) for B6a and B6b (not openly stated in the dialogue, but surely in the cultural background of those for whom the *Theaetetus* was written) the same explanatory role that the wind-example has played for the Man the Measure maxim. Let us assess the exegetical credibility of such a hypothesis.

I suggest that one can in fact find some reasonable consonance between the ideas expressed in the two fragments and the meaning of the Defence, so that the latter could be read as an exegesis of the former. As pointed out in the first chapter on Protagoras’ life, fragments and scholarship, both B6a and B6b have two alternative readings, a rhetorical one *versus* a philosophical one.¹⁰⁰ The Greek text reads:

καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πραγμάτος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις (B6a) and

Maguire [149], 137-138. More cautious are McDowell (*Commentary*, 165, 172-3); Burnyeat (*Intr.*, p. 22, n. 30) and Cole [108], 23. Against the authenticity of the Defence, see Cole [107], 103; A. Levi [219], 302 and [143], 18.

⁹⁹ See Cornford (*PTK*, 72), where he writes that “[Protagoras] must have reconciled this claim [*sc.* to be a Sophist and to possess superior wisdom] with his doctrine that all opinions are equally true, and can only have done so by arguing, as he does here, that some opinions are ‘better’, though not truer, than others (...). The analogy of the husbandman substituting sound and healthy sensations in plants is an archaic touch, suggesting that Plato may be drawing on Protagoras’ own writings.”

¹⁰⁰ See above, pp. 10 ff.

καὶ τὸν ἥττω δὲ λόγον κρείττω ποιεῖν τοῦτ' ἔστιν. (B6b).

The philosophical interpretation translates the fragments, respectively: “(Protagoras was the first to say that) on every thing (i.e. experience, fact), there are two opposite accounts” and “to make the weaker account the stronger.” The emphasis in such a translation is put on *logos* and *pragma*. *Pragma* is taken in its basic meaning of 'thing, concrete reality'; *logos* is given its wider meaning of 'account', that is, not only a purely linguistic 'discourse' but also standing for what is behind the discourse, i.e. 'thought, mental process'.¹⁰¹ The Defence would be meant as a comment on the two quoted fragments, taken in their philosophical meaning. We have just now seen that a man may have pernicious perceptions or feelings, e.g. he may taste a food as bitter or feel fear in front of another person; on the other hand, the *polis* may have pernicious conventions. After the *sophos* has done his job, our man has a new and good perception and feeling, whilst the city is likely to have wholesome conventions.¹⁰² That is, through the action of the *sophos* the same food that was tasted as bitter before by our man is now tasted as different, and in an opposite way; the same person who caused fear for him is now felt as being a comfortable person to be with. We may say that our man has experienced two different and opposite ways of perceiving the same thing, ways that we may define as being *antikeimenoι*: using Protagoras' own words, we should say that on this thing “there are two opposite accounts.”

One may then argue that one account is thought of as being *hetton*, the other as *kreitton*. The *sophos*' *logos* which at first seems weaker is then made stronger, that is. Its position is reversed. This is precisely what the *sophos* claims to be able to do in the Defence. When the perceiver is unhappy with his own perceptions, the *sophos* is the one who can “change the appearances—the man who in any case where bad things both appear

¹⁰¹ See below, p. 74, n. 108..

¹⁰² After Protagoras' performance, the individual has good (*agathon*) feelings instead of bad (*kakon*) ones while the city has wholesome (*chreston*) judgements instead of pernicious (*poneron*) ones.

and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him.”¹⁰³ The *sophos* is able to work a change in the perceiver so that the perceiver may now have good perceptions, instead of bad ones. The perceiver has replaced his bad account of reality with a better one—with the opposite one, ‘opposite’ just insofar as good rather than bad. That is, through the *sophos*’ action, the perceiver has made the weaker and unsatisfying account the stronger and the satisfying one. Such a modifying action is carried out by the wise man also for the *polis*, as we have already pointed out: “the wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones.” When the city suffers from bad conventions, the *sophos* “replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just.” Again, the *sophos* can make the weaker and unsatisfactory account the stronger and the satisfactory one.

From this perspective, there seems to be a hermeneutic echo between the Defence and the concepts expressed in the two fragments; Socrates may be well thought of as offering Protagoras’ Defence, with these two ‘fragments’ in mind.¹⁰⁴ Plato shows himself familiar at least with the idea expressed in the Weaker/Stronger *logoi* fragment, when he includes it in the charges attributed to Socrates during his trial.¹⁰⁵ But it is highly likely that he also knew also the Two-*logoi* ‘fragment’, which was famous enough for Aristophanes to have played widely on it in his *Clouds*.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, that Plato was familiar with these two slogans of Protagoras’, and so might be commenting on them in the Defence, is suggested by the language of the Defence itself. Protagoras’ sayings mean that on the same thing there are two opposite *logoi* and that

¹⁰³ 166d6-8.

¹⁰⁴ What nowadays is a fragment was not evidently such at Plato’s time. When in this section I say ‘fragment’, I mean ‘the idea expressed in the fragment’.

¹⁰⁵ “Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse (*hetton*) into the stronger (*kreitton*) argument (*logos*)” (19b5-6) (tr. G.M.A. Grube). But the fact that in the *Apology* Plato would be referring to the ‘fragment’ in its rhetorical interpretation does not seem to affect my argument here. Plato shows that he *knows* Protagoras’ Two-*logoi* fragment.

¹⁰⁶ See above, 12.

it is possible to make the weaker *logos* the stronger, whilst in the Defence the *sophos* is said to change the worse state into a better one by means of *logoi*.¹⁰⁷ All the most important, recent translations in English of *Theaetetus* 167a5-6 render *logoi* as ‘words’ (Levett/Burnyeat), or ‘discourse’ (Cornford), or ‘things he says’ (McDowell)—all of them taking the Greek word *logos* in its basic linguistic meaning. But *logos* has a much wider semantic field, covering not only ‘speech’ or ‘discourse’ but also ‘thinking’ or ‘account of’ or again ‘formula’. That *logos* had such a wide meaning can be shown especially for the Older Sophists, as Kerferd has brilliantly pointed out,¹⁰⁸ when the philosophical lexicon was less sharp and detailed than the one Plato and Aristotle later ‘codified’. It is thus reasonable to think that when offering Protagoras’ Defence Plato’s Socrates is really relying upon Protagoras’ own words, taking them in the wider and original meaning here described. Were this correct, the Defence could be plausibly read as a philosophical commentary on Protagoras’ very ‘fragments’ by Plato, thus revealing itself as displaying genuine Protagorean material, at least in its core. Conversely, the philosophical interpretation of the two fragments will be much strengthened by all this.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ 167a5-6.

¹⁰⁸ See Kerferd [36], 83-4: “In the case of the word *logos* there are three main areas of its application or use, all related by an underlying conceptual unity. These are first of all three area of language and linguistic formulation, hence speech, discourse, description, statement, arguments (as expressed in world) and so on; secondly the area of thought and mental processes, hence thinking, reasoning, accounting for, explanation (cf. *orthos logos*), etc; thirdly, the area of the world, that *about* which we are able to speak and to think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws and so on, provided that in each case they are regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process. While in any context the word *logos* may seem to point primarily or even exclusively to only one of these areas, the underlying meaning usually, perhaps always, involves some degree of reference to the other two areas as well, and this I believe is as true for the Sophists as it is, say, for Heraclitus (...).”

¹⁰⁹ Despite the evidence I hope here to have produced, very few scholars have spoken of a connection between *Tht.* 166a-168c and DK80B6a/b. But Kerferd [34] writes: “It is possible that Protagoras associated with the two-*logoi* principle the prescription attributed to him by Aristotle ‘to make the lesser (or ‘the weaker’) argument the stronger’. This may have been what the Sophist was expected to do when altering a man’s opinions for the better.” See also Cole [108], 33-35 (“I suggest, therefore, that making the worse argument

better was simply another example of teaching men how to make the best of what seemed to them a bad situation"); E. Schiappa [61], chapter 6; Untersteiner [71], 79-101, especially 79-85.

3 Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* II.

It is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem
that custom is lord of all.¹

Herodotus

As we have seen at the end of the previous chapter, Protagoras' maxim has been widened to such an extent that it now means "that for each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be." Again, "whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention (*nomos*) maintains itself." The city is the *metron* of ethical judgements, as much as the individual is for perceptual apprehensions. But what does this really mean? It could mean that, so far as ethical judgements are concerned, the city decides what should be taken as *chreston* or as *poneron*. It may be assumed that it is the *nomos* of the city that establishes what is wrong and right. In the fifth century B.C. *nomos/phusis* controversy, Protagoras may be then seen as joining those who declare the superiority of the former over the latter: what is generally held as being right or wrong in that *polis* is such, for so long the *nomos* maintains itself.²

¹ 3.38.4.

² *Nomos* may be translated in different ways (law, convention, custom, etc) and one may ask nowadays for an accuracy of translation as well as for a conceptual precision that the Greeks did not have. We will never know if for Protagoras the *nomos* of a city is only its laws, or its laws and its conventions (I mean the ones not codified in a legislative corpus), or its laws, conventions and customs (that is, all that is not *phusis*). We shall therefore allow an intrinsic ambiguity when we speak of *nomos* and in this work I shall use all the semantic variety here alluded to when I refer to *nomoi*. See Kerferd [36], 112): "*Nomos*, traditionally translated either as 'law' or 'convention' or 'custom' according to what seems best to fit the context, is perhaps a rather more subtle term than these translations would suggest (...). The term *nomos* and the whole range of terms that are cognate with it in Greek are always prescriptive and normative and never merely descriptive—they give some kind of direction or command affecting the behaviour and activities of persons and things. The nearest

That Protagoras really held this position may be argued, if we turn our attention to the so called Great Speech in the *Protagoras*,³ on which I shall say something detailed in the next chapter. In offering a kind of historical and exemplary reconstruction of human civilisation, Protagoras emphasises that men needed *aidos* and *dike* in order to live together happily. When uncivilised men came together to form groups and to defend themselves against attacks from wild animals, they were unable to act justly towards one another. To avoid their mutual destruction, Zeus sent them *aidos* and *dike*, two ethical values that every society has ‘by nature’ on the one hand, but that can be seen on the other as varying from one society to the other. In other words, to have a moral code is natural for every human gathering, but the particular moral code of a society is a matter of convention.⁴

If this interpretation of the political⁵ widening of the maxim is correct, Protagoras seems to be a partisan of *nomos* and hold that each and every ethical judgement a city maintains is true for that city (so long the city maintains it). This might make Protagoras susceptible to the charge of conservatism: he may have been a thinker who left small or no room at all for criticism of the actual laws of a community and thus for trying to make them

modern term for *nomos* is ‘norm’—the establishment or promulgation of *nomoi* is the setting up of norms of behaviour. So *nomos* as law is legally prescribed norm, and *nomos* as convention is norm prescribed by convention; in each case what is being said or prescribed is that something is to be done or not done, or is to be or not to be the case or is to be accepted as being the case (...). It follows that ‘custom’ is only *nomos* in those cases, admittedly frequent, where it carries with it the implication that it is approved custom, or custom regarded as normative in some way or to some degree.” See also Ober [228].

³See *Prt.* 320c8-322d5.

⁴ The interpretation of the Great Speech here offered is rather general and simpler than the one I shall be offering in chapter 4. See pp. 123 ff, for my detailed interpretation of the controversy by nature/by *nomos* in the Great Speech of the *Protagoras*.

⁵ I shall use ‘political’ in its etymological meaning of ‘pertinent to the *polis*’. I shall therefore speak of a political meaning or application of Protagoras’ maxim, when this is dealing with ethical issues. Conversely, the non-political application of the maxim is that already discussed and termed as ‘individualistic’, when individual perceptual cases are concerned.

better.⁶ This charge (which is not advanced by Plato either in the *Theaetetus* or in the *Protagoras*) is rather similar to the one already brought against the Sophist, where individual cases are concerned: that is, if every perception of ours is true, it does not make sense to speak of wisdom and of wise men. Each of us is always the judge of his own perceptual world and therefore always correct in what he perceives and feels.⁷ The Defence will then have offered a plausible and clear answer to both these criticisms. As we have seen before, there is a real possibility for Protagoras that the *sophos* may change the *nomoi* of a city, when the city is no longer happy with them, and/or when he himself thinks an 'improvement' is needed. It seems therefore that the charge of conservatism in political matters brought against Protagoras is misguided, since we have solid textual grounds to hold the opposite thesis, i.e. that he may well have been what is nowadays called a progressive.⁸

⁶ See A.E. Taylor, *Plato. The man and his work*, London 1926, 246-7, where he writes "there is no moral standard [*sc.* for Protagoras] more ultimate than the standard of respectability current in a given society." Some criticisms of this position are expressed by Taylor, *PRT*, 100-102, Loenen [220] and Kerferd [213].

⁷ See above, 40 ff.

⁸ See Kerferd [213], 45: "It has been objected that the argument [*sc.* of the Great Speech in the *Protagoras*] involves the identification of goodness with the actual traditions of an existing civilised state. So when Protagoras claims to be able to teach virtue to Athenians, as he does at the end of his speech, he would need to claim exceptional ability in catching the tone of the social traditions after only a few visits. This is surely a perverse criticism. The virtue with which Protagoras is concerned is repeatedly stated to be the condition of all cities—without it no Polis can exist. The criticism in fact is not one which arises from the *Protagoras* at all—it derives from the doctrine attributed to (and certainly held by) Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* (166 seq) 'whatever practices seem just and laudable to each city, are so for that city as long as it holds them' (...). [I]t can be said at once that the *Theaetetus* provides no basis for the present criticism. The doctrine there attributed to Protagoras has as a corollary, that while whatever seems just to any city is so, in place of practices which are harmful the wise man substitutes others that are beneficial (167c4-7). It is perfectly clear in the *Theaetetus* that the sophist is regarded as capable of changing the views of a whole community as to what is held just. His function cannot be merely therefore to express and teach what the community already believes." That the Sophists hold a progressive political position is commonly held by scholars, since Grote's treatment of the Sophistic movement (G. Grote, *A History of Greece*, London 1888, vol. VII). More recently,

3.1 The New Formulation of Protagoras' Maxim.

Protagoras seems to think possible the improvement both of the individual (when unsatisfied with his perceptions) and of the *polis* (when not happy with its *nomoi*), and this may be confirmed by another key passage of the Protagorean section, i.e. 171d9-172c1.

The Greek reads:

ΣΩ. Ἦ καὶ ταύτη ἂν μάλιστα ἴστασθαι τὸν λόγον, ἣ ἡμεῖς ὑπεγράψαμεν βοηθοῦντες Πρωταγόρα, ὡς τὰ μὲν πολλὰ ἣ δοκεῖ, ταύτη καὶ ἔστιν ἐκάστῳ, θερμά, ξηρά, γλυκέα, πάντα ὅσα τοῦ τύπου τούτου· εἰ δέ που ἔν τισι συγχωρήσεται διαφέρειν ἄλλον ἄλλου, περὶ τὰ ὑγιεινὰ καὶ νοσώδη ἐθελῆσαι ἂν φάναι μὴ πᾶν γύναιον καὶ παιδίον, καὶ θηρίον δέ, ἰκανὸν εἶναι ἰᾶσθαι αὐτὸ γιγνώσκον ἑαυτῷ τὸ ὑγιεινόν, ἀλλὰ ἔνταῦθα δὴ ἄλλον ἄλλου διαφέρειν, εἶπερ που;

ΘΕΟ. Ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ οὕτως.

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ πολιτικῶν, καλὰ μὲν καὶ αἰσχροῦ καὶ δίκαια καὶ ἄδικα καὶ ὅσια καὶ μή, οἷα ἂν ἐκάστη πόλις οἰηθεῖσα θῆται νόμιμα αὐτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ἐκάστη, καὶ ἐν τούτοις μὲν οὐδὲν σοφώτερον οὔτε ἰδιώτην ἰδιώτου οὔτε πόλιν πόλεως εἶναι· ἐν δὲ τῷ συμφέροντα ἑαυτῇ ἢ μὴ συμφέροντα τίθεσθαι, ἔνταῦθα, εἶπερ που, αὖ ὁμολογήσει σύμβουλον τε συμβούλου διαφέρειν καὶ πόλεως δόξαν ἑτέραν ἑτέρας πρὸς ἀλήθειαν, καὶ οὐκ ἂν πάνυ τολμήσειε φῆσαι, ἃ ἂν θῆται πόλις συμφέροντα

see T.A. Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, chapter IV; R. Winton, in Rowe and Schofield [60], 89-121.

οἰθηεῖσα αὐτῇ, παντὸς μᾶλλον ταῦτα καὶ συνοίσειν· ἀλλ' ἐκεῖ οὐ λέγω, ἐν τοῖς δικαίοις καὶ ἀδίκοις καὶ ὀσίοις καὶ ἀνοσίοις, ἐθέλουσιν ἰσχυρίζεσθαι ὡς οὐκ ἔστι φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον, ἀλλὰ τὸ κοινῇ δόξαν τοῦτο γίγνεται ἀληθὲς τότε, ὅταν δόξη καὶ ὅσον ἂν δοκῇ χρόνον. καὶ ὅσοι γε ἂν μὴ παντάπασι τὸν Πρωταγόρου λόγον λέγωσιν, ὧδέ πως τὴν σοφίαν ἄγουσι.

SOC. We may also suggest that the theory would stand firm most successfully in the position we sketched out for it in our attempt to bring help to Protagoras. I mean the position that most things are for the individual what they seem to him to be; for instance, warm, dry, sweet and all this type of thing. But if the theory is going to admit that there is any sphere in which one man is superior to another, it might perhaps be prepared to grant it in questions of what is good or bad for one's health. Here it might well be admitted that it is not true that every creature—woman or child or even animal—is competent to recognise what is good for it and to heal its own sickness; that here, if anywhere, one person is better than another. Do you agree?

THEOD. Yes, that seems so to me.

SOC. Then consider political questions. Some of these are questions of what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom. But when it is a question of laying down what is to the interest of the state and what is not, the matter is different. The theory will again admit that here, if anywhere, one counsellor is better than another; here the decision of one city may be more in conformity with the truth than that of another. It would certainly not have the hardihood to affirm that when a city decides that a certain thing is to its own interest, that thing will undoubtedly turn out to be to its interest. It is in those other questions I am talking about—just and unjust, religious and irreligious—that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its

own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems. And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom.⁹

Despite its length, this passage is worth quoting as a whole for its importance. To get the real meaning of the passage, we should bear in mind that it follows Socrates' attempt to refute Protagoras' maxim. Such an attempt, on which we shall say more later, is mainly aimed at showing that there is a true (Platonic) truth that is the only possible wisdom. Socrates is now claiming that if one person is better than another and if one counsellor is better than another, this could not be in the sense of a Protagorean wisdom but only from the point of view of a Platonic truth. While doing so, Socrates makes it plain, once again, that—conversely—for Protagoras it is true that an individual as well as a city may get a better degree of (Protagorean) wisdom and that their condition may be improved (*sc.* through the action of a *sophos*).¹⁰ At least, this is the case if the individual is dealing

⁹ The Greek of the last two sentences presents some problems: the verbal expression “are ready to insist” (*ethelousin ischurizesthai*) has no subject, making dubious the translation of this penultimate sentence. On the other hand, the syntax, together with the vocabulary, of the last sentence is hard, so to make it susceptible of different translations. I agree with Burnyeat (whose translation I accept) when he says (*Intr.*, p. 33, n. 41): “The reader should be warned that it is not easy to keep the translation of 172b neutral with respect to interpretation. Thus McDowell [3] (*sc. Commentary*) has (i) ‘they’ in place of ‘men’ (the Greek is just a plural verb with no subject specified), ‘they’ being constructed as the theorists of the theory which has been speaking so far; (ii) ‘At any rate those who don’t altogether assert Protagoras’ theory carry on their philosophy on some such lines as these’ where the present translation reads ‘And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom’. My own view is that Miss Levett is correct on both counts: on (i) because ‘they’ makes 172b a mere repetition of 172a instead of support for it; on (ii) because, as urged by Cole [25], 113 (*sc.* [107], 113) the interpretation of wisdom is what the discussion is all about.” In favour of this interpretation, see S. Nannini [158], p. 68, n. 285. Cornford (*PTK*, 81-82) has ‘people’ in place of ‘men’ and translates the last sentence in this way: “and those who do not argue altogether as Protagoras does carry on their philosophy on these lines” (on which, see p. 85 below, n. 18).

¹⁰ See Cornford, *PTK*, 80 (commenting *Tht.* 171d-172b): “He [Socrates] begins by restating the premiss on which all, including Protagoras, are agreed: that one man can be wiser than another. Wherein can such

with judgements concerning sensible qualities but not with the healthy, and the city is correspondingly coping with ethical judgements but not with the advantageous.

Together with a restatement of the double-sided aspect of the maxim and of the substantial homogeneity of its two applications (to individual and *polis*), this passage introduces two exceptions to the domain of Protagoras' maxim, namely the healthy and the advantageous, adding something new to his doctrine (at least, as so far developed in this Platonic dialogue). The maxim is said to have a good chance of standing firm if dealing with the hot, sweet, dry (but not with the healthy) or the just, unjust, religious (but not with the advantageous); that is, if it concerns sensible qualities (with the exception of the healthy) and ethical judgements (with the exception of the advantageous). As far as the latter are concerned, the maxim has been literally reformulated in this way: "in respect of these (just and unjust, religious and irreligious), they (*sc. men*) *ethelousin ischurizesthai* that what seems to people collectively to be so comes to be true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems."¹¹ If we recall the last wider formulation of the maxim,¹² we can easily understand that in the New Formulation of the maxim, as Burnyeat has named it,¹³ the accent is put on the restriction of its domain.

superiority lie? Not in the field of immediate perception of sense-qualities: there (...) we have agreed with Protagoras that each man is the measure of what is, or rather becomes, for him. But the Defence itself claimed a superiority in wisdom for the physician, the educator, and the statesman. All these undertake to change our condition and make 'better' things 'appear and be' to the individual or to the State."

¹¹ Levett/Burnyeat translation modified. On *nomos*, taken as a convention, see *Lg.* 889e: "[M]en are always wrangling about their moral standards and altering them, and every change introduced becomes binding from the moment it's made, regardless of the fact that it is entirely artificial, and based on convention, not in nature in the slightest degree" (tr. T.J. Saunders).

¹² That is, "that for each person and each city, things are what they seem to them to be" at 168b6, together with "whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself" at 167c4-5.

¹³ See *Intr.*, 31: by 'New Formulation', he means the formulation of the maxim that makes the healthy and the advantageous two exceptional categories

Such a restriction is better grasped if we read again the part of the quoted passage where Socrates states that “when it is a question of laying down what is to the interest of the state and what is not, the matter is different. The theory will again admit that here, if anywhere, one counsellor is better than another; here the decision of one city may be more in conformity with the truth than that of another. It would certainly not have the hardihood to affirm that when a city decides that a certain thing is to its own interest, that thing will undoubtedly turn out to be to its interest.” As far as the advantageous (*sumpheron*) is concerned, the maxim seems to have little chance (if any) of holding good. To sum up the New Formulation of the maxim,¹⁴ call (M) the maxim, (P) perceptions and (EJ) ethical judgements. Roughly, (M) = (P) + (EJ): (M) is valid if and only if its domain is (P) and (EJ). To remain in force, the domain of the maxim needs to be constituted by perceptions and ethical judgements only, nothing more and nothing less. So far (EJ) has been taken as including the wholesome (*chreston*), the just (*dikaion*), etc; that is, generally speaking, moral, political and religious values. Now it turns out that (EJ) does not include the advantageous (*sumpheron*) or the useful (*ophelimon*) (whilst (P) does not include the healthy).¹⁵ Roughly, (M) = (P-He) + (EJ-Ad): (M) is valid if and only if its domain is (P-He) and (EJ-Ad), where the last brackets indicate all ethical judgements, except for those concerning the advantageous (Ad) (whilst the first brackets indicate all perceptions but not those concerning the healthy).¹⁶

¹⁴ Allow me the following formalisation of the maxim: although rough, it may be a useful one.

¹⁵ For these lexical notes, see Burnyeat, *Intr.*, p. 32, n. 40. *Ophelimos*, ‘useful’, is the adjective Socrates uses after the Digression (177d), when he wants to “go back to what we were saying before” (177c), namely to the point I am currently discussing. *Ophelimos* then becomes the key word of the last part of the Protagorean section (177d-179d).

¹⁶ See Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 32-33), where he writes: “With regard to (a) what seems hot or sweet and the like, (b) what seems just or unjust, etc, the Measure Doctrine remains in force and is said (171d) to have a good chance of standing firm (...). The theory would not have a good chance of standing firm if it dared to deny the objectivity of advantage (172ab).” McDowell (*Commentary*, 172) is more ‘formal’ and rather clear: “In this section [*sc.* 171d-172b], Socrates sets out a variant of Protagoras’ doctrine (...). The modification is made by

The New Formulation is restated after the Digression, at the opening of the last part of the Protagorean section, where Socrates says that “when it is a question of what things are good, we no longer find anyone so heroic that he will venture to contend that whatever a community thinks useful, and establishes, really is useful, so long as it is the established order.”¹⁷ The core of the New Formulation is therefore the removal of the categories of the advantageous and of the useful, as far as Protagoras’ maxim is concerned. The further step is now to attempt to understand if the New Formulation is stating something genuinely Protagorean, or something Platonic. In any case, before doing that, it is worth asking two questions, one exegetical, the other more philosophical: first, what is the relation between the Defence and the New Formulation? Secondly, what does the widening of the maxim imply for the whole of Protagoras’ epistemology?

As said above and as the expression itself suggests, the New Formulation states something new, as far as Protagoras’ doctrine is concerned. The problem here is thus to know firstly if the New Formulation *restates* what has been already said in the Defence. Roughly, the Defence has been understood as proclaiming a kind of Protagorean wisdom

distinguishing two sets of predicates. An unrestricted version of Protagoras’ doctrine could be stated as follows: (D) If something seems *f* to someone, then it is *f* for him, whatever predicate is substituted for ‘*f*’. According to the modified doctrine, a formula like (D) is true for a range of substitutions for ‘*f*’ including the following: ‘hot’, ‘dry’, ‘sweet’, ‘admirable’, ‘just’, ‘in conformity with religion’, ‘lawful’. But it is false for a range of substitutions for ‘*f*’ including ‘healthy’ and ‘advantageous.’” Lastly, Cornford (*PTK*, 81-83) offers an interpretation of the passage rather different from Burnyeat’s, McDowell’s and mine. He does not take the passage as a unit, stating a coherent and single doctrine, but he divides the passage in two parts: the first (171d-172b2) restating the position of the Defence, the second part (172b2-172c) as expounding a new position held by those “who do not state their position altogether as Protagoras stated his.”

¹⁷ 177d2-5. The lines before read: “We were speaking of the people who assert a being that is in motion, and who hold that for every individual things always are whatever they seem to him to be; and we said that they were prepared to stand upon their principle in almost every case- not least in questions of what is just and right. Here they are perfectly ready to maintain that whatever any community decides to be just and right, and establishes as such, actually is what is just and right for that community and for long as it remains so established” (177c6-d1). The passage quoted in the main text then follows.

that could make better both the perceptions and feelings of the individual (if unsatisfied with them) and the ethical judgements of the *polis* (if unhappy with them). On Protagoras' behalf, Socrates has then made plain that this wisdom is not based upon any truth (leaving aside the interesting problem about the real source of such wisdom). There is no individual who could have truer perceptions than those of another and no city that could have truer ethical judgements than those of another city. As far as I can see, all this is clearly and undoubtedly stated again in the New Formulation. The New Formulation makes then the exception of the healthy and of the advantageous for the domain of Protagoras' maxim (as already stressed), ending with a consideration of the likely widespread approval of an educated man of the fourth century B.C. about the profession of moral relativism invoked by Protagoras' words.¹⁸ This is the other new element that the New Formulation adds (the

¹⁸ I think this is what Plato means at 172b1-c1. I understand "And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom" as referring to those who stop short of Protagoras' position and I take the whole passage as indicating a profession of general shared moral relativism. Relativism about values was very common in the fifth and fourth century B.C. (see Herodotus, 3.38) and those who adhered to it need not to be philosophically minded or relativist in epistemology. It may have well happened that readers of the *Theaetetus* at Plato's time could have felt themselves alluded to in Socrates' remark (see Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 33; Bett [84], 145-6).

The passage, together with the reference to those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras, is taken in the same way as I have understood it by Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 32-33). Whilst translating the troubled sentence approximately in the same way that Miss Levett translates it, McDowell (*Commentary*, 172-173) offers a different exegesis of the whole passage, not taking it as a profession of general moral relativism (McDowell does not speak of 'men' but generally of 'they': see *ad loc.*). As already alluded to above, p. 81, n. 9, Cornford (*PTK*, 82-83) gives a rather different interpretation of the whole passage. He takes "those who do not argue altogether as Protagoras does carry on their philosophy on these lines" (his translation) as referring to those who go further than Protagoras, elaborating an "extreme position" (not shared by the Sophist) on ethical matters. I think this position insupportable because: 1) it is hard to understand "those...", as alluding to those who go further than Protagoras; 2) the position expressed at 172b2-6 is substantially the same as the one expressed at 172a1-5 and at 167c4-5 (on all of this, see McDowell, *Commentary*, 173). Lastly, an original interpretation of the disputed sentence is offered by Maguire [149], p. 122, n. 15: "The verbal parallels between the theories of 172b and 177c, and the designation of the authors in

other being the taking out of the category of the advantageous). Such a new element does not really introduce anything substantial, so far as the concordance of the Defence and the New Formulation is concerned (the role of this new consideration being that of preparing for the forthcoming Digression).¹⁹

If I am correct in taking the New Formulation as compatible with what already expressed in the Defence, there is now sufficient new material to attempt to make the picture of Protagoras' epistemology a wider and more detailed one. As far as Protagoras' theory of knowledge is concerned, I have so far used the idea of 'perceptual cohabitative autonomy' (PCA), in relation to the individual's perceptions and feelings.²⁰ That is, the individual is always right in the perception he has; if another perceiver perceives differently at that very moment, he is right as well in his different perception. If the dispositions of the two individuals toward the world "out there" are different at the same time *t*, their

177c as 'advocates of the flowing reality', seems to me to solve the lengthy dispute about the identity of 'those who do not in all respects argue as Protagoras does' in 172b. They are Heracliteans."

¹⁹ I take the New Formulation therefore as restating what has been said in the Defence. This is McDowell's position, which I share also in its details: "At 171d9-e1, Socrates identifies the modified doctrine with that stated in the course of his defence of Protagoras, i.e. presumably with that to be found in the speech ascribed to Protagoras in the section 165e-168c. With two minor reservations, the identification is acceptable. (1) One reservation is that the remarks, at 171e3-8, about wisdom on the question of what is healthy or unhealthy do not correspond very well with the account of the wisdom of the doctor given at 166e1-4. They do, however, correspond quite well with an account of the wisdom of the doctor parallel to the account of the wisdom of the politician given at 162c2-7 (...). (2) The second reservation is that the present passage makes it explicit, as the earlier passage, for obvious dramatic reasons, could not, that the doctrine which it states is a modified doctrine: note, in particular, 'those who don't altogether assert Protagoras' theory, at 172b6-7.'" Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 32), on the other hand, is not so sure about the concordance between the Defence and the New Formulation. He writes: "Socrates reverts to the Defence of Protagoras to help him formulate an answer to this question (171d), but the reader has already been warned (p. 27) that it remains open to discussion whether the New Formulation, as I shall term it, should be understood as restating something already contained in the Defence or as reinterpreting its remarks about expertise along unambiguously objectivist lines. The back-reference on its own could be regarded either way." Lastly, Cornford (*PTK*, 81) says that "the position taken up in the Defence is here restated fairly" but in his opinion this is true until 172b2.

²⁰ See above, 46.

perceptions will be different at that time t , but that will not imply a conflict of appearances to be resolved. Further, this perceptual cohabitative autonomy may be a dialogical cohabitative autonomy (PDCA).²¹ When a perceiver is dissatisfied with his *hexis* toward the world and therefore with his perceptions, it may well happen that his perceptual autonomy becomes an autonomy that is in dialogue with the 'better' perceptual autonomy of another perceiver, in this case the *sophos*. Through such an useful exchange, the unsatisfied perceiver may change his *hexis* and therefore his perception of the world. How might all this fit with the political application of Protagoras' maxim? It is the very question we earlier left with no answers;²² it is now the right time to deal with it.

3.2 *A first estimate of Protagoras' doctrine.*

As far as the case of the individual is concerned, I have avoided the custom of trying to label Protagoras' epistemological position. I have avoided calling such a position 'relativistic' or 'cognitive relativism', being happy to grasp the core of the Protagorean doctrine. For the time being, I will take substantially the same attitude to Protagoras' epistemology, as far as collective, or rather political, cases are concerned. Later on, at the end of chapter 4 and in the Conclusion, I shall try to make comparisons between Protagoras' whole epistemological position, as I will have understood and reconstructed it from Plato's own testimonies, and modern philosophical positions. I will not therefore at this stage term the political application of the maxim an application even of rough 'moral relativism'.²³

²¹ See above, 57.

²² See above, 47.

²³ On (the perennially appealing) moral relativism, see Williams [281]; Foot [256]; Nagel [272].

As we have understood Protagoras' maxim up to now when applied to political matters, let us call his political position 'ethical autonomy' (EA). Leaving aside the special status accorded to the 'advantageous' and taking into account the whole of ethical field (i.e., the just, the religious, the good), each and every city is the metron of its own *nomoi*. What the *polis* decides to be just is such for that city, for so long as it maintains that.²⁴ The city enjoys an epistemological autonomy in taking its ethical decisions, as much as the individual does, when his perceptions and feelings are concerned. In this latter case, Socrates is clear in saying that this perceptual autonomy is cohabitative;²⁵ for ethical issues such a corresponding cohabitative autonomy of the *polis* is not openly stated, but it may be inferred from brief allusions in the text. These allusions may be found in the last quoted passage of the New Formulation, when Socrates says: "Then consider political questions. Some of these are questions of what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain that whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom."

I read this excerpt, mainly the last sentence, as implying that the epistemological autonomy of the city on ethical issues is a cohabitative one, i.e. it is an autonomy that allows other ethical positions to be legitimate. If Athens finds it just that teachers should be paid for their teaching, while Sparta finds it unjust, both of them are right in holding their

²⁴ The same ambiguity I met with when trying to render *nomos* is here again to be discussed. That is, is it just what the assemblies of the *polis* rule to be such (the law) or is it what common sense decides to be so (the general convention)? It is generally held, rightly, that in a sane society what is ruled as just is generally felt as such by people. But, again, this does not seem to dissipate the ambiguity. At any rate, such an uncertainty does not prejudice a good comprehension of Protagoras' doctrine, the distinction legislative/conventional being rather secondary. Some help towards answering it, however, may come from the *Protagoras*; as far as the *Theaetetus* is concerned, the stress of the Digression on the men of the law-court (an allusion to Protagoras, see below) as opposed to the philosophers may suggest a 'legislative' answer to the question.

²⁵ 152b-c.

(opposite) points of view. Whilst in individual cases it was possible to infer that different perceptions of different perceivers are caused by their different *hexeis* toward the world “out there” at a certain time, in political cases the reasons why different cities have different ethical judgements on a certain issue is not clearly set forth. Since the homogeneity between the application of Protagoras’ maxim to individual cases and to political matters has been shown, it seems to be not unreasonable to guess that the different ethical approaches of different cities to a political issue may be ascribed to their different ‘dispositions’.²⁶ Such an explanation of the different ethical judgements of different *poleis* is, however, only hypothetical, resting wholly on the homogeneity we have spoken of above.²⁷ As far as I can see, in the whole Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* I have

²⁶ Although its general and wider meaning is ‘condition’, *hexis* is mainly used of the individual, his body or his soul (see *LSJ*, s.v., where one of the most interesting quoted passage is *Thi.* 153b). It is not however meaningless, at least for our modern tastes, to speak of ‘disposition’ of a society or of a state. We may define the disposition of a society as its general attitude toward what is generally (and rather ambiguously, I have to admit) called ‘life’. Such a disposition produces ethical judgements, common behaviours, customs, a kind of *esprit national*, for which the Spartans are spartan, the Italians without sense of the state, the British nationalist and practical people. I think such a discourse (with its unavoidable generalisations) could well have been understood by a Greek, who was generally well aware, not least after Herodotus, of the variety of differences between Persians and Greeks, Greeks and Egyptians, and so on (not forgetting the differences among Greek *poleis*) and, conversely, of the uniqueness of every city or people. The very famous Pindaric slogan, *Nomos Panton Basileus* (fr. 169 Sch.=152B), may be read as the Greek’s own understanding of such a political principle. That this principle could well have been widespread at Protagoras’ time may be guessed from Herodotus’ testimony at 3.38, according to which if you asked every city or people which *nomos* is the best, they would answer their own. All this suggests that the Greeks could understand rather well the idea of a city having dispositions (although the usage of *hexis* seems not to allow that so surely). On *Nomos Basileus* and the alleged moral relativism connected to the Pindaric dictum, see Gigante [205].

²⁷ I should say that this explanation is hypothetical because it is true that the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* is mainly focused on the individual side of the question, i.e. the variety of perceptions and feelings of different perceivers. Although being likely to be genuinely Protagorean, the political application of Protagoras’ maxim depends very much on its individual application, at any rate in the *Theaetetus*. Such a focus (one that I impute to the theme of the whole dialogue, namely what knowledge is) does not seem to affect a genuine comprehension of Protagoras’ general philosophical position. In any case, this imbalance in the *Theaetetus* between the two sides of the Protagorean question should always be kept in mind whilst

found no reason given or implied that might explain the diversity of ethical judgements between the *poleis*.²⁸

It seems reasonable to suppose that in Protagoras' epistemology there is no problem of Conflicting Ethical Judgements, since all (opposite) ethical judgements are true for the city that holds them, so long as it maintains such and such point of view. As in the case of individual perceptions there seems to be no clash between opposite appearances of different perceivers, in this case there seems to be no conflict between the opposite ethical judgements of different cities.²⁹ As far as (PCA) and (EA) are concerned, both of them allow the legitimacy of the difference, respectively of perceptions and of ethical judgements: (PCA) and (EA) seem to be strictly non-conflicting in themselves. What now is left open to discussion is the relationship between the two, that is, are (PCA) and (EA) conflicting? Does what is allowed by (PCA) contradict (EA) and vice versa? As Myles Burnyeat has pointed out, "the *Theaetetus* simply admits collective subjects on a par with individual ones, leaving aside questions about the relation between the judgement of the collective and the judgements of the individuals composing it."³⁰ We are apparently left

reading the dialogue, to avoid confusion or, worse, an unfruitful approach to the whole Protagorean question. Although less detailed and interesting for the very theme of this inquiry, the *Protagoras* will help us to capture more solidly the political side of Protagoras' doctrine.

²⁸ I do not see the problem as solved if we say that different cities have different ethical judgements because different things are advantageous to them (an answer some readers may find themselves inclined to accept, when we have to deal with the last part of the Protagorean section, i.e. 177-179). I do not think this a reasonable explanation, since 1) it is not granted that the last part of the Protagorean section displays genuine Protagorean material, and I am more drawn to the idea that it is rather Platonic in its contents; 2) even granted the genuineness of the last part of the Protagorean section, the proffered explanation seems to me rather weak and superficial. To say that different cities have different ethical judgements because different things are advantageous to them is only a way of putting off the problem. That is, why do those cities have different things that are advantageous to them? What does such diversity of things that are advantageous depend upon? A reasonable and legitimate answer to these questions is again because different cities have different *hexeis*.

²⁹ As for Conflicting Appearances, see above, 46-48.

³⁰ See Burnyeat, *Intr.*, p. 23, n. 31.

without an answer to the problem just raised, but what we have been saying about Protagoras' doctrine so far seems to allow the possibility of setting forth an hypothesis on how (PCA) and (EA) are related and work together.

Let us call the first perceiver P_1 , the second one P_2 . They both live in Athens (A), where some *nomoi* (n) are in force. When feeling the wind, P_1 has his own perception of coldness (let us call it p_1) whilst P_2 has his own perception of warmth (let us call it p_2). On the one hand, (PCA) allows both p_1 and p_2 to be legitimate, on the other it allows the possibility that, although disagreeing, P_1 and P_2 are happy with their own perceptions (no conflict exists between them anyway). Let us now imagine that in Athens, surprisingly, there is a *nomos* that forbids people from keeping cats (I have thought of that, since my cat Indira has been scratching my legs all the morning, trying to reach the screen of my laptop and figure out what was going on up there). Call such *nomos* n_1 : n_1 is valid for each and every person who lives in Athens. P_1 and P_2 cannot have their own *nomoi*, as far as the keeping of cats is concerned, and they have to follow the *nomos* their city has established, according to (EA). As far as the perceptual sphere is concerned, therefore, P_1 and P_2 still enjoy the autonomy ascribed to them by (PCA); such an autonomy seems to find its limit in the ethical field, where there is (EA) that has power.

The picture, drawn in this way, looks to be reasonable, or at least not absurd. In a political community, there are many individuals who can enjoy a great autonomy in their perceptual and emotional sphere: whatever they feel as cold, hot, dreadful, interesting is such for those of them who have that kind of perception or feeling, no matter what others feel. On the other hand, when ethical issues have to be dealt with, it is the political community as a whole that makes the decisions: what is regarded as just or right or religious by that community is such and the individual has to observe the *nomos* so established. I have written that the individual can enjoy a *great* autonomy in the perceptual sphere and not an *absolute* autonomy, since there might evidently be cases where the perceptual sphere clashes with the ethical field. This may be true especially when private

feeling or emotions are concerned. Coming back to n_1 , the *nomos* that forbids people in Athens from keeping cats, think of the case of an Athenian who loves having cats at home to avoid loneliness. His feeling of pleasure in stroking a cat cannot be denied, following (PCA); on the other hand, his very feeling is undeniably caused by an action legally forbidden by a *nomos* established by all the Athenians, through (EA). In this case, (PCA) and (EA) are evidently conflicting and (EA) should be stronger than (PCA), although admittedly there is no direct textual evidence for this; it is merely that, if it were the other way round, (EA) would be contradicted.³¹

The balance between the individual's perceptual autonomy and the ethical autonomy of the city therefore seems to be a good one, to the extent that the area in which the two autonomies may be conflicting seems not to be so wide. The individual is actually autonomous in the great variety of his perceptions and feelings; when some of his feelings conflict with the *nomoi* of his city, he seems to need to change his attitude on that issue.³² If

³¹ Obviously, if (PCA) were stronger than (EA), it would follow that the individual is the judge not only of his perceptions and feelings but also of the *nomoi* of the city. This is patently contradicting (EA).

³² This is the old but perennial problem of how to combine individual needs and satisfaction on one side and political and collective interests on the other. The scholarship on this issue is rather impressive in quantity and quality and I will not go into the question, which is marginal for this inquiry. In any case, simplifying dramatically: if there is an unsatisfactory balance between the individual and his political community, there are two possible solutions, at least in the modern democratic world. If you look at the whole matters *ex parte populi*, the unsatisfied individual may try to act in order to make his needs popular among other people and lobby those who legislate accordingly. On the other hand, if you look at the matter *ex parte principis*, it is the political community (its leaders and rulers) that should understand the needs of its individuals and legislate accordingly, once the legitimacy and the diffusion of those needs have been assessed. If the individual's new needs were thought of as being insane for the whole of the political community, no change in the legislative field would be made and, conversely, the unsatisfied individual should change his attitude on the debated issue. A law could be passed therefore if the new and permanently achieved political balance strengthens the old one, the main aim of those who lead a political community being the reinforcement of that alleged balance. As far as Protagoras' likely attitude to that is concerned, we may say that he could well have understood the two solutions here proposed, since he knew what a democracy was (although his idea of democracy was rather different from our own). His epistemology as so far reconstructed seems to allow both the solutions here advanced. As already stressed above, the modification of the *nomoi* of a city is thought of

this answer may be a reasonable one from a strictly practical point of view, things change when we look at the whole question from an exclusively epistemological point of view. That is, may we say that the truth of individual perceptions is 'allowed' by the truth of ethical judgements of the *polis*? Is the truth of ethical judgements a stronger truth than that of individual perceptions? Are they similar truths or of a different nature? Is their relationship conflicting or collaborative? These are, of course, rather modern questions that involve the contemporary philosophical debate on cognitive and moral relativism, or better on what relativism is and if it is epistemologically defensible.³³ I am pretty sure that there is

as being possible through the action of the wise political man. In the case then where the unsatisfied individual should change his attitude because of its insanity for the whole of the political community, the Protagorean *sophos* of the Defence is the right man to help him to do that. On these issues in ancient philosophy, see Ober [228]. Lastly, see Martha Nussbaum's interview on her new book *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, issue 11, summer 2000, 37-40. She says: "The imperative of political justice (...) is to enable everyone to have these core capabilities [*sc.* freedom of speech, right to vote, etc]. Unlike rival theories which argue that the goal of political justice should be distribution of resources, 'the capabilities approach recognises the fact that individuals have varying needs for resources if they are to become capable of the same level of functioning.' And unlike approaches that make actual functioning, rather than the capability to function, the goal, 'the capabilities approach leaves more room for freedom of choice.' (...). 'People's desires, intentions, and emotions are highly malleable,' explains Nussbaum. 'They adjust to social reality. In order to avoid the pain of constant frustration, people have a tendency to adapt their aims to what they believe they can achieve. This means that if their culture has put certain things off limits for them, and especially if it also tells them that it is not fitting and proper for women (say) to do these things, they are highly likely not to demand or aspire to these things.'"

³³ The modern debate on philosophical relativism is very varied and wide. As a good and balanced starting point for a discussion on relativism, I accept Bett's definition: "Relativism, in what I am calling the deep and interesting sense, may be stated in the broadest terms as follows. It is the thesis that *statements in a certain domain can be deemed correct or incorrect only relative to some framework*" (Bett [84], 141 ff). This is a rather broad definition that may be applied to all the forms of relativism, and more generally to its two main forms, cognitive and moral relativism. For people involved in such a debate, it is inevitable that, when reading the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, they ask the questions mentioned above, in the main text. Is (PCA) an epistemological position involving perceptual relativism? And if so, is this kind of Protagorean perceptual relativism a vulgar form of relativism or an interesting one? If it is an interesting and deep form of relativism, what framework of reference is there? If there is a framework, who has chosen it? What kind of relation is

no answer to any of those questions in the *Theaetetus*. It has been claimed that “relativism, in the deep sense, is largely foreign to Greek philosophy as a whole”³⁴ and I have myself advanced reservations about labelling Protagoras’ epistemological position as so far reconstructed as a relativistic position. At any rate, if in Greek philosophy there is something close to what nowadays is meant to be ‘relativism’, this may be found first in the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*.³⁵ Although rather problematic and somehow also desperate, the attempt to understand Protagoras’ doctrine as one of the first expressions of philosophical relativism in the history of thought remains a fascinating one and, philosophically speaking, a real challenge.

In any case, this is not the right moment to link Protagorean positions to modern themes, so as to make the former better understood through the latter. Before doing that, we have to investigate the last part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, not to mention the *Protagoras*. For the time being, it is enough to have established that (PCA) and (EA) describe two Protagorean positions that are epistemologically consistent and understandable; that (PCA) and (EA) are not generally in conflict and when it is the case

there between the framework of such an alleged perceptual relativism and the supposed framework of the moral relativism of the *polis* (granted that we can label (EA) as a form of moral relativism)? Is the framework to which the ethical judgements of the *polis* are relative also responsible for the epistemological rules that govern the perceptual relativism? To go back to the point where I have ascribed (PCA) to Protagoras: I have there indicated the centrality of language as an indispensable medium for the cognitive process. Roughly, might language be working as the common framework for perceptual and moral relativism? These questions and many others may be asked, to try to make Protagoras’ whole epistemological position more or less sustainable. On the modern debate on philosophical relativism, see *The Monist*, (67 (1984), no. 3, ‘Is Relativism Defensible?’); Krausz-Meiland [268]; Hollis-Lukes [263]; more recently, see Kirk [267].

³⁴ See Bett [84], 168. He curiously makes an exception (although with reserve) for Protagoras, on which see the following note.

³⁵ See Bett ([84], 168), where he writes, in commenting on the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*: “Suffice it to say that that a respectable case can be made for the conclusion that Plato interprets Protagoras as a relativist, in the deep sense we have throughout been interested in [...]. If that is indeed Plato’s interpretation, Plato’s *Theaetetus* becomes the one piece of evidence for relativism, in the deep sense, among any of the Sophists.”

that they are, (EA) seems to be predominant over (PCA). Let us now turn our attention back to the question we have left open, i.e. whether the treatment of the category of the advantageous in the New Formulation as an exception to the rule is something genuinely Protagorean or not.

3.3 *The maxim and the future.*

As far as Protagoras' epistemology is concerned, the last meaningful part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* is 177c-179b. As so often when one tries to make sense of Plato's own handling of Protagoras, the meaning of the passage is not clear. After the Digression,³⁶ Socrates makes a point about the whole discussion up to now. He says:

³⁶ As far as I can see, the Digression is indeed a piece of "of quite extraordinarily bitter eloquence" (Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 31)—running from 172b to 177c. Burnyeat's and my opinion about the eloquence of the Digression is not shared by McDowell (*Commentary*, 174, who treats it as equivalent to a footnote) and by Gilbert Ryle ([169], 158, who finds it "philosophically quite pointless"). At any rate, "It [*sc.* the Digression] had a tremendous impact. First, it stimulated a protracted debate, involving Aristotle and others, about the ideal forms of life. Then, in later antiquity (from around 100 B.C. onwards), the passage was endlessly excerpted and quoted from, both by pagan and in due course by Christian philosophers. The idea of virtue as becoming like God so far as one can (176b) was taken up as a common theme among philosophers of quite different persuasions" (Burnyeat, *Intr.*, 35). The themes of the Digression are many but its main one, or at least the one that is more linked with our present discussion, is the contrast between the philosopher (with his style of life) and the man of the law-court (with his rather different style of life). I understand the latter as being paradigmatic of the Sophists, although I admit that Plato is purposely parodying them and that he is not suggesting a complete identification of Protagoras with the picture of the court-man he is drawing. The characterisation of the two figures is strikingly detailed and I take it as introducing this latter part of the Protagorean section (where the accent is put, I claim, on the political connotation of Protagoras' doctrine and on the role of the *sophos* as a wise political man: see below). On the different themes of the Digression, see Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 33-39), McDowell (*Commentary*, 173-177); Cornford (*PTK*, 88-89). Few articles have been written on the Digression: among the acutest ones, see R. Rue [166], and A. Barker [81].

ἔφαμεν τοὺς τὴν φερομένην οὐσίαν λέγοντας, καὶ τὸ ἀεὶ δοκοῦν
ἐκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι τούτῳ ᾧ δοκεῖ, ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις
ἐθέλειν δισχυρίζεσθαι καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα περὶ τὰ δίκαια, ὡς παντὸς
μᾶλλον ἢ ἂν θῆται πόλις δόξαντα αὐτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ ἔστι δίκαια τῇ
θεμένῃ, ἕωσπερ ἂν κέηται· περὶ δὲ τὰγαθὰ οὐδένα ἀνδρεῖον ἔθ'
οὕτως εἶναι ὥστε τολμᾶν διαμάχεσθαι ὅτι καὶ ἢ ἂν ὠφέλιμα
οἰηθεῖσα πόλις ἑαυτῇ θῆται, καὶ ἔστι τοσοῦτον χρόνον ὅσον ἂν
κέηται ὠφέλιμα.

We were speaking of the people who assert a being that is in motion, and who hold that for every individual things always are whatever they seem to him to be; and we said that they were prepared to stand upon their principle in almost every case—not least in questions of what is just and right. Here they are perfectly ready to maintain that whatever any community decides to be just and right, and establishes as such, actually is what is just and right for that community and for so long as it remains so established. On the other hand, when it is a question of what things are good, we no longer find anyone so heroic that he will venture to contend that whatever a community thinks useful, and establishes, really is useful, so long as it is the established order.³⁷

Socrates here restates the New Formulation of the maxim that we had at 171d-172b: instead of ‘advantageous’ (*sumpheron*) here we have ‘useful’ (*ophelimon*).³⁸ Except for this, what proclaimed here is perfectly consistent with what was stated before.³⁹ Socrates then adds “it is surely this [*sc.* the useful] that a government aims at when it legislates, whatever name it calls it. A community always makes such laws as are most useful to

³⁷ 177c7-d5.

³⁸ I shall use the two adjectives interchangeably, as synonymous.

³⁹ See McDowell, *Commentary*, 177.

it—so far as the limits of its judgements and capacity permit.”⁴⁰ The last sentence about the limits of the judgements of the city when it legislates causes Theodorus to answer negatively to Socrates’ question whether a community always achieves the useful.⁴¹

After that, Socrates starts a new discourse, putting “a question about the whole class of things to which ‘what is useful’ belongs.” He says that “these things are concerned, I take it, with future time; thus when we legislate, we make laws that are going to be useful in the time to come. This kind of thing we may properly call ‘future’.”⁴² He then goes back to Protagoras’ maxim, in its ‘individual’ meaning, offering the usual exegesis and saying that “He [*sc.* man] has the criterion of these things within himself; so when he thinks that they are as he experiences them, he thinks what is true and what really is for him.”⁴³ Lastly, he asks the following question:

⁴⁰ 177e4-6. The Greek reads: ἄλλ' ὃ ἂν τοῦτο ὀνομάζη, τούτου δήπου στοχάζεται νομοθετουμένη, καὶ πάντας τοὺς νόμους, καθ' ὅσον οἴεταί τε καὶ δύναται, ὡς ὠφελιμωτάτους ἑαυτῇ τίθεται.

⁴¹ 178a2-4.

⁴² 178a6-10. The Greek reads: εἰ περὶ παντός τις τοῦ εἴδους ἐρωτῶν ἐν ᾧ καὶ τὸ ὠφέλιμον τυγχάνει ὄν· ἔστι δέ που καὶ περὶ τὸν μέλλοντα χρόνον. ὅταν γὰρ νομοθετώμεθα, ὡς ἐσομένους ὠφελίμους τοὺς νόμους τιθέμεθα εἰς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον· τοῦτο δὲ “μέλλον” ὀρθῶς ἂν λέγοιμεν.

⁴³ 178b5-7. For the first time in the *Theaetetus*, we meet the word ‘criterion’ (*kriterion*) as referred to Protagoras’ maxim. This will happen again shortly, in the passage I am about to quote. *Kriterion* could be a Platonic coinage: it is true that it means “means for judging or trying, standard” (*LSJ*, s.v., quoting precisely *Tht.* 178b) but also “court of judgement, tribunal” (again *LSJ*, s.v., indicating *Lg.* 767b). Is Plato here suggesting that the standard of things that are going to be in the future (namely, the advantageous) is to be found in the court of judgement? It is worth remembering that *kriterion* is the word used by Sextus when he deals with Protagoras’ maxim. See *P.* 1.216, where Sextus says: “Protagoras also holds that ‘Man is the measure of all things, of existing things that they exist, and of non-existing things that they exist not’; and by ‘measure’ he means the criterion, and by ‘things’ the objects (...)” (tr. R.G. Bury).

Ἦ καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ἔσεσθαι, φήσομεν, ὦ Πρωταγόρα, ἔχει τὸ κριτήριον ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ οἷα ἂν οἰηθῆ ἔσεσθαι, ταῦτα καὶ γίγνεται ἐκείνῳ τῷ οἰηθέντι;

Then, Protagoras, we shall say, what about things that are going to be in the future? Has a man the criterion of these within himself? When he thinks certain things *will be*, do they actually happen, for him, as he thought they would?⁴⁴

Socrates then offers four examples, where he shows that those who have expertise on a subject are those who are better when it comes to say how things will turn out to be in the future. After that, he goes back to Protagoras' maxim, saying that "our question for the moment is, whether the individual himself is the best judge, for himself, of what is going to seem and be for him in the future."⁴⁵

The last part of the argument of this part is then introduced, when Socrates and Theodorus have the following dialogue:

ΣΩ. ἢ σύ, ὦ Πρωταγόρα, τό γε περὶ λόγους πιθανὸν ἐκάστῳ ἡμῶν ἐσόμενον εἰς δικαστήριον βέλτιον ἂν προδοξάσαις ἢ τῶν ἰδιωτῶν ὅστισοῦν;

ΘΕΟ. Καὶ μάλα, ὦ Σώκρατες, τοῦτό γε σφόδρα ὑπισχνεῖτο πάντων διαφέρειν αὐτός.

ΣΩ. Νῆ Δία, ὦ μέλε· ἢ οὐδεὶς γ' ἂν αὐτῷ διελέγετο διδοῦς πολὺ ἀργύριον, εἰ μὴ τοὺς συνόντας ἔπειθεν ὅτι καὶ τὸ μέλλον ἔσεσθαί τε καὶ δόξειν οὔτε μάντις οὔτε τις ἄλλος ἄμεινον κρίνειεν ἂν ἢ αὐτός [αὐτῷ].

ΘΕΟ. Ἀληθέστατα.

⁴⁴ 178b9-c2: the emphasis belongs to the translators.

⁴⁵ 178e2-3.

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν καὶ αἱ νομοθεσίαι καὶ τὸ ὠφέλιμον περὶ τὸ μέλλον ἐστί, καὶ πᾶς ἂν ὁμολογοῖ νομοθετουμένην πόλιν πολλάκις ἀνάγκην εἶναι τοῦ ὠφελιμωτάτου ἀποτυγχάνειν;

ΘΕΟ. Μάλα γε.

ΣΩ. Μετρίως ἄρα ἡμῖν πρὸς τὸν διδάσκαλόν σου εἰρήσεται ὅτι ἀνάγκη αὐτῷ ὁμολογεῖν σοφώτερόν τε ἄλλον ἄλλου εἶναι καὶ τὸν μὲν τοιοῦτον μέτρον εἶναι, ἐμοὶ δὲ τῷ ἀνεπιστήμονι μηδὲ ὅπωςτιοῦν ἀνάγκην εἶναι μέτρῳ γίνεσθαι, ὡς ἄρτι με ἠνάγκαζεν ὁ ὑπὲρ ἐκείνου λόγος, εἴτ' ἐβουλόμην εἶτε μή, τοιοῦτον εἶναι.

SOC. Or, will we ask, would not you, Protagoras, predict better than any layman about the persuasive effect that speeches in a law-court will have upon any one of us?

THEOD. And in fact, Socrates, this at any rate is a point on which Protagoras used to make strong claims to superiority over other people.

SOC. Of course he did, my dear good fellow. No one would have paid large fees for the privilege of talking with him if he had not been in the habit of persuading his pupils that he was a better judge than any fortune-teller—or anyone else—about what was going to be and seem in the future.

THEOD. That's true enough.

SOC. Legislation also and 'what is useful' is concerned with the future; and it would be generally admitted to be inevitable that a city when it legislates often fails to achieve what is the most useful.

THEOD. Yes, surely.

SOC. Then we shall be giving your master fair measure if we tell him that he has now got to admit that one man is wiser than another, and that it is such a man who is 'the measure'; but that I, the man with no special knowledge, have not by any means got to be a measure—a part which the recent speech in his defence was trying to force upon me, whether I liked it or not.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ 178e3-179b5.

Again, I have needed to quote a long excerpt, in order to try to make sense of Plato's own reasoning. As far as I can see, the argument of this last part goes like this. The New Formulation of the maxim has introduced the exception of two categories, the healthy and the advantageous. Here Socrates deals with the advantageous, that is, the exceptional category when the maxim is read in its political meaning (hence, the reason why 'legislation', 'laws', that is, *nomos* and its cognates, so frequently appears in this short passage). The advantageous has to include the future, since what is advantageous is such in the present, but mainly in the future. Protagoras' maxim should be valid also for forward-looking cases and to understand if this is the case, Socrates gives the four examples, which are all about individuals. For example in the case of the healthy, if a man thinks that tomorrow he will be feverishly hot and a doctor thinks the opposite, the doctor is very likely to be right and the ordinary man wrong.⁴⁷ This would imply that the (ordinary) man is not the measure of what will be for him in the future, as far as individual cases are concerned. But such a conclusion remains valid also as far as political cases are concerned. As far as the advantageous is concerned, it should be admitted that when it legislates, a city often fails to achieve what is the most useful. With this last result, Plato thinks Protagoras' maxim, read in its political meaning, is refuted⁴⁸ (the maxim is actually wholly refuted in

⁴⁷ 178c1-7.

⁴⁸ The whole section, i.e. 177c-179b and mainly 178c-e (where the four examples are expounded) is generally taken as a further and once again *general* refutation of Protagoras' Defence. For instance, see Cornford (*PTK*, 89 and 92), where he writes that "Socrates proceeds to refute the defence he put forward earlier on Protagoras' behalf." I do not see this as fully correct. Socrates sets forth four examples, where it is shown that the man with expertise on a certain subject is better in judging than the ordinary man. I do not think this goes against Protagoras' idea of *sophia* as expressed in the Defence. The only case in which I assume that Plato is going against Protagoras' *sophia* is the one of the politician. The Sophist claimed that the wise politician is the one who can "replace each pernicious convention by a wholesome one" (164c6); the wholesome has then turned out to be the advantageous and eventually the useful. The Digression has previously shown the contrast between the true philosopher (with his real wisdom, the truth) and the man of the law-court (with his different wisdom, let us say a political wisdom). The law-court man is clearly meant to represent Protagoras; it is he

Plato's opinion, since it has already been shown as self-refuting when read as a Theory of Perception in a passage that has not been taken into account.)⁴⁹

who ought to be the wise political man who should know what is the most advantageous for the city. But this is not the case: the Sophist's *sophia* is not the right *sophia*, or at least the *sophia* the city needs, since the Sophist often fails to grasp what is the most useful for the city. Protagoras' claim that he is good at that is thus rejected and with it Protagoras' idea of (political) wisdom. I take this section therefore as directed against the idea of (political) *sophia* expressed in the second part of Defence and not against the whole idea of *sophia* there expressed (that the two ideas of *sophia* there expounded are similar and perfectly compatible does not seem to me to affect my reasoning). The passage currently under scrutiny may be taken, I claim, as a *partial* refutation of Protagoras' maxim, since it pretends to show its (the maxim's) inconsistency, when it is understood in its political meaning. I take the partial nature of Plato's supposed refutation as the main difference between my own interpretation of the passage and what in the following lines I shall be calling its common and shared interpretation.

⁴⁹ See 169d-171d, especially 170a3-171c7. The claim that Protagoras' maxim is self-refuting has been rather common and widely shared since Plato's time (see S.E., *M.* 7.389-390 on the very famous *peritrope* argument that Democritus first advanced against Protagoras' dictum). The question, which involves also a more general one, i.e. whether the profession of any relativism is self-refuting, has so far had no clear answer. As far as Protagoras' alleged relativism and its self-refutation are concerned, I shall deal with it briefly in this note. I shall not spend more time on this issue, since I think it is of secondary importance for the present inquiry. The present work has been attempting a reconstruction of Protagoras' own actual doctrine from Plato's testimonies, which have revealed themselves to be mixed, partially genuine, partially modified, to serve Plato's own purposes. I take Plato's argument about Protagoras' self-refutation as mainly aimed at refuting Protagoras' doctrine as *Plato understood it and from his own point of view* (that is, the point of view of the Platonic truth). In other words, the Platonic reasoning about Protagoras' self-refutation seems to me to be based upon Plato's own understanding of Protagorean epistemology, an understanding that is undoubtedly different from the one I have been expounding so far. The self-refutation argument is therefore directed against something that is not the interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine offered in this work and thus such self-refutation is really secondary for this inquiry.

The little importance that the *peritrope* has for this work is then made even less, if we look at the outcome of the self-refutation argument. It is still disputed whether Plato succeeds in refuting Protagoras (this making a pair with the similar ambiguity about the more general claim already advanced, that is, whether relativism is generally self-refuting). The majority of scholars tend to admit that Plato is *not* successful in doing so: see McDowell (*Commentary*, 169-171) and his rather clear summary of Plato's argument. I shall sum up McDowell's understanding of the whole argument briefly. For Protagoras, all judgements are true for those who make them (P), but all men believe that some judgements are false (Q, empirical premiss). As for (P), it may be (i) true or (ii) false. Either way, (P) is false: this is patently true for (ii) and true also in the case



The scholarship on this passage tends to read it as a further and again a general refutation of Protagoras' maxim, since it is assumed that this passage shows that the advantageous is such (in the future) in an objective way. What will turn out to be advantageous for the city (and, more generally, all of what will be in the future) is objectively such.⁵⁰ If we take this shared interpretation of the passage as a good one and if we credit Plato with the very intention of showing Protagoras at last as completely refuted, we are left with little help towards knowing Protagoras' actual position on the advantageous (and on the healthy). The New Formulation has introduced these two categories as exceptional and so far we have had no hint to enable us to understand whether this treatment of them as exceptional is Platonic or really Protagorean. The 'objective' interpretation of 177c-179b does not help to answer the question, for this interpretation is compatible with both the possible answers one can give to the question. If the idea of the exceptional nature of the advantageous were really Protagorean, here Plato would be doing

of (i), given (Q). The implication from (P) that any proposition is true for those who judge it to be so and false for those who judge it to be so is then derived. Such an implication of (P) is then applied to (P) itself, taking (Q) into account. If (Q) includes Protagoras, there is no one for whom (P) is true. If (Q) does not include Protagoras, two conclusions are said to follow. To quote McDowell directly, "First, since more people believe that (P) is false than believe that it is true, it is more the case that it is not the truth than it is. Second, applying the implication of (4) [the one drawn just above] to (P) itself, Protagoras must concede that (P) is false (for those who judge it to be false: but this qualification is omitted at 171b1-2). Moving to higher-order judgements, he must concede that his opponents' judgement, to the effect that their judgement that (P) is false is true, is true (for them: again, this qualification is omitted at 171b6-7). This is represented as the abandonment of (P) by Protagoras himself. Hence, again, there is no one for whom (P) is true." As far as I can see, the weakness of Plato's argument is due to the use of the empirical premiss (Q) and to the dropping of the qualifier 'for x' at some crucial points of the reasoning. Such a weakness is stressed by those who think Protagoras as not refuted: McDowell *cit.*, Vlastos [240], Bostock ([87], 89-92), among the others. The best arguments for asserting that Protagoras is actually refuted by Plato are those famously advanced by Myles Burnyeat in [93] (on which, see Fine [123]).

⁵⁰ See Burnyeat (*Intr.*, 40-42, although with some reserve); McDowell (*Commentary*, 177-79); Cornford (*PTK*, *loc. cit.*, n. 151). Protagoras' maxim seems not to need to rely upon any application in the future to remain in force. Few words have been devoted to the maxim in relation to the future: see Cooper [109].

his philosophical job of showing that the advantageous is objectively such. If Plato himself made the advantageous an exceptional category for Protagoras' doctrine because he thought of the advantageous as objectively such, here he would be just making his assumption explicit and showing Protagoras' own misunderstanding of the point. Either way, we seem to have nothing to indicate Protagoras' own position. However, I claim that a different interpretation of the passage would help us both to understand it better and to assess the credibility of the exceptional nature of the advantageous within the Protagorean framework.

The interpretation of the passage I am referring to derives in a obvious way from the argument I have myself just outlined, in order to try to make sense of the whole passage. Socrates first speaks of the useful, then of future time, and eventually goes back to the useful, making plain that Protagoras is not good at foreseeing what is the most advantageous for the city.⁵¹ I do not think that the common and widely shared interpretation of the passage makes good sense of Plato' argument, since it provides a rather weak explanation of Plato's move in introducing the future (and its relation to the advantageous). This interpretation says that Plato introduces future time into the discussion because what is advantageous will be such *objectively* in the future. But this does not seem to me to be the case. The category of the advantageous is a rather 'subjectivistic' category: what is useful to me may be not to you, and vice versa: more generally, to use Protagoras' words in the *Protagoras* about the good, "so varied and many-sided a thing is goodness."⁵² Moreover, what is advantageous seems to be *subjectively* such also in the future.

Let us take an example from my ordinary life. I have been really under pressure for months, because of the writing up of my thesis. Yesterday I felt exhausted so I planned to spend one day on a beach: I had the idea that it would be useful for me to be away from Protagoras for a while. I asked my girlfriend to join me and she did so. We went

⁵¹ See above, 99-100.

⁵² On the good and the useful (*o^{ph}elimos*) as relational expressions, see *Prt.* 333e5-334c6. See also G. von Wright [279].

somewhere in Tuscany and we spent all day on a wonderful beach, under the pale but still warm sun of September. I came back really restored last night. Today I am writing much quicker than two days ago, my mind being active. I can obviously describe the day on the beach with my girlfriend as a pleasant and useful day for me. What I thought yesterday as being useful for me turned out to be such for me today. Things have turned out rather different for my girlfriend. She was feeling feverishly hot yesterday, when I asked her to join me. She did not tell me anything of that but she knew it would be not useful for her to be in the sun and spend a whole day on the beach. She came anyway, but today she is lying on her bed, since she has a severe fever. What she thought of as being not useful for her turned out to be such for her today. Curiously, what I have experienced as useful has been felt as not such by her. Being on a beach and lying down under a sun may be described as useful for me but not for my girlfriend.⁵³

⁵³ I do not think that the undeniable fact that I am often wrong in foreseeing what will be the most advantageous for me will affect my argument. I can be wrong but this does not prove that the advantageous is objective and objectively assessed. The possibility that I am mistaken does not tell us anything more than that, namely that I can be mistaken. This is true for the case of the advantageous but also for the other cases put forward by Socrates in his examples, i.e. those of the doctor, of the musician and so on. It is true that those who have expertise on a certain subject are better able to predict what is going to happen but it remains true as well that they themselves may be wrong in their prediction. That is, the possibility of being mistaken is intrinsically connected with the human condition. To say that this is more likely to happen to those who have less expertise seems to me a rather weak argument for holding some categories, values or things to be objective.

This discourse runs parallel to the one about Protagoras' maxim in relation to the future. Is it correct to say, with Burnyeat, that "to hold that judgements about the future come within the scope of the Measure Doctrine is to hold that (in the striking phrase introduced at 178b) I have within myself the criterion of what will happen tomorrow" (*Intr*, 40)? I am not so sure that it is. If it is, what follows for Protagoras' alleged relativism? I find Burnyeat's suggestion on how to combine this claim about Protagoras' maxim in relation to the future (let us call it MF) and a relativistic point of view quite interesting. Since his suggestion concerns personal identity, I shall quote it. He writes (*Intr*, 40-41): "Consider (1) It seems to me on Monday that on Tuesday my temperature will be feverishly hot (...). [Given MF], from (1) we may infer (2) It is true for me on Monday that on Tuesday my temperature will be feverishly hot. But the Measure Doctrine has something to say about Tuesday: (3) it is true for me on Tuesday that my temperature is feverishly hot if and only if on

Finally, the useful does not seem to have the privileged link with future time that has been ascribed to it by Plato, or at least such a link is not more privileged than the one that other categories have with the advantageous. I read Plato's own words on "the whole class of things to which 'what is useful' belongs" as his own awareness of the great variety of the things included in such a class.⁵⁴ What is useful will be such in the future, obviously, but also in the present: what is now advantageous for me now will be not so tomorrow. So, why does Plato introduce future time, so establishing a special connection between it and

Tuesday I feel feverishly hot. Now suppose that (as the doctor in 178b predicts) on Tuesday I do not feel in the least bit hot or feverish. Then (3) tells us it is not true for me on Tuesday that I am hot—and doesn't this contradict the conclusion already drawn at (2)? (...). Evidently the contradiction, if it is one, is due to the supposition that the Measure Doctrine vests the authority to decide how things are for me on Tuesday both with my Monday's self and with my Tuesday's self, who may disagree. But now, might our relativist challenge the assumption that the two selves can disagree in this way? There are occasions when my belief that I will enjoy a feast (an example from 178de) brings it about that, when the time comes, I do; and it is not difficult to imagine a similar story for Tuesday's temperature (...). What kind of a world would it be if *whatever* I predicted on Monday came to pass on Tuesday *because* I had predicted it? If that seems close to incoherent, we might imagine the relativist, on a different tack, exploiting the Heraclitean thought that Monday's and Tuesday's selves are two, not one and the same persisting person." Burnyeat then says that this suggestion is similar to the one Protagoras seems to have made about the past, when he claimed that "a man who remembers something he saw yesterday but does not still see now, allegedly both knows (because he remembers) and does not know (because he no longer sees) that thing (163d-164b)." In his Defence Protagoras offers several alternative lines of reply, one of which is to deny that it is the same person who first sees the thing and then sees it no longer (...). The suggestion is not developed, but its effect is to break the objective connection we ordinarily assume to hold between memory and previous experience. And this could lead to a strongly verificationist reduction of the past to present memory experience (...). There would be no problem, on this view, if Monday's self and Tuesday's self have different impressions on what happened on Sunday (...), nor therefore if Monday's self and Tuesday's disagree about Monday: Monday's present does not become Tuesday's past. Now, could the relativist adopt an analogous strategy for the future? How would it work out? Are there asymmetries between past and future which would make it peculiarly difficult to transfer the strategy to the future?"

⁵⁴ See Burnyeat (*Intr*, 41): "In one way or another enormous numbers of present-tense judgements carry implications for the future; Plato's example was judgements about what is advantageous, but the reader will easily add more."

the advantageous? I suggest that in doing so Plato may be referring to and relying upon what Josiah Ober has called ‘democratic knowledge’.⁵⁵

3.4 Democratic Knowledge.

Borrowing some ideas and analysis from Michel Foucault (‘regime of truth’)⁵⁶ and J.L. Austin (performative speech),⁵⁷ Ober comes to define the concept of democratic knowledge. He writes:

Athenian democracy depended for its functioning on a socially and politically constructed ‘regime of truth’ that we may call ‘democratic knowledge’ (...). Democratic knowledge was grounded, in the language of J.L. Austin’s speech-act theory, on understanding the world of politics as ‘the conventional effects of conventional procedures’. Thus the conventional procedures of the democracy (deliberating and voting) led to conventional effects (decrees and judgements of the *dikasteria* to which the citizens adhered). These conventions were created and maintained through constant, collective, public practice. Moreover, democratic debate was open, and neither speakers nor decision makers needed to be acknowledged experts. The Athenians simply assumed that political truth was dialectical (...).⁵⁸ Again, “Athenian political culture was based on collective opinion rather than on certain knowledge, and on the assumption that opinion could be translated into practical reality through democratic political process. The enactment formula of the Athenian Assembly—*edoxe toi demoi*—‘it appeared right to the citizenry—defines the relationship between

⁵⁵ I owe this suggestion to my supervisor, Christopher Rowe. On democratic knowledge as elaborated by Ober, see mainly [227] and [228], 33-36.

⁵⁶ See mainly M. Foucault [257].

⁵⁷ See J.L. Austin [248].

⁵⁸ Ober, [227], 82.

democratic knowledge and political action. What the demos collectively opined was given, through the act of voting, the status of fact (...). Athenian political practice and policy remained flexible because in frequent meetings of the assembly and the people's court contrasting views were publicly aired. Through the process of open debate, the democratic way of knowing, speaking, and acting evolved in response to changing external circumstances.⁵⁹

Ober's words look like a perfect historical comment on Protagoras' maxim, when it is taken in its political meaning.⁶⁰ Just for argument's sake, let me recall some bits of the New Formulation of the maxim, when Socrates says: "Then consider political questions. Some of these are questions of what may or may not fittingly be done, of just and unjust, of what is sanctioned by religion and what is not; and here the theory may be prepared to maintain *that whatever view a city takes of these matters and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city.*" Or later, when he states: "It is in those other questions I am talking about—just and unjust, religious and irreligious—that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; *in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems.*"⁶¹ The resemblance between what Socrates says and Ober's analysis of democratic procedures in classical fifth and fourth century B.C. Athens is striking and becomes more so, if we understand the two main features that Ober ascribes to democratic knowledge, namely that democratic knowledge seeks the most advantageous for the city and is forward-looking.

Ober examines one of the most exemplary cases of political discussion we can find in Ancient Greek literature, the Corcyrean/Corinthian debate held in the Athenian

⁵⁹ Ober, [227], 83.

⁶⁰ See above, mainly p. 64 ff.

⁶¹ Respectively 172a1-5 and 172b1-6 (my emphases).

Assembly, in Thucydides' *Histories*.⁶² From the reading of the Corcyrean/Corinthian debate, we understand how democratic knowledge aims at reaching what is most advantageous for the city in the future. That is, the decisions taken in public assemblies and during public discussion among the members of a community have as their goal that of establishing what (or what action) seems to be the most advantageous for their community in the future.⁶³ In delivering their speech, the Corcyreans try to convince Athens to become their allies, on the grounds that would be very advantageous for the Athenians.⁶⁴ The stress on concern about the future (together with a restatement of the advantageous as the goal of political decisions) that political discussion will carry with it, may be found in the middle of the speech. As Ober puts it,

in order to make their interest and power-based argument, the Corcyreans must instruct the audience on several general principles that determine advantage in interstate conduct: (...) allying

⁶² See Th. 1.31.4-1.44-3.

⁶³ The modalities of the discussion and thus the practical features of democratic knowledge (how it is formed and gained, mainly) are expounded, in Ober's opinion, in Pericles' Funeral Oration (again, Thucydides, 2.35.1-2.45.1). The core of the passage (2.40.2-3) runs: "We ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider words (*logous*) to be an impediment to actions (*ergois*), but rather [regard it] essential to be previously instructed (...) by speech (*logoi*) before embarking on necessary actions (*ergoi*). We are peculiar also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who debate what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance (*amathia*) leads to rashness, while reasoned debate (*logismos*) just bogs them down" (Ober's translation). Ober's analysis on this passage ("virtually a definition of democratic knowledge and its relation to enactment and action") may be found in [227], 90-96.

⁶⁴ Ober writes ([227], 87): "The first word in the Corcyreans' speech is the abstraction *dikaion*, 'just', but their appeal is explicitly aimed at Athenian self-interest. The Corcyreans states (1.32.1) that they know they will fail in their goal if they do not clearly establish (...) that the alliance will be advantageous (*sumphora*) for Athens and that the gratitude (*charis*) of the Corcyreans will be secure (...). The key to the Corcyrean argument is that the addition of Corcyra's *dynamis* (specifically her naval force) to that of Athens will make Athens more powerful and better able to resist enemies (esp. 1.33.2, 1.35.5). Thus the Corcyrean argument is explicitly based on precisely those factors that Thucydides' history attempts to elucidate—power and human nature as motivated by self-interest."

with a state whose enemies are the same as one's own will bring great advantage (1.35.5) (...). The Corcyreans also discuss the effects making or not making the alliance will have on the probable course of the future. They confidently predict that there will be a war (...). If the Athenians do ally with Corcyra, this show of strength 'will cause your enemies to be more fearful' (...) and correspondingly less eager to launch an attack (...).⁶⁵

Democratic knowledge is therefore a kind of knowledge (since it is a way by which men understand and make sense of things and facts)⁶⁶ that may be called 'democratic', for it has its birth in assemblies, where political decisions for an advantageous future are to be taken. That knowledge may be seen as one of the (theoretical) features of classical fifth and fourth century Greece and of its culture. More precisely, the idea of democratic knowledge may be thought of as fully operative in the most representative Greek *polis* of that time, Athens, the Athens of Pericles, the Athens of the Sophists.⁶⁷ It is not unlikely that in the New Formulation of Protagoras' maxim (where the exceptional nature of the advantageous is introduced) and in what comes afterward (namely the role of advantageous as intrinsically forward-looking), Plato is relying upon what I have so far called (following Ober's suggestion) 'democratic knowledge'. In doing so, Plato is likely to be mixing genuine Protagorean material with something that is not such, drawing some non-Protagorean consequence.

⁶⁵ Ober [227], 87.

⁶⁶ That democratic knowledge is a way through which men make sense of things and facts is better understood, if we read the whole of Ober's article. Here the way of understanding the past and the present and thus foreseeing the future typical of democratic knowledge is compared with a different way of so doing, that is to Thucydides' historical knowledge, the way the historian thought better to make sense of (historical) reality.

⁶⁷ On Pericles/Protagoras, see above, 4.

As far as I can see, in the New Formulation⁶⁸ Plato introduces the advantageous as an exceptional category for the domain of Protagoras' maxim, not because he is representing Protagoras' real position but because he has already in mind the connection between the advantageous and the future he is going to establish later on, at 177c-179b. That Plato may be going to describe a non-Protagorean position, or at least a position that is not Protagorean but that he thinks Protagoras could have shared, is better grasped, if we remember the troubled sentence relating to "those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom."⁶⁹ As already said, I have taken this sentence as indicating those who stop short of Protagoras' philosophical position but who would have agreed with him about the truth of the Protagorean principle that "what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems" (172b5-6).

I have taken then the troubled sentence, together with the whole passage 172a1-c1, as indicating a profession of general shared moral relativism.⁷⁰ We may now understand such a sentence as Plato's own warning to the reader that he is widening Protagoras' own doctrine beyond its genuine and actual limits, towards a more general position, probably shared by the common educated man of the fifth/fourth century Greece. In Plato's opinion, I suggest, this common man (not philosophically minded), and Protagoras too (philosophically rather powerful), would agree about what I have called a profession of general shared moral relativism, one that may now be described as an example of democratic knowledge.

⁶⁸ See above, § 3.1. As seen in that paragraph, the New Formulation of Protagoras' maxim is this: (M) = (P-He) + (EJ-Ad). That is, Protagoras' maxim (M) is valid if and only if its domain is (P-He) and (EJ-Ad), where the last brackets indicate all ethical judgements, except for those concerning the advantageous, whereas the first brackets indicate all perceptions but not those concerning the healthy.

⁶⁹ See above, p. 85, n. 18.

⁷⁰ See above, p. 88 ff.

An application of democratic knowledge, together with an allusion to a more common position (compared to Protagoras' more sophisticated one) on political things, may be found in the last bit of the Protagorean section (177c-179b). As we have seen, Plato shows here that the advantageous (literally, the useful) is forward-looking, thus revealing the main feature of what we have so far labelled democratic knowledge. In doing that, Plato seems to be assuming that the crude political meaning (the one stated at 166b6) of Protagoras' maxim relies upon, or is better understood by, or has as its unavoidable consequence, the idea of democratic knowledge. Plato seems to be suggesting that Protagoras, when he proclaims that "for each city, things are what they seem to be" (166b6), is unaware of the philosophical consequence one might draw from it. The following, I claim, may have been Plato's argument: (1) "for each city, things are what they seem to be" implies that (2) "what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems" (172b5-6, at the end of the New Formulation). This last clause makes complete sense, if it is linked with the idea of democratic knowledge, namely with the idea that (3) when it legislates, each city aims at reaching what seems to be the most advantageous for it in the future.

If taken as true in its basic political meaning, Protagoras' maxim drives us towards accepting the theory of democratic knowledge, a false theory for Plato, since "it would be generally admitted to be inevitable that a city when it legislates often fails to achieve what is the most useful" (179a6-8). Once again, Protagoras was not—for Plato—clear-minded enough to grasp fully the consequence of his doctrine. I say once again, since Plato has attempted to show that the Protagorean Theory of Perception that arises from the first reading of the maxim leads us immediately and inevitably to accept a kind of Theory of Flux that may support and make coherent such a Theory of Perception.⁷¹ In this first case, of individual perceptions, I hope to have convincingly demonstrated that the Protagorean Theory of Perception does not have any philosophical need of an Heraclitean Theory of

⁷¹ See above, mainly pp. 31 ff.

Flux to be coherent. I hope that also in this second case, relating to political matters, it is obvious that the Protagorean Theory of Society generated by the collective reading of the maxim is not intended to entail a theory of democratic knowledge.

Whilst in the case of the Theory of Perception I had to spend a good deal of energy in order to show the Theory of Flux to be philosophically unnecessary for the Theory of Perception, things are easier in the new case. The logical gap between (2) and (3) in what I have proposed as Plato's own argument is great, since (2) and (3) are merely juxtaposed, like the two faces of a coin, neither of the two necessarily implying the other. The gap seems to be clear also to Plato: in the case of the Theory of Perception, he speaks of veiled truth and oracular allusions,⁷² in order to suggest an ambiguity of the Theory of Perception that will be dissipated by the introduction of the Theory of Flux. On the other hand, as far as the Theory of Society is concerned, Plato is openly admitting that he is going further than Protagoras' doctrine would allow, when he says that "those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom."⁷³ The lack of consistency in Plato's argument may be evident also from the weakness of his alleged refutation of Protagoras' maxim, when understood in its political meaning. To infer from a purely empirical premiss (i.e. that cities often fail to understand what is most advantageous for them), one that is thought of as being highly probable but not certain, the refutation of Protagoras' maxim (taken in its political interpretation) seems to me a rather weak refutation (if it is one at all).⁷⁴

If my suggestion is a good one and my argument coherent, we can reasonably state that in the last development of the meaning of Protagoras' maxim (from the New

⁷² See above, 32.

⁷³ See above, pp. 85 ff.

⁷⁴ I take the sentence "it would be generally admitted to be inevitable that a city when it legislates often fails to achieve what is the most useful" (179a6-8) as such an empirical premiss. The weakness of this second alleged refutation of Protagoras' maxim is more obvious, if we remember the highly sophisticated attempt to refute the maxim that Plato produced at 169d-171d (see above, p. 101, n. 49).

Formulation onwards), Plato is relying upon concepts and ideas that are likely not to be Protagorean. Such ideas and concepts are more likely to belong to a shared political substratum, which Ober has seen as dominated by the cultural strength of the idea of democratic knowledge. The theory of democratic knowledge works as the Theory of Flux has previously done, namely by introducing something spurious into Protagoras' doctrine. As far as I can see, the advantageous has no special role in Protagoras' opinion nor is there any special concern for Protagoras about the future (or about the application of his maxim to the future). Were all this to be correct, both historically and philosophically, we should assume that Protagoras' actual position on political matters is the following one. To recall what was stated above as a summing up of Plato's conjectured argument, for Protagoras it is true that (1) for each city, things are what they seem to be and (2) what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems. (2) is valid not only for just and unjust, religious and irreligious, but also for the advantageous.

With this last result, it seems that I have finished my handling of Protagorean themes in the *Theaetetus*. It has been a very exciting journey, although a rather difficult one. I may compare it with the work a food expert who is eating a rather sophisticated dish. Asked about the ingredients of the dish, he has to employ all his expertise to understand the nature and kind of the ingredients. I have used all my philosophical strength, first to assess what material is really Protagorean in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and then to make sense of it. I hope to have provided a reasonable, coherent and genuine picture of Protagoras' epistemology. Such an epistemology has two faces, since it concerns the perceptual sphere of the individual and the ethical sphere of the *polis*. Protagoras' maxim that man is the measure of all things may be read in two ways, the first allowing the perceptual autonomy of the individual, the second the ethical autonomy of the *polis*. In any case, Protagoras' epistemology, as so far reconstructed, seems to be a rather complete theory of knowledge,

where with 'complete' I mean that it deals both with the individualistic and the collective side of human life.

What I wish finally to emphasise is that Protagoras' epistemology is *not only* a naive theory of perceptual knowledge, as often claimed.⁷⁵ I have so far avoided labelling Protagoras' epistemological positions. But, if we wished to label them, I would rather take his epistemological position on individual's perceptions as an inter-subjectivist position and his epistemological position on the ethical judgements of the *polis* as something close to moral relativism. If, as far as the individual's perceptions are concerned, my reconstruction of Protagoras' epistemological position is correct, I shall see the principle of 'Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy' as an inter-subjectivist principle, rather than as a relativistic one. If my reconstruction of Protagoras' doctrine about the ethical judgements of the *polis* is correct, I shall by contrast take the principle of 'Ethical Autonomy' as something close to a principle that proclaims a kind of moral relativism. As far as I can see, such epistemological positions and principles are those that Plato allows Protagoras to state in the *Theaetetus*. Let us now see if this epistemological picture is confirmed, wholly, or partially, or not at all, in the other Platonic dialogue which gives extended coverage to Protagoras, the *Protagoras*.

⁷⁵ See C. Swoyer, 'True for', in Krausz-Meiland [268], 84-108.

4 Protagoras in the *Protagoras*.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides
what is true and false?”—
It is what human beings *say* that is true and false;
and they agree in the *language* they use.
That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.¹

L. Wittgenstein

The *Protagoras* is a dialogue on virtue and on the connected problem whether virtue can be taught.² As far as I can see, the philosophical core of the whole dialogue is the section on *akrasia* (or weakness of the will) that still nowadays remains one of the most interesting and puzzling problems of moral philosophy.³ From the point of view of the

¹ *Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations)*, I: 1945; II: 1947-1949, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees editors, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953 (standard edition), §241. To refer to Wittgenstein's *Investigations* in this chapter, I shall use the abbreviation *PI*.

² As far as the translation of *arete* is concerned, see Taylor (*PRT*, 74): “‘Excellence’ is used here [*sc.* at 319e2] and generally (...) to render the Greek *arete*. This word functions as the abstract noun from the adjective ‘good’; anything which is a good *x*, or (generally equivalent) which does well the activity which is characteristic of *x*'s *ipso facto* possesses the *arete* of or appropriate to *x*'s (...). Greek conceptions of what made a man an excellent or admirable man differed widely at different periods: thus in Homeric society *arete* consisted primarily of prowess in warfare and personal splendour, while the standard fifth-century conception placed much more emphasis on social attributes such as fair dealing and self-restraint (...), at the same time assigning a central place to intellectual attainments (e.g. *Prot.* 329e-330a, *Ar.* EN VI). The conventional rendering ‘virtue’, with its specifically moral connotations, is thus highly misleading; while fifth-century Greeks did indeed count some moral virtues as prominent among the qualities that make a man a good man, they recognized much else besides.”

³ The section on *akrasia* runs from 351b to the end of the dialogue. As Santas puts it ([232], 3), “in a case of weakness a man does something that he knows or believes he should (ought) not do, or fails to do something that he knows or believes he should do, when the occasion and the opportunity for acting or refraining is present, and when it is in his power, in some significant sense, to act in accordance with his knowledge or

present inquiry, two points are to be made before I enter into the detailed analysis of the dialogue. Firstly, the *Protagoras* is a less epistemological dialogue than the *Theaetetus*, to the extent that it mainly deals with problems of moral philosophy. Such a feature suggests that the *Protagoras* may offer less strong help for the reconstruction of Protagoras' theory of knowledge. Although this is true, I suggest that readers of the *Protagoras* who want to understand or, at least, to get a hold on Protagoras' epistemology should avoid underestimating in advance the real help the dialogue may offer. The *Protagoras*, I claim (and this is the second point I wish to make), provides a good coverage of the political side of Protagoras' epistemology, viz. of what in the previous chapter I have called the application of Protagoras' maxim to the *polis*.⁴ This side of Protagoras' epistemology is exactly the one that the *Theaetetus* leaves open for discussion, with some shadowy zones to be illuminated.⁵ The *Protagoras* may thus be regarded as the right instrument for dissipating the persisting obscurity in Protagoras' theory of knowledge about the relationship between individualistic (epistemological) autonomy and collective, or at least pluralistic, (epistemological) needs and priorities.

On the relationship between the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, and their relative usefulness for reconstructing Protagoras' philosophy, Adolfo Levi writes:

[S]cholars, when speaking of him [*sc.* Protagoras], start from the *Theaetetus* which in the first part presents and discusses the Protagorean dictum: they either neglect another dialogue that bears his name and in which he appears as the principal interlocutor with Socrates, or, recognising that he is credited in it with statements seemingly inconsistent with those contained in the *Theaetetus*, try to

belief." On *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*, see Santas [232], Vlastos [241], Klosko [214]; for a modern account of weakness of the will, see R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford 1963 (especially 67-85), and Davidson [199]. For an interesting comparison between the Platonic solution to the problem of *akrasia*, namely the one offered in the *Protagoras*, and a modern one, namely the one given by Donald Davidson, see Penner [229].

⁴ See above, pp. 64 ff.

⁵ See above, pp. 93 ff.

get rid of the disagreement by showing that the doctrines of the *Protagoras* can be reconciled with the famous dictum. In any case, however, the man-measure principle is taken as the starting point for the interpretation of the sophist's thought. Now, this procedure, which may seem quite natural, appears instead questionable when we consider that the *Protagoras* presents the sophist as still living in the full exercise of his activity, while the *Theaetetus* speaks of him as of a dead man, and, after having recalled and discussed his saying, conjures his shadow from Hades, in order that he may defend it from the criticisms levelled against it. If one does not wish to discredit the whole of Plato's evidence, one must acknowledge the fundamental importance of the *Protagoras* (in which the principle discussed in the *Theaetetus* is not even mentioned), and through it try to reconstruct the thought of the sophist, interpreting, along the lines thus laid down, the evidence offered by the other dialogue.⁶

The argument offered by Levi for asserting, as far as Protagoras' doctrine is concerned, the priority of the *Protagoras* to the *Theaetetus*, namely that in the former the sophist is represented as still living and in the full exercise of his activity, while the latter speaks of him as of a dead man, seems to me rather weak. Nill's approach is more cautious and acceptable. He writes:

I shall not follow the approach of those commentators who adopt a skeptical interpretation of the man-measure principle as their starting point for analyzing Protagoras' moral views. After all, it is not even certain that the man-measure principle ought to be interpreted as a doctrine of skeptical relativism; and even if it was such a doctrine, there is no historical evidence to indicate that Protagoras applied it to ethical matters. Thus, my approach will be to give separate, independent analyses of Protagoras' positions in the *Protagoras* and in the *Theaetetus* and then to discuss

⁶ Levi [219], 285-6.

whether there are conflicts between Protagoras' views in the two dialogues and whether these conflicts can be reconciled.⁷

In my attempt to understand Protagoras' epistemology as a whole, I shall adopt Nill's approach and see whether the interpretation of the *Protagoras* I shall be offering may be reconciled with (my own interpretation of) the *Theaetetus*.

That being so, for the purpose of the present inquiry the most important section of the whole dialogue is the so-called Great Speech,⁸ where Protagoras is supposed to illustrate, together with an historical account of human progress, his idea of political 'virtue'. Let us turn to it.

4.1 The Great Speech.

On behalf of Hippocrates, who wishes to be taught by a Sophist, Socrates asks Protagoras about what benefit a young man will derive from associating with him.⁹ Protagoras says:

ὦ νεανίσκε, ἔσται τοίνυν σοι, εἰ μὲν ἐμοὶ συνῆς, ἢ ἂν ἡμέρα ἐμοὶ συγγένη, ἀπιέναι οἴκαδε βελτίονι γεγονότι, καὶ ἐν τῇ ὑστεραίᾳ ταῦτα ταῦτα· καὶ ἐκάστης ἡμέρας ἀεὶ ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιον ἐπιδιδόναι.

⁷ Nill [225], 4-5.

⁸ That is, from 320c to 328d.

⁹ 318a3-4.

Young man [*sc.* Hippocrates] (...), if you associate with me, this is the benefit you will gain: the very day you become my pupil you will go home a better man, and the same the next day; and every day you will continue to make progress.¹⁰

Protagoras' words immediately give rise to Socrates' objection: *at what* will Hippocrates be better, and in *what respect*?¹¹ To that question, Protagoras replies:

τὸ δὲ μάθημά ἐστιν εὐβουλία περὶ τῶν οἰκείων, ὅπως ἂν ἄριστα τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν διοικοῖ, καὶ περὶ τῶν τῆς πόλεως, ὅπως τὰ τῆς πόλεως δυνατώτατος ἂν εἴη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν.

What I teach is the proper management (*euboulia*) of one's own affairs, how best to run one's household, and the management of public affairs, how to make the most effective contribution to the affairs of the city both by word and action.¹²

Once having offered such a brief explanation of the meaning of the term 'euboulia', Protagoras might be expected to provide further comment on the double-sided aspect of *euboulia*, i.e. private *euboulia* and public *euboulia*. Rather surprisingly, Protagoras and Socrates shift the whole discussion to the public variety of *euboulia*, equating it (again,

¹⁰ 318a6-9.

¹¹ 318d1-4.

¹² 318e5-319a2. *Euboulia* means, literally, 'good counsel', thus 'soundness of judgement' (*LSJ*, s.v.). For a philosophical use of the term, see *Arist.*, *EN* VI.9.1142b6; on *euboulia* with respect to both private and public affairs, see also *Grg.* 520e. Maguire ([222], 104-105) takes Protagoras' claim to teach *euboulia* as the only genuine Protagorean pronouncement to be found in the whole dialogue. He writes: "Plato begins with what may be the only authentic pronouncement of Protagoras in the entire Dialogue: his profession, he says (explaining his claim to make his students 'better', 318a), is to teach them 'sound judgement' (*euboulia*) about their own proper affairs—how to administer their own households in the best way; and about the affairs of the city—how to be most capable in executing them and in speaking about them (318e)."

rather surprisingly) with the capacity to “make men into good citizens.”¹³ From this point of the dialogue onwards, the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates focuses on political virtue and on the connected problem whether such virtue is teachable.¹⁴ In order to show his own belief that political virtue is indeed teachable, Protagoras delivers the Great Speech. He will not expend a word on the private, individualistic side of *euboulia* (except for a short passage, on which I shall say something later in this chapter).¹⁵

Translating Protagoras’ claim to teach *euboulia* into the claim to make men into good citizens and thus to teach them the political virtue,¹⁶ Socrates makes the sophist

¹³ Ἐπομαί σου τῷ λόγῳ; δοκεῖς γάρ μοι λέγειν τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην καὶ ὑπισχνεῖσθαι ποιεῖν ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας (Have I understood you correctly, then? (...). You seem to me to be talking about the art of running a city, and to be promising to make men into good citizens) (319a3-5).

On the difficulties involved in equating the art of running a state with making men into good citizens, I wholly share Taylor’ position (*PRT*, 71-72): “We find it startling that Socrates should equate teaching the art of how to run a city with making men into good citizens, and that Protagoras should accept this equation. Modern thought makes a clear distinction between the good politician and the good statesman on the one hand, who excel in the performance of (different) specific tasks, and good citizens on the other. The goodness of the latter consists not in excellence in any specific task, but in his adequate fulfillment of various general obligations (...). This distinction [*sc.* between good statesman and citizen] was less clear-cut in an extreme democracy such as fifth-century Athens, where every adult male citizen was a member of the supreme deliberative assembly and might find himself obliged by lot to perform a variety of executive functions. Direct participation in government was thus one of the functions of the citizen as such; hence outstanding statesmen can naturally be described as ‘wisest citizens’ (319e2). But even when allowance has been made for the difference between an ancient democratic city-state and a modern democracy, the simple identification of the notions of good statesman and good citizen embodies a serious confusion.” See also Rowe [231], 412-413; Nill [225], 11.

¹⁴ From 319a7 onwards, up to the end of the dialogue.

¹⁵ The passage is 334a3-c6 (on which see pp. 138 ff). The absence of any discussion about *euboulia* in private affairs is made more evident by the fact that Protagoras uses the expression ‘*arete* of a citizen’ (324a1) and ‘*arete* of a man’ (325a2) as interchangeable. On this, see Taylor (*PRT*, 75) and the following note.

¹⁶ As far as I can see, there is no basis in the text on which to decide whether the whole move *euboulia* = to make good citizens = political virtue is Socrates’ or authentically Protagoras’. Scholars generally agree on the impossibility of attributing the paternity of the move: see Rowe [231], p. 412, n. 19 and Nill [225], 6-7.

susceptible to an objection, namely that political virtue seems not to be teachable.¹⁷ Socrates argues for that conclusion in two ways. First, the Athenians, he says, are commonly regarded as wise people and they allow only experts to speak on those subjects that they think can be taught. But, when it is a question of running a city, they allow any citizen to speak. This ought to imply that political virtue is not teachable.¹⁸ Secondly, it is evident that political virtue is not teachable, Socrates adds, if we think of domestic examples. Good citizens, like Pericles, do not teach their sons to be good (citizens); or, if they do, they often fail.¹⁹ To answer Socrates' two objections, Protagoras delivers the Great

Contra, see Maguire [222], who holds the view that it is Plato, rather than Protagoras, who shifts the whole discussion from *euboulia* in private and public affairs to 'moral excellence', because he wanted to consider the teachability of the latter.

¹⁷ I shall always say 'political virtue', although Socrates and Protagoras use different terms or expressions for it. For instance, *euboulia* = political *techne* = good citizenship (319a) = virtue (319e2, 320a3, b5, c1) = political *sophia* (321d5) = again political *techne* (322b5) = political virtue (322e ff) = justice (*dikaiosune*) and self-control (*sophrosune*) = justice and the rest of political virtue (326a6, b2) = justice, self-control and piety (325a1) = human virtue (human *arete*, at 325a2). On this lexical variety, see Maguire [222], 105.

¹⁸ 319b3-d7. Socrates' first argument is summarized summarized by Taylor (*PRT*, 72), in the following way: "Socrates' first objection runs as follows (supplied steps in parentheses):

- b3-4 1. The Athenians are wise.
2. (Hence, their judgement is to be accepted as true.)
- b5-7 3. On any subject which the Athenians think can be taught, they allow only experts to speak.
- c7-d6 4. On questions of running the city, they allow any citizen to speak.
- d6-7 5. Hence, from 3 and 4, the Athenians consider that skill in running the city cannot be taught.
6. (Hence, by 2 and 5, skill in running the city cannot be taught.)

Comments:

(i) The argument depends on the understood proposition 2, derived from 1. This proposition is neither explicitly stated by Socrates nor challenged by Protagoras.

(ii) The step from 4 to 5 requires additional assumption 4': The Athenians consider that it is not the case that all citizens are experts on question of running the city."

¹⁹ 319e1-320b3. For a fuller version of this argument, see *Meno* 93a-94d; also *Dissoi Logoi*, ch. 6. I will not go here into the details of the question about the paternity of this pamphlet, which has been ascribed (on not very good grounds) to Protagoras. On the question, see Guthrie [131], 316-19; and above, p.10, n. 42.

Speech, which combines a *muthos* and a *logos*. The first may be thought of as an answer to the first of Socrates' arguments, whilst the second may be regarded as being an answer to Socrates' second argument. As far as Protagoras' epistemology is concerned, the *muthos* is much more important than the *logos* and so I shall focus my attention on that.²⁰

4.2 *The myth: exposition of Protagoras' argument.*

Protagoras holds that political virtue is indeed teachable. He tries to show this by offering a myth to oppose and defuse Socrates' first argument, relating to Athenian practice. Protagoras begins his history of the birth and development of human society by saying that the gods "moulded [mortal beings] within the earth, mixing together earth and fire and their compounds."²¹ When the right time came to bring them into the light of day, the gods ordered Prometheus and Epimetheus to equip each species with the power (*dunamis*, 320d5) it required. Epimetheus has the responsibility of distributing different powers to the various species; when it comes to the turn of men, he realizes that he has

²⁰ As said above, the Great Speech runs from 320c to 328d: the *muthos* runs from 320c8-324d1 (its core being 320c8-322d5); the *logos* runs from 324d2-328c2. The scholarly dispute on the reasons why Plato (and/or Protagoras) adopted these two different forms of exposition is endless and perhaps inevitably so. As far as I can see, the hypothesis according to which the myth is genuinely Protagorean whereas the *logos* is not (or the reverse) is scarcely plausible, or at any rate I cannot find any evidence, either in the *Protagoras* or anywhere else, for holding such a view. Levi ([219], p. 289, n. 1) offers a (rather weak) argument to demonstrate the authenticity of the *logos* through the (authenticity of the) myth. He writes: "It is generally admitted that the myth related by Protagoras (...) is a re-elaboration or an imitation of a theory of the formation of human civilisation given by the sophist in his 'On the Primitive Condition [of Mankind]'. As the myth is an interpretation and a development of the *logos*, the thoughts contained in the former must also be considered as Protagorean, unless one holds that the Sophist had expressed them only in a *logos*, and that the mythical form belongs to Plato."

²¹ 320d2-3.

nothing left for them. To put Epimetheus' mistake right, Prometheus steals from the gods the wisdom of the practical arts (*entechnos sophia*, 321d1),²² together with the use of fire. Equipped in such a way, men acquire the wisdom for their mere survival (*euporia tou biou*, 321e3), but not political wisdom.²³

Protagoras describes human life at this pre-political stage by saying:

Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὁ ἄνθρωπος θείας μετέσχε μοίρας, πρῶτον μὲν διὰ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ συγγένειαν ζῶων μόνον θεοὺς ἐνόμισεν, καὶ ἐπεχείρει βωμούς τε ἰδρύεσθαι καὶ ἀγάλματα θεῶν· ἔπειτα φωνὴν καὶ ὀνόματα ταχὺ διηρθρώσατο τῇ τέχνῃ, καὶ οἰκῆσεις καὶ ἐσθῆτας καὶ ὑποδέσεις καὶ στρωμνὰς καὶ τὰς ἐκ γῆς τροφὰς ἤυρετο. οὕτω δὲ παρεσκευασμένοι κατ' ἀρχὰς ἄνθρωποι ὥκουν σποράδην, πόλεις δὲ οὐκ ἦσαν· ἀπώλλυντο οὖν ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων διὰ τὸ πανταχῇ αὐτῶν ἀσθενέστεροι εἶναι, καὶ ἡ δημιουργικὴ τέχνη αὐτοῖς πρὸς μὲν τροφήν ἰκανὴ βοηθὸς ἦν, πρὸς δὲ τὸν τῶν θηρίων πόλεμον ἐνδεής—πολιτικὴν γὰρ τέχνην οὐπω εἶχον, ἧς μέρος πολεμική— ἐζήτουν δὲ ἀθροίζεσθαι καὶ σώζεσθαι κτίζοντες πόλεις· ὅτ' οὖν ἀθροισθεῖεν, ἠδίκουν ἀλλήλους ἅτε οὐκ ἔχοντες τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην, ὥστε πάλιν σκεδαννύμενοι διεφθείροντο.

Since man thus shared in a divine gift, first of all through his kinship with the gods he was the only creature to worship them, and he began to erect altars and images of the gods. Then he soon developed through *technē* the use of articulate speech and of words, and discovered how to make houses and clothes and shoes and bedding and how to get food from the earth. Thus equipped, men

²² That is, the *demiourgike technē* of 322b3.

²³ τὴν μὲν οὖν περὶ τὸν βίον σοφίαν ἄνθρωπος ταύτη ἔσχευ, τὴν δὲ πολιτικὴν οὐκ εἶχευ (That is how man acquired his practical skill, but he did not yet have skill in running a city) (321d4-6).

lived at the beginning in scattered units, and there were no cities; so they began to be destroyed by the wild beasts, since they were altogether weaker. Their practical art was sufficient to provide food, but insufficient for fighting against the beasts—for they did not yet possess the art of running a city, of which the art of warfare is part—and so they sought to come together and save themselves by founding cities. Now when they came together, they treated each other with injustice, not possessing the art of running a city, so they scattered and began to be destroyed once again.²⁴

This pre-political stage of the human community is then followed, according to Protagoras' story, by a political stage, where men are provided by Zeus (through Hermes) with *aidos* and *dike*, "to be the principles of organization of cities and the bonds of friendship."²⁵ When Hermes asks Zeus if he (Hermes) has to distribute *aidos* and *dike* in the

²⁴ 322a3-b8, Taylor's translation modified: Taylor leaves out τῆ τέχνη at 322a6, which I have rendered as 'through *technē*'. What strikes one in the above description is Protagoras' reference to the gods and their cult. This reference seems to contrast with Protagoras' well-known agnosticism (on which see above, pp. 8-9). Some scholars have gone on to conjecture that the passage may thus be regarded as spurious. For instance, Levi ([219], p. 290, n.1) writes: "The myth, in so far as it attributes the first origin of the civilisation to the gods, was bound to assume their existence; while Protagoras, on the contrary, declared he knew nothing about them. It is therefore clear that we cannot here find an expression of the ideas of the sophist (...)". I do not think that such a skeptical position about the authenticity of the passage is necessary, since Protagoras' fragment on the gods is a theoretical fragment (referring to the unknowability of gods' existence), whilst the myth is a *genealogical* and *historical* myth. For the anthropological approach that gives consistency between the reading of the fragment and the myth, see pp. 9-10 above.

²⁵ ἴν' εἶεν πόλεων κόσμοι τε καὶ δεσμοὶ φιλίας συναγωγοί (322c2-3). *Dike* is normally taken to mean 'justice', whereas *aidos* may be generally (and by and large) rendered as 'conscience'. See Taylor (*PRT*, 85), where he writes that "*aidos* has connotation of self-respect, shame, modesty, and respect or regard for others; in different contexts one or other connotation may predominate. It is virtually synonymous with *sophrosune*, when the latter term is used in the sense of that soundness of mind which makes a man accept his proper role in society and pay due regard to the rights of others." The two terms are later equated respectively with *dikaiosune* (323a1) and *sophrosune* (323a2). The archaic sound of *aidos* and *dike* might suggest that the passage is reproducing something genuinely Protagorean. This is strongly denied by Maguire ([222], 119), who sees the introduction of *aidos te kai dike* in the myth as an purely Platonic move, to shift the discussion from an amoral field into a moral one.

same way as he did the other *technai* (namely, to some people and not to all people),²⁶ Zeus orders Hermes to do the following:

Ἐπὶ πάντας (...) καὶ πάντες μετεχόντων· οὐ γὰρ ἂν γένοιντο πόλεις, εἰ ὀλίγοι αὐτῶν μετέχοιεν ὡσπερ ἄλλων τεχνῶν· καὶ νόμον γε θεὸς παρ' ἐμοῦ τὸν μὴ δυνάμενον αἰδοῦς καὶ δίκης μετέχειν κτείνειν ὡς νόσον πόλεως.

[Distribute *aidos* and *dike*] to all (...) and let all share in them; for cities could not come into being, if only a few shared in them as in the other arts. And lay down on my authority a law that he who cannot share in conscience and justice is to be killed as a plague on the city.²⁷

Each and every man (following Protagoras) must possess *aidos* and *dike*, that is, each and every man must share in political virtue. Were this not the case, there would be no city at all.²⁸ The myth thus expounded, Protagoras can now reply to Socrates' first argument on why the Athenians allow anyone to speak, when it is a question of running a city. Socrates has warned that this licence means that political virtue is not teachable;²⁹

²⁶ *Aidos* and *dike* are in fact first regarded as *technai* (322b8) and then as (political) *aretai* (323a1).

²⁷ 322d1-5.

²⁸ Protagoras' conclusion that every man must share in political virtue is reinforced by another brief argument, to the general effect that anyone who says he is lacking in political *arete* would be regarded as being mad (323a5-c2). This argument is generally taken as weak. See Taylor (*PRT*, 88), where he writes: "This argument is affected by the same confusion [*sc.* that affects the argument at 322e1-323a3], in addition to other obscurities. (1) The man who admits to being unjust is so in fact (b3-4). Is he unjust in the sense of being totally lacking in the moral sense which everyone must have if society is to hold together, or merely unjust in the sense of being by ordinary standards dishonest etc., while not altogether devoid of moral sense (...)? (2) The crucial sentence [*sc.* b7-c2] is itself ambiguous. It may mean (a) 'Everyone must possess (justice) to some extent or other, or else be banished or put to death' or (b) 'Everyone must possess (justice) to some extent or other, for unless he did he could not live in a community (...).'"

²⁹ See above, p.122 .

Protagoras by contrast holds that such licence is possible exactly for the opposite reason, namely because political virtue is indeed teachable. Protagoras begins the final part of his reasoning by saying:

ὅταν δὲ εἰς συμβουλήν πολιτικῆς ἀρετῆς ἴωσιν, ἦν δεῖ διὰ δικαιοσύνης πᾶσαν ἰέναι καὶ σωφροσύνης, εἰκότως ἅπαντος ἀνδρὸς ἀνέχονται, ὡς παντὶ προσῆκον ταύτης γε μετέχειν τῆς ἀρετῆς ἢ μὴ εἶναι πόλεις.

[W]hen it comes to consideration of how to do well in running the city, which must proceed entirely through justice and soundness of mind, they [*sc.* the Athenians] are right to accept advice from anyone, since it is incumbent on everyone to share in that sort of excellence, or else there can be no city at all.³⁰

Given this as granted, Protagoras offers an argument for holding that political virtue is teachable, namely the argument from punishment. He says:

Ὅτι μὲν οὖν πάντ' ἄνδρα εἰκότως ἀποδέχονται περὶ ταύτης τῆς ἀρετῆς σύμβουλον διὰ τὸ ἡγεῖσθαι παντὶ μετεῖναι αὐτῆς, ταῦτα λέγω· ὅτι δὲ αὐτὴν οὐ φύσει ἡγούνται εἶναι οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου, ἀλλὰ διδακτόν τε καὶ ἐξ ἐπιμελείας παραγίγνεσθαι ὧ ἂν παραγίγνεσθαι ὧ ἂν παραγίγνηται, τοῦτό σοι μετὰ τοῦτο πειράσομαι ἀποδείξαι.

³⁰ 322e1-323a3. On the inconsistency of Protagoras' position here, see Taylor (*PRT*, 87-88). He writes: "Protagoras' position here (repeated at 324d7-325a5 and at 326e8-327a2) is *prima facie* inconsistent with his common-sense admission (329e5-6, 349d5-8) that not every member of a civilized community is a good man. He would presumably reply that men who are unjust etc. by conventional standards are none the less good in the minimal sense required for participation in social life (327c4-e1). But while that defence removes the inconsistency it prevents Protagoras from meeting Socrates' objection to his claim to teach excellence in the accepted sense." On this point, see also Nill [225], 9-11.

On the point, then, that they [*sc.* the Athenians] are right to accept advice from anyone about this sort of excellence in the belief that everyone shares in it, that is all I have to say. I shall next try to show that they think that it does not come by nature or by luck, but that it can be taught, and that everyone who has it has it from deliberate choice.³¹

In the case of undesirable characteristics that people ascribe to nature or chance, nobody gets annoyed with people who have such undesirable features. When it is a case of good qualities that people acquire by “deliberate choice, practice and teaching” on the other hand,³² everyone gets annoyed and punishes those who do not have such good qualities, but the opposite, bad ones. Since people get annoyed with, and correct, anyone who is unjust and impious, that is, anyone who has whatever is the opposite of political virtue, this ought to imply that political virtue is generally held as being acquired by “deliberate choice and learning.”³³ This is more evident if we think of the role of punishment in the society. Protagoras argues:

³¹ 323c3-8. Once again, see Taylor (*PRT*, 89) for lexical notes on the passage. He writes: “‘by nature’ and ‘by luck’. The two phrases are equivalent in this context, both having the implication ‘without conscious purpose or choice’; cf. *Laws* X, 889a-c. ‘By luck’ translates *apo tautomatou*, lit. ‘by means of the self-moving’ (whence ‘automatic’); ‘chance’ at d1 and 5 translates *tuche* (...). ‘From deliberate choice’: lit., ‘from care’ (...). [*askesis* is translated as] ‘practice’. *Meno* 70a distinguishes practice as a possible source of excellence from both nature and teaching: cf. *Clit.* 407b. The contrast is presumably between on the one hand instruction in the form of systematic verbal exposition and on the other discipline or habituation which might contain little or no formal instruction (...). Clearly there is a continuous scale between the extremes; most systems of teaching include both instruction and practice in different proportions, and it is clear that here practice and teaching are seen as different aspects of a single process rather than as alternatives. This is consistent with the view of the historical Protagoras; see DK 80 B 3 (...) and 10.” For the educational fragment of Protagoras, see above, pp. 10 ff.

³² 323e1.

³³ 324a3.

εἰ γὰρ ἐθέλεις ἐννοῆσαι τὸ κολάζειν, ὦ Σώκρατες, τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας τί ποτε δύναται, αὐτό σε διδάξει ὅτι οἱ γε ἄνθρωποι ἡγοῦνται παρασκευαστὸν εἶναι ἀρετῆν. οὐδεὶς γὰρ κολάζει τοὺς ἀδικοῦντας πρὸς τούτῳ τὸν νοῦν ἔχων καὶ τούτου ἕνεκα, ὅτι ἠδίκησεν, ὅστις μὴ ὡσπερ θηρίον ἀλογίστως τιμωρεῖται· ὁ δὲ μετὰ λόγου ἐπιχειρῶν κολάζειν οὐ τοῦ παρεληλυθότος ἕνεκα ἀδικήματος τιμωρεῖται—οὐ γὰρ ἂν τό γε πραχθὲν ἀγένητον θείη—ἀλλὰ τοῦ μέλλοντος χάριν, ἵνα μὴ αὖθις ἀδικήσῃ μήτε αὐτὸς οὗτος μήτε ἄλλος ὁ τοῦτον ἰδὼν κολασθέντα. καὶ τοιαύτην διάνοιαν ἔχων διανοεῖται παιδευτὴν εἶναι ἀρετῆν· ἀποτροπῆς γοῦν ἕνεκα κολάζει. ταύτην οὖν τὴν δόξαν πάντες ἔχουσιν ὅσοιπερ τιμωροῦνται καὶ ἰδίᾳ καὶ δημοσίᾳ. τιμωροῦνται δὲ καὶ κολάζονται οἱ τε ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι οὓς ἂν οἴωνται ἀδικεῖν, καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα Ἀθηναῖοι οἱ σοὶ πολῖται· ὥστε κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον καὶ Ἀθηναῖοί εἰσι τῶν ἡγουμένων παρασκευαστὸν εἶναι καὶ διδακτὸν ἀρετῆν. ὡς μὲν οὖν εἰκότως ἀποδέχονται οἱ σοὶ πολῖται καὶ χαλκέως καὶ σκυτοτόμου συμβουλευόντος λόγον καὶ Ἀθηναῖοί εἰσι τῶν ἡγουμένων παρασκευαστὸν εἶναι καὶ διδακτὸν ἀρετῆν.

If you care to consider, Socrates, the effect which punishment can possibly have on the wrongdoer, that will itself convince you that people think that excellence is something which can be trained. For no one punishes a wrongdoer with no other thought in mind than that he did wrong, unless he is retaliating unthinkingly like an animal. Someone who aims to punish in a rational way doesn't chastise on account of the past misdeed—for that wouldn't undo what is already done—but for the sake of future, so that neither the wrongdoer himself, nor anyone else who sees him punished, will do wrong again. This intention shows his belief that excellence can be produced by education; at least his aim in punishing is to deter. Now this opinion is shared by everyone who administers chastisement either in a private or in a public capacity. And everyone chastises and punishes those

whom they think guilty of wrong-doing, not least your fellow citizens, the Athenians; so according to this argument the Athenians are among those who think that excellence can be trained and taught.³⁴

With this last passage, we are at the end of Protagoras' *muthos*, which I have above indicated as the most essential part of the whole dialogue for the epistemological concerns of the present inquiry.³⁵ I hope to have provided a fair and reasonable reconstruction of Protagoras' argument.³⁶ It is now time to try to understand the meaning of Protagoras' myth and, above all, to grasp the consequences that such a myth might have for Protagoras' epistemology as a whole, or at least for the epistemology I have reconstructed for him so far.

³⁴ 324a3-c5. It has been noticed (Taylor, *PRT*, 96) that the account of punishment here illustrated by Protagoras has "considerable affinities" with the one Plato offers in some of his other dialogues (see *Grg.* 476a-479e; *Lg.* 735d-e; 854d-e; 862d-863a). Further, such an account fits rather nicely with the Platonic claim that no wrongdoing is voluntary (which relates the problem of *akrasia* dealt with later in the *Protagoras*). This might suggest that the view here expounded is not Protagorean. For modern discussion of general theories on punishment, see Hart [262] and Acton [247]; for the incoherence (from the point of view of the current discussions on the subject) of the theory of punishment here expounded, see Taylor, *PRT*, 90-95; Nill [225], 24-27.

³⁵ For this reason, I will not go into the details of the *logos* (324d2-328c2), which makes an attempt at answering Socrates' second argument about the teachability of virtue, namely that good citizens do not teach their sons to be good and if they do, they often fail. Protagoras' answer to Socrates' second objection is that different individuals have different degrees of aptitude for virtue (326e6 ff). On that, see Taylor (*PRT*, 96-97); Kerferd [213], 44; Rowe [231], 413.

³⁶ An interesting parallel between Protagoras' account of human development and Hume's is proposed by Farrar [202], 90-95.

4.3 The myth: interpretation of Protagoras' argument.

As far as I can see, there are two points that Protagoras incontrovertibly makes in his myth. First, and above all, all men possess political virtue. They have it by nature. As other animals are provided with the powers that they require, men are provided, first, with *entechnos sophia* and then with political *technē* (that is, *arete*) by being given *aidos* and *dike*. Equipped in this way, men can live together. The fact that men get political virtue at a second stage, at any rate after being given *entechnos sophia*, does not entail the thesis that political virtue is not by nature.³⁷ Furthermore, and this is the second point I wish to make,

³⁷ The two different times at which men are given *entechnos sophia* and political virtue seems more a literal expedient of Protagoras' to emphasize a substantial difference between the two *technai* than a suggestion that political virtue is not by nature. When I say that political virtue is by nature, I mean that all human beings as such have it. I do not mean that all human beings have (different) degrees of political virtue from the very beginning of their life: infants, for instance, cannot be seen as displaying any kind or degree of political virtue, although they may be said as potentially having it. Again, when I say that political virtue is by nature, I mean that political virtue is a *conditio sine qua non* for being human beings, at least in Protagoras' world. See Levi [219], 294: "The germs of morality exist in all men, that is to say, they are indispensable elements of human nature, but in order to create virtue they must develop by means of exercise, practice and tuition." *Contra* Levi's and my approach, see Kerferd [213], 43, although I cannot fully understand what *he* means by saying that political virtue is not by nature. He writes: "It seems clear that the powers of the animals are regarded as being by nature, and it is possible that the skill in crafts is so possessed by human beings. It was given to mankind before they began their life on this earth, and it is to man what the powers are to animals. But Aidos and Dike are in a different position — they are something got after man has been living in the world (...). The fact that all men are regarded as sharing in Aidos and Dike is not in itself sufficient to show that they do so *by nature*. The position of Aidos and Dike in the myth is sufficiently distinct from that of skill in crafts to raise no difficulty if we find other reason to deny that the former are in men by nature. He himself says (323c3-8): 'these then are the reasons I give why they rightly allow every man to offer his advice regarding matters involving this (political) virtue, because they believe that every man has a share in it; but that they consider it to be not by nature nor of spontaneous growth, but in whomsoever it is present, the result of teaching and practice, this I will endeavour to demonstrate'. Nothing could be more emphatic—political virtue is both shared by all men and is not by nature." I cannot attach any meaning to Kerferd's last sentence, to the extent that I find it rather contradictory: how is it possible that something is possessed by all men but is

that political virtue is by nature does not entail the thesis according to which all men have the same degree of political virtue. It seems more than clear from Protagoras' words that the degree of political virtue varies from man to man and this variation is precisely what makes the teaching of virtue possible.³⁸

Political virtue is therefore shared by all men, although not in the same way.³⁹ This is what Protagoras' myth seems to state but it does not imply that we may offer a single

not by nature? As far as Protagoras' quoted sentence goes, I take it as signifying that men have to be taught and undergo practice to develop it, to have (good degrees of) political virtue.

³⁸ It is evident that if all citizens have the same degree of political virtue, neither will there be teachers of political virtue (viz. people who have a better degree of political virtue) nor pupils (viz. people who lack a good degree of political virtue). On this, see also the end of the *logos*, i.e. 324d2-328c2, especially 326e6 ff., the argument of the *aulos*-player. Protagoras says: "Why, then, do good men often have worthless sons? The reason is this: it's not at all surprising, if it's true what I said before, that excellence is something of which none must be ignorant, if there is to be a city at all. If, then, it's as I say—and it most certainly is—think of any pursuit or branch of knowledge that you care to take as an example. Suppose that there could not be a city unless we all played the *aulos* to the best of our ability, and everyone was in habit of teaching the next man this both privately and publicly, and reproving him when he played badly, and not refusing to share his knowledge with him, just as at the moment no one refuses to share his knowledge of what is right and lawful, or conceals it, as in the case of other crafts (...). If, then, we were all so willing and eager to teach one another to play the *aulos*, do you think, Socrates, that the sons of good *aulos*-players would themselves turn out to be better players than the sons of poor players? I think not, but whoever had a son with the greatest natural talent for the *aulos*, his son would grow up to be famous, and if anyone had a son with no talent, he would remain unknown. And often the son of a good player would turn out poor, and the son of a poor player good. But all the same they would all be competent players, compared with people who can't play at all" (326e6-327c4).

³⁹ On the possible difficulties raised by Protagoras' position, see Nill [225], 8-9: "There are however two major difficulties with the positions of Protagoras thus far discussed. The first one concerns certain serious problems and weaknesses in his claim that moral *arete* is a necessary condition for human survival and the existence of cities. To begin with, he seems to think that this claim involves the notion that *all* members of an existing political community must be and, in fact, are just (moral) (...). [Protagoras] is not saying, as C.C.W. Taylor observes, that the existence of cities requires that all *be required* to be just (universal normative requirement), but rather that the existence of cities requires that all *be* just (universal factual requirement). It would follow from Protagoras' claim that every person in a community would have sufficient reason always to be moral; but the claim itself would seem to be patently false: the existence of a political community does not require that (literally) all its members be (perfectly) just or moral. On the other hand, there are a number

interpretation of the whole myth. At least two possible interpretations of the myth are available. The first is one that ascribes a kind of ethical objectivism to Protagoras. Briefly, such an interpretation offers the following argument. In Protagoras' myth, political virtue is by nature and thus shared by all men. Such political virtue is then equated with concrete and traditional ethical values, such as piety, justice etc.⁴⁰ All this might allow us to conjecture that piety, justice *et alia*, being by nature, are objective values, viz. values common to all political communities, as such.⁴¹ I reject this interpretation on two sorts of

of indications which suggest that Protagoras did not believe that all members of a political community are, in fact, moral (...). This view implies that Protagoras recognizes the fact that a city continues to exist despite the presence in it of those who act unjustly." To remove these apparent inconsistencies, Nill suggests that "one could argue that when Protagoras says that all are and must be just in the city, he merely means that no one is or must be completely unjust in a city. Thus, all citizens of a city are at least minimally just (...). The second way to reconcile Protagoras' seemingly inconsistent views is to interpret that 'all' in 'all must be and are just' to mean 'nearly everyone' or 'most people'. On this interpretation, Protagoras would be saying that most people in a political community must and do meet requirements of justice well beyond minimal levels necessary for them to continue existing in a city." Finally, Nill suggests combining the two approaches, namely "[Protagoras] would be saying that the existence of a city requires that (literally) all maintain a minimal level of moral behavior and that most everyone generally observes all the moral requirements embodied in the laws." I take Nill's way of solving Protagoras' seemingly discrepancies as rather reasonable. On the whole question, see also Taylor (*PRT*, 80-82).

⁴⁰ 325a-326c.

⁴¹ A 'light' ethical objectivism is the position that Taylor ascribes to Protagoras. In commenting on the conclusions of the Great Speech, Taylor writes (*PRT*, 101): "[T]he story and its expansion make it clear that in Protagoras' view the social traditions of Athens or any other city reflect a universal ethical truth, viz. that the basic social virtues are justice and soundness of mind (...). The moral and legal code of any actual city must therefore already have passed the test of imposing on its citizens limitations on their freedom which satisfy basic requirements of justice (nowhere specified by Protagoras). Given the satisfaction of that minimum requirement, whatever the code of any city lays down as justified, obligatory, etc. is so until it is changed." Taylor none the less admits that "[Protagoras'] fundamental ethical objectivism is consistent with a wide degree of relativism, and in particular with the relativism of *Theaet.* 167c and 172a." Protagoras is regarded as holding objectivistic positions in the myth also by Levi [219], 294-297 and Moser-Kustas [224], 112-113. *Contra* such position, see A. Taylor (*Plato. The man and his work*, 246-7) who takes Protagoras' position here as implying a sort of conservative relativism, for which "there is no moral standard more

grounds. First, and less cogently than the second argument I shall offer, the objective interpretation of Protagoras' myth goes against the results I have obtained in interpreting the *Theaetetus*. To recall that reading, in those cases in which Protagoras' homo-mensura maxim is applied to political matters, I have spoken of the 'Ethical Autonomy' (EA) of the *polis*. That is, each and every city is the *metron*, measure, of its own *nomoi*; what the *polis* decides to be just is such for that city, for so long as it maintains that.⁴² Furthermore, I took (EA) as being an epistemological position that recognizes the different ethical autonomies of different *poleis* and makes the different ethical judgements of different *poleis* all legitimate.⁴³

I cannot think of anything more distant from a position of ethical objectivism, which cannot legitimize any ethical autonomy between different ethical subjects. For ethical objectivism, there are ethical values that are such, independently of any particular point of view (and by 'particular', I here mean 'any that refers to a political community and only to it'). One may obviously object that the fact that the *Theaetetus*, or at least a possible reading of it, has offered (EA) as being Protagoras' probable position on political matters does not imply that any ethical objectivism in the *Protagoras* is false or not authentically Protagorean. The myth in the *Protagoras* might claim a higher degree of authenticity than the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, and might represent Protagoras' real position on political matters.⁴⁴ If there were a contradiction between the *Theaetetus* and the *Protagoras*, one might argue, we are better off placing greater reliance upon the latter than upon the former. I do not take this objection as well-grounded. As shown throughout the previous chapters, the *Theaetetus* deals with Protagoras in a rather detailed and wide-ranging way. The picture of Protagoras' epistemology that that dialogue offers is so complete that it has a

ultimate than the standard of respectability current in a given society" (see my own critique of this position above,).

⁴² See above, p.88 and *Tht.* 167c4-7.

⁴³ See above, pp. 90 ff.

⁴⁴ I shall deal with the genuineness of the myth later on in this chapter.

good chance of being genuine (not to mention the rather numerous proofs of authenticity of each part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* that have been given). As was said at the beginning of the present chapter, while offering good coverage of the political side of Protagoras' theory of knowledge, the *Protagoras* provides a less detailed and less general account of Protagoras' ideas. If one had to choose between the two dialogues for the purposes of reconstructing Protagoras' epistemology, one should choose the *Theaetetus* as more essential than the *Protagoras*.

At any rate, as far as political matters are concerned, I cannot see any open contradiction between the *Theaetetus* and the *Protagoras*; and with this preliminary (and possibly provocative) suggestion made, I propose my second and stronger argument for rejecting the ethical objectivism of the myth, while simultaneously introducing the second possible way of interpreting it.⁴⁵ I cannot see any element whatsoever that commits us to finding a profession of ethical objectivism in Protagoras' *muthos*. It is true that when speaking of the passage from a pre-political stage to a political one,⁴⁶ Protagoras says that Zeus sent Hermes to bring *aidos* and *dike* to all men, as if *aidos* and *dike* were two objects, or things that have *objective* existence.⁴⁷ Political virtue is actually equated with *aidos* and *dike* but the equation that really matters—I propose—is the one between political *arete* and political *techne*. From 322b5 to 322d4, it is said four times that through Hermes Zeus has provided men with political *techne*.⁴⁸ More significantly, *aidos* and *dike* are compared to

⁴⁵ As for this second interpretation of the myth, the best arguments for supporting it are those offered by Vlastos [240], ix-xxiii.

⁴⁶ 322c1-323a4.

⁴⁷ 'Objective' to the extent that *aidos* and *dike* seem to be two things always present in any human gathering as such, and that there could not be any difference of historical time or geographic placement that would alter (significantly) such a given fact.

⁴⁸ That is, "[men] did not yet possess the art of running a city [*sc. politike techne*], of which the art of warfare [*sc. polemike techne*] is a part" (322b5); "when [men] came together, they treated each other with injustice, not possessing the art of running a city [*sc. politike techne*]" (322b9); and the two passages to which I refer in the following note, namely 322c5-6 and 322d2-4.

other *technai*.⁴⁹ Finally, political virtue is regarded as being (the result of) a *techne*. Protagoras says that “when there is a question about how to do well in carpentry [*sc. tektonike techne*], or any other expertise, everyone including the Athenians think it right that only a few should give advice (...), but when it comes to consideration of how to do well in running a city [*sc. politike arete*] (...) they are right to accept advice from anyone.”⁵⁰

Rather than providing (objective?) ethical values, political virtue seems to be the result of a *techne*. If political virtue is understood like this, an *arete* will be the product of a “set of rules, a system or method of making” things or meeting targets.⁵¹ Political virtue may be thus seen as the product of *politike techne*.⁵² This idea will become more evident if we look at the comparison that Protagoras draws at 322a-b between *demiourgike techne* (= *entechnos sophia*, at 321d1) and *politike techne*. Let me recall the translation of the passage. It runs:

Then he [*sc. man*] soon developed through *techne* the use of articulate speech and of words, and discovered how to make houses and clothes and shoes and bedding and how to get food from the earth. Thus equipped, men lived at the beginning in scattered units, and there were no cities; so they began to be destroyed by the wild beasts, since they were altogether weaker. Their practical art was

⁴⁹ Hermes asks Zeus about the manner in which he has to distribute *aidos* and *dike* to all men: “Shall I distribute these [*sc. aidos* and *dike*] in the same way as the arts [*sc. technai*]?” (322c5-6). See also Zeus’ answer: “To all (...), and let share in them [*sc. aidos* and *dike*]; for cities could not come into being, if only a few shared in them as in the other arts [*sc. technai*].” (322d2-4)

⁵⁰ 322d6-323a1.

⁵¹ *LSJ*, s.v. *techne*. See also Taylor (*PRT*, 75-6): “This [*sc. Socrates’* claim at 320b4-5] illustrates the conceptual link between an art or craft (*techne*) and excellence (*arete*): someone possesses a craft in the fullest sense only when he is good at it, i.e. possesses the corresponding skill or excellence, and hence the claim to teach art is the claim to teach the appropriate *arete*. Of course, not all *aretai* are acquired skills; e.g. good sight is not a skill possessed by the eyes.”

⁵² See Winton, in Rowe-Schofield [60], 97: “*Arete*, ‘virtue’, [is] identified by Protagoras with *politike techne*.”

sufficient to provide food, but insufficient for fighting against the beasts—for they did not yet possess the art of running a city, of which the art of warfare is part—and so they sought to come together and save themselves by founding cities. Now when they came together, they treated each other with injustice, not possessing the art of running a city, so they scattered and began to be destroyed once again.⁵³

Through *techne*, men are provided with a multi-faceted capacity that allows them on the one hand to create a language, i.e. a rather intellectual activity, and, on the other, to make houses, clothes, shoes etc., very tangible activities. *Demiourgike techne* at 322b3 similarly provides a tangible result, namely food. *Politike techne* may be reasonably taken as a particular capacity given to men to allow them to live together by producing shareable ethical values and laws. Provided with *politike techne*, men are not only able to fight against beasts by means of *polemike techne*, but also they can give up fighting against each other and find rules that may allow their peaceful cohabitation.⁵⁴ Equipped with the same practical *techne*, men can however (and indeed do) reach different results, to the extent that applying the same kind of skill does not mean meeting the same target. That is, men speak different languages, they have different types of houses, they dress in different ways, they have different activities to provide their own food. It may easily be inferred that things will go the same way as far as *politike techne* is concerned. Although men are given the same *politike techne*, nothing prevents us from assuming that they find different ethical values on which their peaceful cohabitation may be built. This seems to be the case, if we turn our

⁵³ 322a5-b8: see above, 124.

⁵⁴ See Vlastos [240], x: “[The myth] has two main themes: first, that the arts are the human counterpart to the various devices which insure the survival of animal species; unlike theirs, man’s survival weapons are, as we would say, cultural, or, as Protagoras speaks of them, matters of art (*techne*) or knowledge (*episteme*, *sophia*): they have to be invented at the beginning and then transmitted by some sort of learning and teaching. Secondly, that the ‘political’ art is no less authentic a feature of his cultural equipment than the ‘industrial’ ones, no less necessary for survival: men could have the struggle against nature (...) unless they had learned how to live with one another.”

attention to what happens nowadays or to historical periods different from ours. I am reasonably sure that most of us would agree if I said that some African people may find disgraceful what an European may find legitimate, or that we may find shameful what was not thought of as being such in the Persian Empire, during the time of Xerxes.

Protagoras was very well in a position to understand that ethical values (may) vary. There is a short passage in the *Protagoras* that may illuminate this point a bit more, while also illustrating the variety of ethical values: 334a3-c6. Socrates asks Protagoras if there are things that are good (*agathon*). Protagoras answers affirmatively and Socrates asks him if things that are good are those that are beneficial (*oephelimon*) to people.⁵⁵ Rather irritated, Protagoras answers by saying that “there are things I call good even though they aren’t beneficial to people.”⁵⁶ This raises Socrates’ further questions: “Do you mean things that aren’t beneficial to any human being, Protagoras, (...) or things that aren’t beneficial at all? Do you call things like that good too?”⁵⁷ In order to answer fully Socrates’ questions, Protagoras offers a short speech on the complexity of goodness. He says:

οὐδαμῶς, ἔφη· ἀλλ’ ἔγωγε πολλὰ οἶδ’ ἃ ἀνθρώποις μὲν ἀνωφελῆ ἔστι, καὶ σιτία καὶ ποτὰ καὶ φάρμακα καὶ ἄλλα μυρία, τὰ δέ γε ὠφέλιμα· τὰ δὲ ἀνθρώποις μὲν οὐδέτερα, ἵπποις δέ· τὰ δὲ βουσὶν μόνον, τὰ δὲ κυσίν· τὰ δέ γε τούτων μὲν οὐδενί, δένδροις δέ· τὰ δὲ τοῦ δένδρου ταῖς μὲν ῥίζαις ἀγαθὰ, ταῖς δὲ βλάσταις πονηρά, οἶον καὶ ἡ κόπρος πάντων τῶν φυτῶν ταῖς μὲν ῥίζαις ἀγαθὸν παραβαλλομένη, εἰ δ’ ἐθέλοις ἐπὶ τοὺς πτόρθους καὶ τοὺς νέους κλῶνας ἐπιβάλλειν, πάντα ἀπόλλυσιν· ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἔλαιον τοῖς μὲν φυτοῖς ἀπασίν ἔστιν πάγκακον καὶ ταῖς θριξὶν πολεμιώτατον ταῖς τῶν ἄλλων ζώων πλὴν ταῖς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου,

⁵⁵ 333d8-e1.

⁵⁶ 333e1-2.

⁵⁷ 333e4-334a2.

ταῖς δὲ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀρωγὸν καὶ τῷ ἄλλω σώματι. οὕτω δὲ ποικίλον τί ἐστὶν τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ παντοδαπὸν, ὥστε καὶ ἐνταῦθα τοῖς μὲν ἔξωθεν τοῦ σώματος ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, τοῖς δ' ἐντὸς ταῦτόν τοῦτο κάκιστον· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οἱ ἰατροὶ πάντες ἀπαγορεύουσιν τοῖς ἀσθενοῦσιν μὴ χρῆσθαι ἐλαίῳ ἀλλ' ἢ ὅτι σμικροτάτῳ ἐν τούτοις οἷς μέλλει ἔδεσθαι, ὅσον μόνον τὴν δυσχέρειαν κατασβέσαι τὴν ἐπὶ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι ταῖς διὰ τῶν ῥινῶν γιγνομένην ἐν τοῖς σιτίοις τε καὶ ὄψοις.

Not at all, he said. I know of many things which are harmful to humans, food and drink and drugs and a thousand other things, and of some which are beneficial. Some things have neither effect on humans, but have an effect on horses; some have no effect except on cattle, or on dogs. Some have no effect on any animal, but do affect trees. And some things are good for the roots of the tree, but bad for the growing parts, for instance manure is good if applied to the roots of all plants, but if you put it on the shoots and young twigs it destroys everything. Oil, too, is very bad for all plants and most destructive of the hair of animals other than man, but in the case of man it is beneficial to the hair and to the rest of the body. So varied and many-sided a thing is goodness, that even here the very same thing is good for the outside of the human body, and very bad for the inside. That is the reason why doctors all forbid sick people to use oil in their food except in the smallest quantities, just enough to cover up any unpleasant smell from the dishes and garnishes.⁵⁸

This passage is generally taken as fairly reproducing Protagoras' own ideas.⁵⁹ As Taylor has written in commenting on it, the passage implies three theses: "i. Everything good is in some way beneficial (a3); ii. The notion 'good for' is relational, i.e. it requires to

⁵⁸ 334a3-c6.

⁵⁹ See Vlastos ([240], p. xvi, n. 32): "The only thing that looks like a piece of genuine Protagorean theorizing is at 334a-c, which has been generally recognized as one of the arguments Protagoras used to support moral relativism." See also Nill [225], 33.

be completed by a subject expression, to give 'good for x', 'good for y', etc; iii. The same thing may be good for x and bad for, or not good, for y."⁶⁰ Theses (ii) and (iii) may be taken as representing a kind of moral relativism, for which what is thought of as being good in Athens is not such in Sparta, or in the Persian Empire, or as it may be among the Callatiae.⁶¹ Since 'good' may be regarded as the general ethical category that includes the just, the pious, etc, it may be added that Protagoras' short speech implies that the just, what is generally taken as such in a *polis*, differs from one *polis* to another. This sort of political meaning of the whole speech may be further inferred from the use of the adjective 'beneficial' (*ophelimon*). Together with its synonymous *sumpheron*, this is the adjective that Protagoras uses in the *Theaetetus* when referring to the political application of his man the measure maxim.⁶²

Taylor has noted that this passage does not imply that "if anyone believes that something is good, then that thing is good (for him), i.e. the application to goodness of the general thesis of Protagorean subjectivism".⁶³ As far as Plato's Protagoras is concerned, there is no place—in the *Theaetetus* or in the *Protagoras*—where Protagorean subjectivism (as Taylor calls it, intending broadly the epistemological principle proclaimed by Protagoras' man the measure maxim) is applied to the ethical judgements of an individual. The individual is never said to be the measure of his ethical judgements; it is always the *polis*, the community of many individuals, which is taken as being the measure of ethical judgements. Taylor's remark about Protagorean subjectivism seems thus to underrate

⁶⁰ See Taylor, *PRT*, 133.

⁶¹ On the Callatiae, cannibal Indians, see W. W. How, J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus*, 3.38.4: "the name *Callatiae* (from Sans Kâla = black) points to the aboriginal inhabitants of India; they are otherwise unknown except for a vague reference in Hecataeus (fr. 177, F. H. G. i. 12)." See also below, 150.

⁶² See above, pp. 80 ff.

⁶³ Taylor (*PRT*, 133). He goes on by saying: "The observation that manure is good for roots but bad for leaves neither entails nor follows from the thesis that whatever anyone believes to be good is good (for the person who believes it). The conjunction of Protagoras' theses ii and iii (which we might call the Relational Thesis), is not only true, but also logically independent of subjectivism."

Protagoras' actual theory of knowledge, at least the one Plato has so far offered for him. Moreover, if it is true that Protagoras' theses (ii) and (iii) are logically independent of Protagoras' subjectivism (to use Taylor's terminology), nonetheless they do not exclude it. In the passage Protagoras does not actually say that goodness is varied and many-sided because of the different beliefs about the good that people hold, but such silence does not mean that what he is saying about the good as multiform cannot be read in accordance with his subjectivism. There is no logical reason for taking the passage as meant to exclude the application of Protagorean subjectivism to goodness.

Once again, this interpretation is denied by Taylor. He writes:

Protagoras does not here espouse any version of evaluative relativism, i.e. the doctrine that the standards by which things are judged good or bad vary in different circumstances (e.g. in different cultures, at different historical epochs, according to the different interests of different individuals) and that there is no second-order criterion by which it is possible to judge any standard more correct than any other. Protagoras' examples, which are all of facts of nature (...), do indeed presuppose agreed standards of what counts as a good state for plants and animals, but there is no reason to suppose that Plato represents him as looking on these as culture-relative, not is it clear that they are in fact.⁶⁴

Once again, for my part I do not find Taylor's argument conclusive. The main claim of his argument for rejecting the speech as a profession of moral relativism is that the examples offered by Protagoras concern the good of animals and plants, namely an objective good, the good by *phusis* (if there is one). This ought to imply that *phusis* represents the "agreed standards of what counts as a good state for plants and animals." Protagoras' recall of "facts of nature" (as Taylor puts it) does not seem to mean a denial of moral relativism, at least of the kind of moral relativism that one can attach to Protagoras'

⁶⁴ Taylor, *PRT*, 134.

maxim. As was seen in the two previous chapters, Protagoras' maxim may be taken as indicating both a perceptual autonomy of the individual and an ethical autonomy of the *polis*. In both cases, Protagoras' maxim concerns human beings. The maxim proclaims in fact that "man is the measure of all things" and, as Socrates notes in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras did not say that "'pig is the measure of all things' or 'baboon' or some yet more out-of-the-way creature."⁶⁵

Nor indeed did Protagoras choose the gods as being the measure of all things.⁶⁶ According to Protagoras, it is only in the human sphere, that is in the sphere of purely human epistemological activities, that man can be the measure of all things. Moral relativism too, or to use Taylor's expression 'evaluative relativism', is something that has to do with humans beings, not indeed with animals or plants. If this is the case, Protagoras' short speech cannot be taken as a literal or, say, precise expression of moral relativism, but as a sort of Protagorean suggestion that also in the realm of plants and animals the good may be thought of as multi-sided and various, as it is in the domain of human affairs. That is, I understand Protagoras as saying here: "Do not think of the realm of purely human things, such as epistemological activities or ethical concerns. Do not think of human conventions, of human *nomoi*. It is clear enough that in this realm goodness is varied and depends upon the ethical judgements of *poleis*. Look instead at the realm of *phusis*, of

⁶⁵ *Tht.* 161c4-5.

⁶⁶ See *Tht.* 162c5-7. Socrates asks Theaetetus "Do you think the Protagorean measure isn't meant to be applied to gods as much as to men?" Theaetetus answers: "I most certainly don't." See also the following passage, namely *Tht.* 162d5-e5. Here Socrates makes Protagoras say: "My good people, young and old (...) you sit here orating; you drags in gods, whose existence or nonexistence I exclude from all discussion, written or spoken; you keep on saying whatever is likely to be acceptable to the mob, telling them that it would be a shocking thing if no man were wiser than any cow in a field."

plants, animals, or human bodies: there too, there is a multi-sided goodness that makes the same thing good for x and bad for y. Goodness seems to be *naturally* varied too.”⁶⁷

If understood in this way, the passage seems to suggest that the variation of ethical values, namely of what is counted as good, may be taken as a natural process, as something that must inevitably happen, (human) nature being as it is. There is also another passage in the *Protagoras* that may be read as hinting at such a relativistic variation of ethical judgements, 356c-d.⁶⁸ Socrates and Protagoras are discussing *akrasia*, viz. weakness of the will. For the time being, let us just focus on the core of the argument.⁶⁹

Socrates says that being overcome by pleasures means “taking fewer good things at the cost of greater evils.”⁷⁰ He proposes then to substitute ‘pleasant’ for ‘good and ‘painful’ for ‘bad’,⁷¹ restating his previous sentence in the following way: “A man does—before we said bad things, but now let’s say painful things, in the knowledge that they are painful, because he is overcome by pleasant things, which are, of course, not worth it.”⁷² This is one of the formulations of the problem of *akrasia* and Socrates is now going to propose his solution to the problem, namely the art of measurement (*metretike technē*). First, Socrates says that the difference between immediate pleasure and pleasure at a later time consists in a difference of (quantity of) pleasure. He goes on then by saying:

⁶⁷ The passage just examined is the only passage in the whole dialogue that deals with individualistic epistemological concerns and that may be taken as allowing *directly* a form of relativism or subjectivism to be legitimate (although the passage does not *openly* express such subjectivism.)

⁶⁸ I am using ‘relativistic’ in its philosophical sense of ‘being epistemologically relative to someone, to someone’s point of view’.

⁶⁹ As said above, the section on *akrasia* runs from 351b to the end of the dialogue.

⁷⁰ 355e1-2.

⁷¹ On the hedonism of the *Protagoras*, see Taylor (*PRT*, 174-176; 179-181); more recently, see C.J. Rowe, “Hedonism in the *Protagoras* again: *Protagoras* 351Bff”; C. Kahn, “Socrates and Hedonism”; C.C. Taylor, “The Hedonism of the *Protagoras* Reconsidered”: these three unpublished papers were originally read at the symposium on Plato’s *Protagoras*, held in Prague, 11-13 October, 2001. I must thank my supervisor C.J. Rowe for allowing me to read them.

⁷² 355e6-356a1.

ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἀγαθὸς ἰστάναι ἄνθρωπος, συνθεῖς τὰ ἡδέα καὶ συνθεῖς τὰ λυπηρά, καὶ τὸ ἐγγὺς καὶ τὸ πόρρω στήσας ἐν τῷ ζυγῷ, εἶπε πότερα πλείω ἐστίν. ἐὰν μὲν γὰρ ἡδέα πρὸς ἡδέα ἰσῆς, τὰ μείζω ἀεὶ καὶ πλείω ληπτέα· ἐὰν δὲ λυπηρὰ πρὸς λυπηρά, τὰ ἐλάττω καὶ σμικρότερα· ἐὰν δὲ ἡδέα πρὸς λυπηρά, ἐὰν μὲν τὰ ἀνιαρὰ ὑπερβάλληται ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδέων, ἐάντε τὰ ἐγγὺς ὑπὸ τῶν πόρρω ἐάντε τὰ πόρρω ὑπὸ τῶν ἐγγύς, ταύτην τὴν πρᾶξιν πρακτέον ἐν ἧ ἂν ταῦτ' ἐνῆ· ἐὰν δὲ τὰ ἡδέα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνιαρῶν, οὐ πρακτέα.

Rather, like someone who is good at weighing things, add up all the pleasant things and all the painful, and put the element of nearness and distance in the scale as well, and then say which are the more. For if you weigh pleasant things against pleasant, you always have to take the larger and the more, and if you weigh painful against painful, you always have to take the less and the smaller. And if you weigh pleasant against painful, if the painful are outweighed by the pleasant, no matter which are nearer and which more distant, you have to do whatever brings the pleasant about, and if the pleasant are outweighed by the painful, you have to avoid doing it.⁷³

In order not to be *akrates*, man needs to be good at weighing. He needs to be good at understanding the respective weight of present pleasures and pains and of future ones, for instance if he had better avoid immediate (lesser) pleasure because of the future (greater) pain. As Socrates has pointed out, the art of weighing has to take into account “element of nearness and distance” and this is highly risky. Someone could be, and people often are, deceived by the power of (immediate) appearance, and choose a present pleasure because it

⁷³ 356a8-c1.

seems greater from near at hand than a future pain (which is at a distance in time).⁷⁴ If someone does so, he will not have a happy life, Socrates warns. It is those who are able to avoid the power of appearance (*tou phainomenou dunamis*) and to weigh pleasure and pain in accordance with their actual weights, whose lives are saved (as Socrates says rather unprophetically at 356e1). In other words, if a man possesses the (objective) art of measurement (*metretike techne*), he will be able to grasp the truth, which gives peace of mind and allow everyone who has it to live a good life.⁷⁵ But let us read Socrates' actual words on all of this. He says:

Εἰ οὖν ἐν τούτῳ ἡμῖν ἦν τὸ εὖ πράττειν, ἐν τῷ τὰ μὲν μεγάλα μήκη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λαμβάνειν, τὰ δὲ σμικρὰ καὶ φεύγειν καὶ μὴ πράττειν, τίς ἂν ἡμῖν σωτηρία ἐφάνη τοῦ βίου; ἄρα ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη ἢ ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις; ἢ αὕτη μὲν ἡμᾶς ἐπλάνα καὶ ἐποίει ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω πολλάκις μεταλαμβάνειν ταῦτα καὶ μεταμέλειν καὶ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσιν τῶν μεγάλων τε καὶ σμικρῶν, ἢ δὲ μετρητικὴ ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, δηλώσασα δὲ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἐποίησεν ἔχειν τὴν ψυχὴν μένουσαν ἐπὶ τῷ

⁷⁴ "Answer me this [Socrates speaking]. Do the same magnitudes look bigger when you see them from near at hand, and smaller at a distance, or not? (...). And similarly with thicknesses and numbers? And the same sounds are louder near at hand and softer at a distance?" (356c4-8).

⁷⁵ On Socrates' whole argument here, see Taylor (*PRT*, 191): "Socrates begins from the fact of ordinary observation that things look, sound, etc. quantitatively different under different conditions of observation, e.g. things in the distance look smaller than the same things seen at close quarters. He draws the unexceptionable conclusion that, if it is important to give a correct answer to the question 'Is x bigger etc. than y?', ordinary observation of whether x looks bigger must be superseded by a technique of measurement which provides answers independent of variations in the observation conditions. Socrates' emphasis on saving one's life is deliberate; he does not say that one can never correctly judge whether x is bigger than y without measuring. What he does say is that, if one's life depended on *regularly* making correct judgements and choices based on them (...), one would not be able to rely on observation of how things look etc., but would require a technique of measurement."

ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἔσωσεν ἂν τὸν βίον.

So if our well-being had depended on taking steps to get large quantities, and avoid small ones, what should we have judged to be the thing that saves our lives? The art of measurement or the power of appearances? The latter, as we saw, confuses us and makes us often change our minds about the same things and vacillate back and forth in our actions and choices of large and small things; but measurement would have made these appearances powerless, and given us peace of mind by showing us the truth and letting us get a firm grasp of it, and so would have saved our lives.⁷⁶

The contrast here is obviously between the power of appearance (*tou phainomenou dunamis*) and the art of measurement (*metretike techne*). The first is a clear allusion to Protagoras and to his own theory of knowledge, whilst the second is Socrates' ideal instrument for gaining truth and happiness.⁷⁷ Protagoras' power of appearance provides nothing better than a subjective belief (and one relative to the one who makes the judgments) about what *seems* to have to be taken as more pleasurable; Socrates' art of measurement offers an objective criterion for choosing what *is* best, in terms of pleasure

⁷⁶ 356c8-e2.

⁷⁷ See Taylor (*PRT*, 191): "The contrast in d4 between the art of measurement and the power of appearance is the nearest thing in the dialogue to a direct reference to Protagorean subjectivism. Socrates is chiefly concerned to insist on the distinction between 'x looks bigger than y' and 'x is bigger than y'. He points out (d4-7) that we may in different conditions make equally well-grounded judgements 'x looks bigger than y' and 'x does not look bigger than y', and that the impasse has to be resolved by recourse to measurement, which 'shows us the truth' (d8-e1), i.e. shows whether x is in fact bigger. The central tenet of Protagorean subjectivism, by contrast, is the elimination of the distinction between 'x looks F to A', and 'x is F (to or for A). Thus there is nothing which can be said beyond the judgements 'x looks bigger than y to A at time t' and 'x does not look bigger than y to A at time t+1', and consequently the question whether x really is bigger than y cannot be asked."

and pain, good and bad.⁷⁸ The former is a bad epistemological criterion, for it depends on illusion and does not attain the truth; the latter is a good epistemological criterion, for it is solid and allows men to grasp the truth. This is what I claim Plato likes to suggest, or, better, to demonstrate, with this passage (and more generally with the whole section on *akrasia*).

The passage may be regarded as showing once again the contrast between Protagorean, subjective (or inter-subjective, or relativistic) ideas of *aletheia* on the one hand, and Platonic, objective notion of truth. This epistemological discourse is here applied to ethical matters, since Socrates and Protagoras are discussing 'pleasant' and 'painful', terms that they have agreed to take as synonymous with 'good' and 'bad'.⁷⁹ It is true that Socrates and Protagoras are discussing cases of mainly individual moral choices, but the two opposite principles of the power of appearance and of the art of measurement state two different general (epistemological) rules, that is, rules that seem to govern the whole ethical

⁷⁸ I say 'objective' because it is this feature of the art of measurement that Plato wishes to convey, as opposed to the subjective feature of Protagoras' alleged position. That the art of measurement is an objective, or at least inter-subjective, art is fairly clear. On this point, see Taylor (*PRT*, 195): "Techniques such as weighing, counting, and linear measurement have two main features: they are (a) quantitative and (b) inter-subjective, i.e. they give results which are accessible to all those who have mastered the technique in question, independent both of the particular conditions of observation of the attitudes, preferences etc. of the particular person making the judgement. Ideally, therefore, the desired technique of measuring pleasures and pains should share both features." On Taylor's own critique of the logical strength of Plato's position here, see *PRT*, pp. 196-7; see also Arist., *EN* V.1134b35-a6. When discussing natural (political) justice *versus* conventional (political) justice (on which, see below, n. 82), Aristotle writes: "Those just arrangements based on agreement and what is advantageous are like units of measure: measures of wine and corn are not the same everywhere, since even political constitutions are not the same everywhere, although only one is everywhere the best by nature" (C. Rowe's translation).

⁷⁹ On the substitution of 'pleasant' for 'good' and 'painful' for 'bad', see Taylor (*PRT*, 179, commenting on 355b3-c1). He writes: "These lines contain the core of the argument, the mutual substitution of the pairs of terms 'pleasant' and 'good' and 'unpleasant' [viz. 'painful'] for 'bad', on the ground that it has already been agreed that each of these pairs consists of two names for the same thing (...). [E]conomy of interpretation indicates that this should be understood, not as identity of sense between the members of each pair, but as identity of reference (...)."

field of society. As already seen, Plato's Protagoras has not so far been interested in the ethical judgements of the individual. This is the only case where Socrates forces Protagoras to hold a position on such issue. As far as I can see however, nothing prevents us from assuming that this application of the principle of the "power of appearance" to individual cases is a just a restricted case of a much wider and general application of the same principle to society as a whole. In other words, Protagoras is once again indicated by Plato as holding a non-objective, relativistic criterion as far as ethical matters are concerned: the *polis* may well choose its own ethical values, according to the power of appearance, viz. to what seems the best to it at the moment when it takes its ethical decision. Ethical values and judgements seem thus to vary, as appearances vary: what seems laudable among Athenians is not such for Spartans, whereas what now seems laudable among Athenians will not be such in the future. Although for Protagoras all men are political animals (since all of them possess the same *politike technē*), the Protagorean epistemological position that is expounded at 334a3-c6 and in the central part of the section on *akrasia* seems to indicate, or at least not to exclude, that ethical judgements may vary and be relative to the point of view of those who make such judgements.

Such relativistic ideas seem not to be exclusively Protagorean, but widespread among Greek thinkers of fifth century B.C.⁸⁰ I wish to remind the reader of the passage in

⁸⁰ On the fifth century B.C. as a 'relativistic' century', see Guthrie ([131], 59): "[In the Athens of the fifth-century B.C.] we are entering a world in which not only sweet and bitter, hot and cold, exist merely in belief, or by convention, but also justice and injustice, right and wrong. Doubts about the order and stability of the physical world as a whole, and the dethronement of divinity in favour of chance and natural necessity as causes, were seized upon by upholders of the relativity of ethical conceptions and became part of the basis of their case (...)." He then quotes an extract by Greenleaf that Guthrie thinks well represent the changing climate of thought in the Athens of that period. The extract says "The voyages of discovery ... revealed numerous different systems of morality ... To none of these customs, so infinite in matter and diversity, could 'permanent authority' be attributed. The idea of a universal moral law was, therefore, to this extent on the wane, and it became *pari passu* more credible to regard moral rules as merely customary and relative, as having grown up to meet the needs of particular people in given places and times."

the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* that has generally been taken as indicating a general shared moral relativism.⁸¹ This is also the time of Herodotus, who taught to all Greeks the *poikilia* of human habits, customs, beliefs and laws.⁸² As far as such variety of human habits and belief, together with another profession of moral relativism, is concerned, I cannot help but think of Herodotus' famous passage, which runs:

Πανταχῆ ὧν μοι δηλὰ ἐστὶ ὅτι ἐμάνη μεγάλως ὁ Καμβύσης· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἱροῖσί τε καὶ νομαίοισι ἐπεχείρησε καταγελᾶν. Εἰ γάρ τις προθείη πᾶσι ἀνθρώποισι ἐκλέξασθαι κελεύων νόμους τοὺς καλλίστους ἐκ τῶν πάντων νόμων, διασκεψάμενοι ἂν ἐλοίετο ἕκαστοι τοὺς ἑωυτῶν· οὕτω νομίζουσι πολλόν τι καλλίστους τοὺς ἑωυτῶν νόμους ἕκαστοι εἶναι. Οὐκ ὧν οἶκός ἐστι ἄλλον γε ἢ μαινόμενον ἄνδρα γέλωτα τὰ τοιαῦτα τίθεσθαι. Ὡς δὲ οὕτω νενομίκασι τὰ περὶ τοὺς νόμους οἱ πάντες ἄνθρωποι, πολλοῖσί τε καὶ ἄλλοισι τεκμηρίοισι πάρεστι σταθμώσασθαι, ἐν δὲ δὴ καὶ τῷδε. Δαρεῖος ἐπὶ τῆς ἑωυτοῦ ἀρχῆς καλέσας Ἑλλήνων τοὺς παρεόντας εἶρετο ἐπὶ κόσῳ ἂν χρήματι βουλοίετο τοὺς πατέρας ἀποθνήσκοντας κατασιτέεσθαι· οἱ δὲ ἐπ' οὐδενὶ ἔφασαν ἔρδειν ἂν τοῦτο. Δαρεῖος δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα καλέσας Ἰνδῶν τοὺς καλεομένους Καλλατίας, οἱ τοὺς γονέας κατεσθίουσι, εἶρετο,

⁸¹ See *Tht.* 171d9-172c1, above, pp. 81 ff.

⁸² For the cultural climate of the fifth century B.C. and for the possible relationship between Herodotus and the Sophists, see Winton, in Rowe-Schofield [60], 89-101. In his own original reconstruction of Protagoras' doctrine, Vlastos ([240], xv-xvi) refers to Herodotus. Reproducing an imaginary dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras, Vlastos makes Socrates tell Protagoras: "I suppose you have no scruples about applying your appearance-is-reality doctrine to morals. [Protagoras says] Are you sure insinuating there is something there is something unscrupulous about that? I am in most respectable company here. Herodotus, you will recall, said Cambyses was mad because he despised the burial customs of other people. All I am doing is to generalize the notion our historian has applied to something as sacrosanct as funeral rites, and say that anything held right and just in a given state is right and just for it."

παρέοντων τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ δι' ἑρμηνέος μανθανόντων τὰ λεγόμενα, ἐπὶ τίνι χρήματι δεξαίαιτ' ἂν τελευτῶντας τοὺς πατέρας κατακαίειν πυρί· οἱ δὲ ἀμβώσαντες μέγα εὐφημέειν μιν ἐκέλευον. Οὕτω μὲν νυν ταῦτα νενόμισται, καὶ ὀρθῶς μοι δοκίει Πίνδαρος ποιῆσαι, "νόμον πάντων βασιλέα" φήσας εἶναι.

I hold it then in every way proved that Cambyses was quite insane; or he would never have set himself to deride religion and custom. For if it were proposed to all nations to choose which seemed best of all customs, each, after examination, would place its own first; so well is each convinced that its own are by far the best. It is not therefore to be supposed that anyone, except a madman, would turn such things to ridicule. I will give this one proof among many from which it may be inferred that all men hold this belief about their customs. When Darius was king, he summoned the Greeks who were with him and asked them for what price they would eat their fathers' dead bodies. They answered that there was no price for which they would do it. Then Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callataie, who eat their parents, and asked them (the Greeks being present and understanding through interpreters what was said) what would make them willing to burn their fathers at death. The Indians cried aloud, that he should not speak of so horrid an act. So firmly rooted are these beliefs; and it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that custom is lord of all.⁸³

Herodotus' passage may be read as a kind of manifesto of moral relativism. The Greeks thought of as shameful what the Callataie found laudable, as far as the way of treating fathers' dead corpses is concerned.⁸⁴ This is obviously only an example of a much

⁸³ Hdt. 3.38.1-4 (Loeb translation of A.E. Godley). See also Xenophanes, 21DKB15 and 16: "But if cows and horses or lions had hands or could draw with their hands and make the things men can make, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, and they would make their bodies similar in shape to those which each had themselves" and "The Ethiopians say their gods are snub-nosed and black; the Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired" (J. Barnes' translation).

⁸⁴ On the Callataie, see above, p. 139, n. 61.

wider difference of ethical beliefs which may occur between different peoples and which may concern what is taken as being pious, wholesome, useful, just. That is, the idea of the just seems to vary from one group of people to another in the same way as other ethical categories do. In other words, I want to emphasize the following. In Protagoras' myth, *aidos* and *dike* are indeed sent to men as two ethical values on which a peaceful cohabitation of men had to be built. Nonetheless, if *aidos* and *dike* are taken as a kind of (varying) result of the application of *politike technē* (and Protagoras' myth does allow that), they cease to appear as two *objective* ethical values, common to every political community, and appear rather as two *modifiable* ethical values. Two different political communities may both construct their political balance on justice, but they might well give two different meanings to justice.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ I take Protagoras' emphasis in the Great Speech on some ethical values, such as *dikaiosune* and *sophrosune*, as showing his own awareness that he was delivering his speech in Athens and that those were the ethical values predominant there at that time. I do not, obviously, take Protagoras' emphasis as his own suggestion that those were objective ethical values. On this point, it is worth quoting Aristotle's treatment of natural (political) justice *versus* conventional (political) justice. He writes (*EN* V.1134b19-1134b33): "What is politically just divides into the natural and the legal: the natural being what has the same force everywhere, and does not depend on a decision whether to accept it or not, the legal what in the beginning makes no difference whether enacted or not, but when enacted *does* make a difference (...). Some people think that all legal enactments are of this sort, on the grounds that what is by nature is unchangeable and has the same force everywhere (just as the fire burns both here and in Persia), whereas they see things that are just in process of change. But in fact it is not like this, except in a way. Granted, among gods there is presumably no change at all, but among human beings, while there is such a thing as what is by nature, still everything is capable of being changed—and yet, despite this, there is room for a distinction between what is by nature and what is not by nature. It is clear enough what sort of arrangement, among those that can also be otherwise that they are, is by nature, and what sort is, rather, legal and the result of agreement, given that both sorts alike are changeable" (C. Rowe's translation). Sarah Broadie ([253], p. 348) comments on this passage by saying: "Ar. rejects the argument that if there were laws reflecting natural justice they would be the same everywhere and immutable. Even if natural justice is in some sense divine (cf. *Politics* III 16, 1287a29), our human interpretations of it are, of course, different under different circumstances." I take Aristotle's view here as supporting the claim here attributed to Protagoras, more than contradicting it.

I am pretty sure that Protagoras was aware of the widespread moral relativism of his century.⁸⁶ The evidence of the *Theaetetus* and his own fragments, whatever interpretation one attaches to them, both support my belief. This is not the right place to attempt to demonstrate that Protagoras may have well have favoured the diffusion of such moral relativism through the diffusion of his own philosophical positions.⁸⁷ I am happy just to say that the second, non-objective interpretation of Protagoras' myth seems to be very much in consonance with the cultural climate in which Protagoras worked. In general I claim that this reading of the myth has a good chance of representing a genuine position of Protagoras'. It is also important for me to emphasize that this interpretation of Protagoras' myth is based upon an understanding of Plato's text in the *Protagoras* and upon some historical considerations that make such an interpretation plausible, not based upon (my own understanding) of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*. In elaborating the non-objective reading of the myth, I have nowhere made use of arguments taken from the *Theaetetus* to make such a reading plausible or more coherent.

It is important to note this, when we compare Protagoras' position in the myth of the *Protagoras* and the position attributed to him in the second part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* (viz. from the Defence of Protagoras onwards, to the very end of that section).⁸⁸ As far as Protagoras' homo-mensura maxim, read as a Theory of Society, is

⁸⁶ On such issues and on a possible comparison between Protagoras and Herodotus on relativistic themes, see Farrar [202], 45-46: "The claim that a community's standards and decisions are legitimate because they are the standards believed in and the decisions made by the community was characteristic of Protagoras' time. Herodotus, apparently provoked only to reflection, not defensiveness or doubt, by the subversive implications of Parmenidean reasoning or indeed of his own researches into the diversity of human customs, cites Pindar's dictum that 'Nomos is the King' (3.38) (...). For Protagoras, the weakness of Parmenides' theory was its dismissal of human beliefs. His own ideas are a response to Parmenides, and he is therefore less innocent than Herodotus in his assessment of the status of *nomoi*, but he nevertheless shares the historian's belief in the power and tenacity of communal standards." See also Gigante [205].

⁸⁷ On this point. see Vlastos [240], xvi, n. 30.

⁸⁸ *Tht.* 166c-179c.

concerned, I have ascribed to Protagoras the epistemological position I have labeled 'Ethical Autonomy' (EA).⁸⁹ That is, as far as the whole ethical field is concerned (the just, the religious, the good), each and every city is the *metron* of its own *nomoi*; what the *polis* decides to be just is such for that city, for so long it maintains that. I find (EA) perfectly consistent with the non-objective reading of the myth that I have sketched above. Such a reading may thus be taken as a wider illustration from Protagoras of his own political position, which the *Theaetetus* has expounded in a more brachylogical and obscure way. In handling the *Theaetetus*, I have used a lot of energy in trying to decrypt Protagoras' authentic position on ethical matters: it has taken so much energy because of the epistemological preoccupations of that dialogue and of the intricacy and depth of Plato's philosophical arguments. In the *Protagoras*, by contrast, we have Protagoras telling a story in which he expounds in a rather clear way the idea that men are naturally given to political skill and ability. Such a skill allows men to produce ethical values, but ethical values may well vary from one place to another. In Protagoras' myth, there seems to be no objective standard to look to, in order to say that one ethical judgement is wrong, whilst another is right.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ See above, p. 88.

⁹⁰ The agreement between the *Theaetetus* and the *Protagoras* I am proposing here is proposed also by Vlastos ([240], xii-xx), who still warns that "Though the first [*sc.* Protagoras' ontological subjectivism] implies the second [*sc.* Protagoras' moral subjectivism], the second by no means implies the first, is by far the stronger, more defensible of the two, and must have been then, as it is now, an influential position, held by many who would not dream of saddling themselves with the freakish extremism of Protagoras' generalized subjectivism" (xvii). A slightly different way of reconciling the two dialogues as a depiction of Protagoras' whole doctrine is proposed by Farrar [202], especially 76-87. She writes: "As I shall show, the Great Speech in the *Protagoras* expresses the sophist's belief, reflected in the *Theaetetus*, in the beneficent socializing effect of *polis* life and democratic political action. The man-measure doctrine conceives of the experience and understanding attained by ordinary men as the touchstone of social values. Protagoras' measure is a man who notices his neighbor and who moves through life and interacts with others as a human being (...). In a democracy, and indeed in response to democracy, epistemology and political ethics coincide" (76). *Contra*, see Nill [225], 14-5: "[T]he Protagoras of the Great Speech does not adopt the position that what *seems* just or

While confirming the reading of the *Theaetetus*, the myth of the *Protagoras* provides support for our asserting the coherence of Protagoras' own epistemology, at least as I have reconstructed it so far. As we have seen, the *Theaetetus* offers a plausible and reasonable picture of Protagoras' doctrine, a picture that the *Protagoras* confirms on its own, that is without having to depend or rely upon the (interpretation of the) former dialogue. I take this as further evidence of Plato's coherent representation of Protagoras. While helping us to assess Plato's coherence in representing Protagoras' theory of knowledge, the myth of the *Protagoras* nonetheless fails to help us say anything useful on the problem left unanswered in the *Theaetetus*: that is, whether and why Protagoras thinks that some ethical values are better, more wholesome, less pernicious than others.⁹¹ It is worth recalling here the passage of the Defence of Protagoras in question. On Protagoras' behalf, Socrates says:

I look for wisdom, as regards animal bodies, in doctors; as regards plant-life, in gardeners—for I am quite prepared to maintain that gardeners too, when they find a plant sickly, proceed by causing it to have good and healthy, that is true perceptions, instead of bad ones. Similarly, the wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just.⁹²

advantageous to a city *is* just or advantageous (for that city), a position which he is sometimes thought to adopt in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Protagoras*, the bottom line is always that the laws embody prescriptions which *are* advantageous to the city.”

⁹¹ On the first problem, see above, pp. 68 ff. With ‘better’ here, I am obviously referring to what is meant by ‘better’ in Protagoras’ Defence in the *Theaetetus* (166a-168c5): see above, pp. 52 ff.

⁹² *Tht.* 167b5-c7.

Each *polis* has its own ethical values that may well be thought of as varying, as is explicitly said in the passage above. Further, the *sophos* may be regarded as the one who is—allegedly—able to improve the *nomoi* of a *polis* (when it is no longer happy with them). But, where does the *sophia* of the *sophos* come from? How does the *sophos* understand that a new *nomos* is better than the old one and thus propose that the *polis* should replace the latter with the former? In other words, what are the sources of the *sophia* of the Protagorean *sophos*? All this was left unanswered in the *Theaetetus* and, rather disconsolately, I have to admit that the *Protagoras* does not fill this lacuna. The only way to try to find the solution to this enigma is to formulate some hypotheses about the nature of the wisdom of the Protagorean wise man, relying on all the Protagorean material we have examined so far. I will attempt to do that in my conclusion.

Nevertheless, the most compelling question that the *Theaetetus* has left open is the one about the relationship between the individual side of Protagoras' epistemology and its collective counterpart. For instance, what is the balance between the principle of Ethical Autonomy, which seems to govern the political aspect of Protagoras' theory of knowledge, and that Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy, which is the rule of the private, individualistic side of such theory?⁹³ In attempting to answer this question in the context of the *Theaetetus*, I advanced the thesis that the balance between the individual's perceptual autonomy and the ethical autonomy of the city seems to be a good one, to the extent that the area in which the two autonomies may conflict seems not to be so wide. The individual is actually autonomous in the great majority of his perceptions and feelings; when and if some of his feelings conflict with the *nomoi* of his city, he seems to need to change his attitude on the issue involved.⁹⁴ When I brought in the modern debate on philosophical

⁹³ For the definition of 'Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy', viz. (PCA), see above, 46. (PCA) defines the epistemological autonomy that is peculiar to each individual, who has his own private perceptions and feelings, even while understanding those of others.

⁹⁴ See above, pp. 92 ff.

relativism, and looked at the whole question from a strictly epistemological point of view, namely whether (EA) may be said to have an epistemological superiority over (PCA), I advanced a rather cautious position.⁹⁵ I said that (PCA) and (EA) describe two Protagorean positions that are epistemologically consistent and understandable; that (PCA) and (EA) are not generally in conflict and when it is the case that they are, (EA) seems to be predominant over (PCA). In other words, and put in more modern terms, I claimed that the framework to which the ethical judgements of the *polis* are relative seems also to be the same epistemological framework that governs perceptual relativism.

This seems to be a rather hard point to make. Let us try to make it clearer. When I first dealt with Protagorean epistemology in the *Theaetetus*, the question arose about the treatment of perceptions and feelings. I did my best to show that Protagoras' epistemological position, as far as perceptions and feelings are concerned, does not lead to any kind of solipsism. Although they have private (unerring and different) perceptions and feelings, (Protagorean) people need not be confined in solipsistic worlds that have no possibilities of communicating with one another. Protagorean people may be thought of as being able instead to exchange, through the medium of a common and public language, their own different perceptions and feelings. Since they speak the same language, Protagoras may tell Socrates his (Protagoras') private perceptions and feelings and, on his part, Socrates may well understand them.⁹⁶ I have called this position (PCA). But I avoided labelling (PCA) as an epistemological position of perceptual relativism.⁹⁷ I avoided doing so not only for the reasons I expounded in the previous chapter, but also for the following reason. When Protagoras is said to be a relativist, it is generally meant that he is only a

⁹⁵ See above, 93-94.

⁹⁶ See above, 44-45.

⁹⁷ See above, pp. 46 ff.

perceptual relativist who holds a rather trivial form of relativism, namely that " $\forall x$ (x believes that $p \Rightarrow X$ is true)." ⁹⁸

As I hope to have already demonstrated, the latter is a kind of caricature of Protagoras' whole epistemological position and, as far as perceptions and feelings are concerned, I would rather call him a sort of inter-subjectivist. ⁹⁹ Through the medium of a public language, Protagoras' individuals are non-solipsistic entities that have private perceptions; these private perceptions may be understood, however, by those who do not have them (at that moment). Language thus seems to be a sort of common epistemological background, through which Protagoras' individuals (learn to) perceive their perceptions and feel their feelings. Language seems to be the epistemological element that makes Protagoras' position on perceptual knowledge an inter-subjectivist position. At least, language *seems to me* the possible element that may make us understand Protagoras' position on perceptual knowledge as a kind of inter-subjectivist position. As already said, I do not claim that Protagoras was *aware* of all this, namely that he took language as the common epistemological background for (perceptual) knowledge.

To establish the precise identity of this common epistemological background, nonetheless, is important but not essential. In order to avoid once again labeling, or indeed being myself labelled for my own understanding of Protagoras' epistemology, let us call such common epistemological background 'Background X'. 'Background X' may be seen as the epistemological structure of the Protagorean world through which individuals learn their way of perceiving things and societies their way of judging ethically. 'Background X'

⁹⁸ See C. Swoyer, in Krausz-Meiland [268], 84-108. He writes (p. 108): "Talk of belief and truth is likely to call to mind Plato's discussion in the *Theaetetus*, where he attributes to Protagoras roughly the view that $P \forall x$ (x believes that $p \Rightarrow X$ is true for x). As unpromising as P is as a statement of relativism—or of anything else—Plato proceeds to drop the qualifying phrase 'for x' at a critical stage in the argument [*Theaetetus*, 171-72], thus saddling Protagoras with an even more vulnerable view: $P' \forall x$ ((x believes that $p \Rightarrow X$ is true). What is surprising is that a number of more recent objections to relativism have been raised against a form of the doctrine suggested by P'."

⁹⁹ On 'objective', 'inter-subjective' and 'subjective', see recently D. Davidson [255].

be taken as the conceptual schema by which individuals have their perceptions and societies their ethical judgements. Put in less philosophical terms, think of a case of a British and an Italian who meet at a conference, Martha Nussbaum's Keeling lecture on Compassion and Terror. The British person says: "Hello, my name is John. I am a lecturer in Philosophy at King's." He says this, looking politely at his Italian colleague (they both are philosophers) and thinking of what he is saying. The British colleague looks straight into the eyes of the other, thinking of the overall impression that the Italian makes on him. On his part, the Italian says: "Hello, my name is Giovanni. I am a professor of Philosophy at the University of Bologna." He says this, looking curiously at (the physical aspect of) his British colleague, hardly caring about what he is saying. Although he thinks that the other person does not guess it, the Italian looks at the way his British colleague is dressed, telling himself that time passes but British people keep on understanding little about fashion. At the end, the Italian does not remember the name of his colleague, because his eyes were more curious than his ears.

This is a rather imprecise picture of how things go when a British person and an Italian first meet. To some extent, it is a kind of caricature. Nonetheless, it is a true account of what happens in some cases when British and Italian people meet. The two ways of perceiving the other are different. The British tend to be more focused on the 'interior' impression that the other makes on him as a person, whilst the Italian is more concentrated on the 'exterior' impression that the other makes on him. Once again, I am aware that the above description is too brutally general and simplified, but it is a real description (I apologize to any Italian who may feel offended by my caricature. Most of us, I am afraid, are that way.)

Further, this example is not the kind of example one may read in a book on the philosophy of perception. I am not here interested in showing how our senses work in elaborating our perceptions (nor indeed could I do that). What I wish to emphasize with the example I have given is that the British and the Italians seem to have two different

backgrounds through which they have learned to have their perceptions. Put in the same situation, namely that of meeting another person, they have different approaches and their senses work differently. The Italian is more active with his eyes, whilst the British person is more balanced between eyes and ears. The different uses of their senses obviously determine their different ways of perceiving the other. The Italian person perceives the other in a more 'exterior' way, the British in a more 'interior' way. These different ways of perceiving are also related to different ways of seeing things. For an Italian, it is good to be well dressed; for a British person, it is important to be appropriately dressed but elegance may probably lie somewhere else. For the British, it is good to act elegantly and politely. Not only the way of perceiving is different but also the way of judging things (ethically) is different. What may be taken as good by an Italian, may be not seen as (so) good for a British person and vice versa. Although the differences in perceiving and judging ethically are small, British and Italian seems to have two different *cultural* backgrounds, which are, in *some way*, responsible for their different ways of perceiving and judging ethically. The two different cultural backgrounds are, in some way, responsible for their different ways of understanding things, viz. for their epistemological approaches to the world "out there".

What I wish to understand now is whether there is something in Protagoras' theory of knowledge (as so far reconstructed) that may work as a background in this way? Is there in Protagoras' epistemology a kind of 'Background X' that may be taken as responsible for the ways Protagorean people perceive and judge ethically? May *we*, at least, see something in Protagoras' theory of knowledge that may work as a kind of 'Background X'? We have seen that language may be taken as the common medium that makes possible communication between people with different and private perceptions. Language may easily be taken as the common medium for people with different ethical values and judgements. People with different ethical values and judgements may well understand each

other through the medium of language, be it a common spoken language or not.¹⁰⁰ In the Protagorean world, however, is there anything beyond language? Is there anything in the Protagorean world, to which language may relate but which is more essential than language, that may be taken as 'Background X'? Going back to (EA) and (PCA), I have just above claimed that the framework to which the ethical judgements of the *polis* are relative seems also to be the same epistemological framework that governs perceptual relativism. What is this framework?

Might the *Protagoras*, or at least the myth of the *Protagoras*, offer suggestions that would help me to answer these questions? It is important to try to find an answer because it would allow us to assess whether Protagoras is a relativist and, above all, the quality of his relativism. As far as perceptions and feelings are concerned, there are good grounds for taking Protagoras as a kind of inter-subjectivist. As far as his epistemology as a whole is concerned, may he be seen as holding a kind of relativism? If we find something in his epistemology that may work as a kind of 'Background X', Protagoras' epistemology should be taken as offering a rather sophisticated form of relativism, at least a relativism of a much more interesting kind than the trivial one normally ascribed to him.¹⁰¹ I claim that the *Protagoras* can be seen as offering some help toward deciding whether Protagoras' doctrine may not, after all, be taken as one of the first serious expressions of philosophical relativism in the history of thought.

In order to try to respond to such a philosophical challenge, let us turn back to political *arete*. I have claimed that for Protagoras political virtue is something that all men possess by nature.¹⁰² I have argued that this does not mean that political virtue is an objective ethical value that is always the same in different places (and substantially the

¹⁰⁰ In Hdt. 3.38, Greeks and Callatiae do not speak (literally) the same language, but through interpreters they can understand each other.

¹⁰¹ See above, p. 56, n. 59.

¹⁰² See above, pp. 131 ff..

same over time); political virtue is to be taken as the product of *politike technē*. It may reasonably be stated that *politike technē* and political virtue are a *conditio sine qua non* for our being human beings. To be such, we need to be provided with a political skill that will allow us to produce political virtues. In Protagoras' myth, gods are responsible for providing human beings with that. As Kerferd puts it, "Men, before societies existed, were unable to form societies, because they lacked what they could learn only from and through societies. Accordingly, divine intervention was required to enable the process to start."¹⁰³ If we wish to escape from the mythical frame and look for a more 'human' explanation of the reasons why political virtue is regarded as being a *conditio sine qua non* of human condition (more than an objective, given value), we should think—I propose—of Wittgenstein's 'Lebensform', viz. 'form of life'.

4.4 Protagoras among moderns: Wittgensteinian fascinations.

Before turning to Wittgenstein's 'form of life', I shall devote some words to the question of the authenticity of Protagoras' myth, on which I have said nothing so far.¹⁰⁴ The reason for my silence is that it is generally agreed among scholars that the myth has a good chance of representing Protagoras' real position. The subject of the myth, a title of Protagoras' work as reported by Diogenes Laertius, the archaic tone of words like *aidos* and *dike*, all this seems to suggest the genuineness of the Great Speech.¹⁰⁵ The non-

¹⁰³ See Kerferd [213], 45.

¹⁰⁴ Except for a short note in Chapter 1.

¹⁰⁵ See Taylor (*PRT*, 78): "There has been much discussion of the question whether Protagoras' defence is based on an actual work of his (...). In view of the considerable interest in the fifth century in the origins of civilization (...), and in view of the fact that the list of titles of works attributed to Protagoras includes one 'On the original state of things' (D.L. IX. 55), it is perfectly plausible that it is." On the authenticity of the

objective interpretation of the myth offered above is therefore not only a coherent and plausible interpretation of Plato's Protagoras, but it is indeed based upon material that is highly likely to be genuinely Protagorean. Moreover, the concordance between the reading of the *Theaetetus* I have provided in the previous chapters and the interpretation of Protagoras' myth offered in this chapter may be offered then as a further argument for the authenticity of the latter. On one hand, the *Theaetetus* has been shown to be offering a higher degree of authenticity (as far as Protagoras' doctrine is concerned);¹⁰⁶ on the other, the myth of the *Protagoras* seems to be perfectly consistent with the *Theaetetus*. It should follow then that the myth too has a good degree of authenticity and thus represents (more or less fully and accurately) Protagoras' own position on political matters.¹⁰⁷

The question of the authenticity of Protagoras' myth and, more generally, of Protagoras' Great Speech has been introduced here, and rather late, not only because it is a minor problem (there being almost general scholarly agreement about it), but also because I am here about to depart from the authentic Protagoras. I am going to introduce a rather non-Protagorean idea, Wittgenstein's 'form of life', in order to make better sense of Protagoras'

Great Speech, see also Rowe [231], 418; Nill [225], 5 and 15; Farrar [202], 76 and 96 (for the archaic tone of *aidos* and *dike*). *Contra*, see Maguire [222], especially 111-118. At p. 103, Maguire writes, rather abruptly: "From the viewpoint of Plato's techniques in manipulating historical figures, *Protagoras* is even more startling than *Republic I* or *Theaetetus*. Like them, it is organized around themes *Plato* wanted to discuss; and like them, it reaches the themes by deliberately perverting an ambiguous formula of its chief antagonist. But in the accompanying arguments neither of the other two quite approaches (...) the violence of the means employed in *Protagoras*: the passages apparently irrelevant to the main strategy; the disproportionate length of some of these; the false leads; the use of acknowledged fallacies; the awkward transitions; the internal inconsistencies." See also Guthrie [131], p. 64, n. 1 and Untersteiner [71], 83-92.

¹⁰⁶ On the question of the authenticity of the main part of the Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus*, see above, pp. 39 ff and pp. 106 ff (the last two indications being that that concerns the political side of Protagoras' epistemology).

¹⁰⁷ On the concordance between the *Theaetetus* and the Great Speech of the *Protagoras* as an argument for holding the likely authenticity of the Great Speech, see Vlastos [240], xvi, where he advances a more cautious position than mine.

whole doctrine. I am obviously not claiming that Protagoras used the notion of ‘form of life’ in elaborating his epistemology. What I am claiming is that we can make better sense of Protagoras’ doctrine, if we rely on Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life’. Using such a notion—I propose—we have a good chance of better understanding why political virtue is taken as a *conditio sine qua non* of human life.¹⁰⁸

‘Lebensform’, i.e. ‘form of life’, is a rather difficult concept to grasp, particularly since Wittgenstein used ‘Lebensform’ in only five places of his *Philosophical Investigations*, namely at §§ 19, 23, 241 and at pp. 174 and 226.¹⁰⁹ For the sake of the

¹⁰⁸ For the time being, I shall not deal here with the problem of the legitimacy of this approach, namely whether it makes sense to try to understand ancient philosophers through the use of rather modern ideas. Since I am using this approach here, I obviously take it as a legitimate attempt. Wittgenstein once wrote: “People say again that philosophy doesn’t really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But the people who say this don’t understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as there continues to be a verb ‘to be’ that looks as if it functions in the same way as ‘to eat’ and ‘to drink’, as long as we still have the adjective ‘identical’, ‘true’, ‘false’, ‘possible’, as long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc. etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up” (*Culture and Value*, 15e, P. Winch’s translation). I take this as Wittgenstein’s own suggestion that we look at Greek philosophy through (his) modern eyes.

¹⁰⁹ On the elusiveness of the notion, see Max Black, “‘Lebensform’ and ‘Sprachspiel’ in Wittgenstein’s Later Work”, in Kirchberg [266]. See also Janik-Toulmin [264], 230: “[T]he notion of ‘forms of life’ as the contexts for the language games within which linguistic expressions acquire their meaning, is itself a strikingly Loosian notion [*sc.* taken from Alfred Loos, the famous architect]. Loos himself had insisted that the design of any meaningful artifact must be determined by the ‘forms of culture’ within which it is used (...) so that changes in design have to be justified by changes in our manner of life, rather than vice versa. Even the very term *Lebensformen* (or ‘forms of life’) itself (...) had a recognizable Viennese origin. One of the most successful works of popular neo-Kantian literature, published shortly after the First World War, was a contribution to characterology written by Eduard Spranger. By the late 1920s, this book had sold as many as 28,000 copies, and the title of this best seller was, quite simply, *Lebensformen*. Given Wittgenstein’s Viennese background, therefore, he was no more in a position to *invent* the term ‘form of life’ than one could today invent the phrase ‘territorial imperative’; in the Vienna of the 1920s, this was just one of those cultural commonplaces that did not need explaining.” See also Baker-Hacker [250], 136-7.

argument, and because of their brevity, we may a look at these occurrences. At §19, Wittgenstein says: “it is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”¹¹⁰ A similar idea is expounded at §23: “There are *countless* kinds [*sc.* of sentence]: countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols’, ‘words’, ‘sentences’. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten (...). Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”¹¹¹

Again a link between ‘form of life’ and language is established at §241, which sounds a very Protagorean paragraph: “‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.”¹¹² To understand this last paragraph better, it is worth quoting §654, where ‘form of life’ is not used, but where it is stated that “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought

¹¹⁰ For the *Philosophical Investigations*, I shall always use G.E.M Anscombe’s translation. On §19, see Baker-Hacker [250], 135-138.

¹¹¹ On §23, see Baker-Hacker [250], 157-158. On language and language-games, see §7: “In instruction in the language the following process will occur: the learner *names* the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teachers points to the stone.—And there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher—both of these being processes resembling language. We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) [*sc.* a kind of language Wittgenstein has shown at §2] as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games ‘language-games’ and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone [*sc.* the kind of language of §2] might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’.” On language and language-game, see Kenny [264], chapter 9; Baker-Hacker [250], 89-99.

¹¹² On §241, see Baker-Hacker [251], 212-215.

to look at what happens as a 'proto-phenomenon' [*sc. Urphänomen*]. That is, where we ought to have said: *this language-game is played*'.¹¹³

At p. 226 Wittgenstein defines the forms of life as the original datum, what has to be accepted as such. He says: "What has to be accepted, the given [*sc. das Hinzunehmende, Gegebene*], is—so one could say—*forms of life*". Lastly, and less significantly, at p. 174, he asks: "One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after to-morrow?—And what can he not do here?—How do I do it?—How am I supposed to answer this? Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life."¹¹⁴

It seems to be rather hard to understand fully what Wittgenstein means with 'form of life'. Since this is not a work on Wittgenstein, I shall be content to say that a form of life seems to be (connected to) a primary activity. That is, 'Lebensform' relates to an activity (in which a language-game is a relevant part) that is essential to human beings and that is characterized by skills common to all those who share such activity. Secondly, a language-game is itself characterized by language and by all those actions into which it is woven. Thirdly, and most importantly, a form of life is what must be accepted, the given.¹¹⁵ Our

¹¹³ On [654, see Baker-Hacker [252], 118-121.

¹¹⁴ In the whole of Wittgenstein's corpus, there is one other occurrence of 'form of life', namely *On Certainty*, [358: "Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life'. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.)" (tr. by G.E.M Anscombe and D. Paul).

¹¹⁵ On these three points, see Baker-Hacker [250], 137: "The notion of a form of life is connected with that of a language-game, but is more general and elemental. A form of life is a given unjustified and unjustifiable pattern of human activity (part of human natural history (*PI* [25])). It rests upon, but is not identified with, very general pervasive facts of nature. It consists of shared natural and linguistic responses, of broad agreement in definitions and in judgements, and of corresponding behaviour. A language perforce contains moves which are not justified by reference to anything, but are simply accepted as appropriate, as a common pattern of linguistic behaviour by reference to which other moves are justified. Equally, any cognitive claims, as well as

focus being on this last remark, to what extent may we say that a form of life is the given, the original datum? May we say that a form of life is what has to be accepted in the same respect in which we say that we must accept that it is raining outside or that two people over there are kissing each other? Or perhaps, may we say that a form of life is what has to be accepted, as we have to accept that men have feelings and emotions and that there is no particular explanation for this? There are some physical explanations that can explain why it rains and there are some biological (evolutionary) explanations for saying why human beings have feelings and emotions. There does not seem to be, nonetheless, any particular *philosophical* explanation for all of this, and with 'philosophical explanation' I here mean any explanation that may abstract from nature or history and show the crude (or pure) reasons why things must be that way.¹¹⁶

I feel love for my girlfriend and disgust for my Prime Minister (I am here obviously referring to my Italian one). My friend Rudy feels love for his girlfriend (whilst, I know, he does not like mine) and admiration for our Prime Minister. I have desires and ambitions: I would like to develop a new line of scholarly research about Personal Identity and *philia* in Aristotle. I would like to teach young people who like philosophy as much as I like it, or more. My friend Rudy would like to buy a house and live together with his girlfriend. He wants to be a father. He does not mind Aristotle. He likes the band Pink Floyd and I do not

any doubts, occur within a framework of propositions that are not doubted, that belong to the frame of reference of the system of knowledge (...). Training in what counts as justification, acceptance of undoubted truths of the world-picture, is acculturation in the form of life of a community."

¹¹⁶ I am aware that there could be many objections to the distinction I have just drawn between the 'philosophical' on the one hand and the 'biological', 'physical', etc on the other. I shall not pursue the issue further here, for it would take us far away from the purposes and limits of the present inquiry. At any rate, what I wish to convey when I say that there is no particular *philosophical* explanation for the fact that it rains or that men have feelings is what Alfred North Whitehead expresses in a passage of *The Concept of Nature*. He writes: "I regret that it has been necessary for me in this lecture to administer a large dose of four-dimensional geometry. I do not apologise, because I am really not responsible for the fact that nature in its most fundamental aspect is four-dimensional. Things are what they are...".

think he has the smallest desire to read more than a line of a book every week. Despite being so different, we are friends. There is no reason for that. We are friends and that is enough. People have friends because this is the way human beings are. Rudy and I have indeed different feelings and ambitions, but still both of us feel love, hatred, desire, etc. There is no particular reason for that. People are simply this way. From the very beginning of our lives, we have feelings, desires, and so on. This is the original datum, what has to be accepted as the given. I am here suggesting that Wittgenstein means this when he says that the form of life is the given. The notion of 'form of life' alludes to the way people are, without giving any (philosophical) explanation for the way they are: there is no explanation for that. The notion of 'form of life' just indicates our human awareness that we are in a particular way and that there is no particular (philosophical) reason why we are that way.

Were all this reasonable, I have here the feeling that there is, or at least there could be, a strong relation between 'form of life' and the political virtue (or *techne*) of Protagoras' myth, as I have understood it. I have just above claimed that *politike techne* and political virtue seem to be a *conditio sine qua non* of human condition. To be human, we need to be provided with a political skill that allows us to produce political virtues.¹¹⁷ This being the case, it might well be said that political virtue and *techne* show the way men are. From the very beginning of their (adult) life, men are political animals by nature and there is no further reason to be discovered for that.¹¹⁸ They are simply that way: their being

¹¹⁷ See above, pp. 131 ff.

¹¹⁸ For man as *politikon zoon*, see Arist, *Pol.* 1253a2-5: ἐκ τούτων οὖν φανερόν ὅτι τῶν φύσει ἡ πόλις ἐστὶ, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῶον, καὶ ὁ ἀπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἤτοι φαυλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος. (From these things therefore it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it) (Loeb translation of H. Rackham). See also and *EN* I.1169b18: πολιτικὸν γὰρ ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ συζῆν πεφυκός (man is a civic being, one whose nature is to live with others) (C. Rowe's translation).

One may wonder whether Aristotle's definition of man as *politikon zoon* is not more useful than Wittgenstein's notion of 'form of life' to make better sense of Protagoras' *politike techne* and *arete*. For

political is just how they are: they have feelings, emotions, etc. and they are 'political'. People have different degrees of political virtue, as much as they have different feelings and emotions. Different peoples have different political virtues, namely they have different ethical values, as much as different people feel love or hatred for different kind of people. At any rate, all of us are provided with political *arete*, as much as all of us have an emotional life.

At this point, one might ask whether there could be a relationship between Ober's idea of 'democratic knowledge' and Wittgenstein's notion of 'form of life'.¹¹⁹ For the argument's sake, let me recall Ober's definition of democratic knowledge. He writes:

Athenian democracy depended for its functioning on a socially and politically constructed 'regime of truth' that we may call 'democratic knowledge' (...). Democratic knowledge was grounded, in the language of J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, on understanding the world of politics as 'the

Aristotle, man is inevitably a political creature; for Protagoras, at least for the one we have met so far in the present inquiry, man inevitably possesses *politike technē* and virtue. There is an obvious analogy between the two positions and it may be claimed that the former would help to illuminate the latter, better than Wittgenstein's 'form of life'. Moreover, the historical proximity between Protagoras and Aristotle may strengthen this claim. All this might be true and I do not deny the possibility (and usefulness) of such an attempt. On the other hand, to illuminate Protagoras' idea of *politike technē* and virtue, I prefer using the notion of 'form of life'. I do so for three main reasons: first, 'form of life' relates to a *primary* activity, that is 'form of life' relates to an activity that is essential to human beings. I do not see this 'being primary' so emphasized in Aristotle's treatment of man as *politikon zoon*. Secondly, 'form of life' relates to a primary activity that is characterized by *skills common to all those who share such activity*. I do not see this connection between activities and skills so stressed in Aristotle. Thirdly, 'form of life' is what must be accepted, the datum. Once again, I do not see Aristotle stressing this, when he deals with man as *politikon zoon*. In other words, all the features that characterize Wittgenstein's 'form of life' seem to me to explain Protagoras' *politike technē* and virtue, at least as I have understood them, and their mutual relation better than Aristotle's treatment of man as *politikon zoon* would do. Lastly, there is a further reason for my preferring Wittgenstein's 'form of life', and it is a 'reason connected to the economy of my thesis. Introducing the notion of 'form of life' allows me to conjecture some hypotheses for a better understanding of Protagoras' epistemology as a whole, and for cataloguing it (on this, see the last pages of this chapter).

¹¹⁹ On Ober's idea of 'democratic knowledge', see above, pp. 106 ff.

conventional effects of conventional procedures'. Thus the conventional procedures of the democracy (deliberating and voting) led to conventional effects (decrees and judgements of the *dikasteria* to which the citizens adhered). These conventions were created and maintained through constant, collective, public practice. Moreover, democratic debate was open, and neither speakers nor decision makers needed to be acknowledged experts. The Athenians simply assumed that political truth was dialectical (...).¹²⁰

Further,

Athenian political culture was based on collective opinion rather than on certain knowledge, and on the assumption that opinion could be translated into practical reality through democratic political process. The enactment formula of the Athenian Assembly—*edoxe toi demoi*—‘it appeared right to the citizenry – defines the relationship between democratic knowledge and political action. What the demos collectively opined was given, through the act of voting, the status of fact (...). Athenian political practice and policy remained flexible because in frequent meetings of the assembly and the people’s court contrasting views were publicly aired. Through the process of open debate, the democratic way of knowing, speaking, and acting evolved in response to changing external circumstances.¹²¹

We have already seen that the main features of democratic knowledge are that it is forward-looking and that it seeks to establish the most advantageous for the *polis*.¹²² Thus, are there possible relationships between ‘democratic knowledge’ and ‘form of life’? The two ideas seem to be different, at least in their nature. Ober’s concept is a perhaps both (generally) philosophical and historical, whilst Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘form of life’ is

¹²⁰ Ober, [227], 82. I have already quoted this passage and the following one: see above, 107.

¹²¹ Ober, [227], 83.

¹²² See above, pp. 109 ff.

mainly epistemological. There is nonetheless a feature that seems to link the two ideas. Democratic knowledge may be regarded as the result of the conventional political procedures of democracy, i.e. deliberating and voting. Democratic knowledge is defined through the collective and public practice shared by all the citizens in the assembly. I have just above noted that 'form of life' relates to an activity that is essential to human beings and that is characterized by skills common to all those who share such activity.¹²³ Democratic knowledge may be reasonably taken as such primary activity (or as a result of such activity).¹²⁴ All citizens have political skills common to all of them (and with this, I mean the ability of taking political decisions) and they gather in assemblies to perform what is essential for them, namely the deliberation about what is most advantageous for their *polis* (that is democratic knowledge).

In some way, therefore, democratic knowledge may be seen as the kind of primary activity (with skills common to all those who perform such activity) to which 'form of life' relates. What the concept of democratic knowledge seems to lack is the other important feature that distinguishes the notion of 'form of life', namely that 'form of life' is the given, the datum, what must be accepted with no further explanation. As far as I can see, there is nothing in Ober's definition of democratic knowledge that allows us to infer that democratic knowledge represents the datum, what must be taken without explanation. Indeed, Ober gives a rather detailed description of the historical context that has created, or at least made possible the birth of, the idea of democratic knowledge. In Ober's opinion, democratic knowledge may easily be seen as the outcome of the cultural and political climate of Greek society of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.¹²⁵ Although they share a common feature, Ober's 'democratic knowledge' and Wittgenstein's 'form of life' are two

¹²³ See above, 165-66.

¹²⁴ As Ober's definition has made clear, democratic knowledge is not only a kind of knowledge, but also (the result of) a *praxis*, that of gathering together in assemblies and taking political decisions.

¹²⁵ See especially Ober [228], 33-41, but all of the whole of his [227] and [228] makes this plain.

different concepts and the latter (with its feature of being what must be accepted as the given, with no further explanation for that) seems to be more useful for illuminating Protagoras' idea of men as being inevitably political creatures.¹²⁶ Let us now turn back to this.

In his myth, Protagoras seems to have shown his own awareness of men as being inevitably political creature in terms of a mythological narration. This should not prevent us from saying that he seems to have put man's 'being political' as an (the) ultimate horizon of the human condition, beyond which men cannot go.¹²⁷ This is not only a practical limit, to the extent that men inevitably act *politically*, but it is also an epistemological limit, to the extent that they have no particular or further reason for explaining their acting politically. The parallel between Wittgenstein's 'form of life' and Protagoras' political virtue (and *techne*) seems to be more fitting, if we think of a form of life as a primary activity. That is, the notion of 'form of life' seems to relate to an activity that is essential to human beings and that is characterized by skills common to all those who share such activity.¹²⁸ This resembles rather closely Protagoras' account of political virtue, at least the one depicted in the myth.

Protagoras' political virtue has been taken as being the result of *politike techne*, viz. of an activity that is a *primary* one, at least as primary as the activities devoted to human mere survival are primary.¹²⁹ As seen above, men need *demiourgike techne*, in order to make their houses, clothes, shoes and to provide their own food. *Demiourgike techne* is

¹²⁶ It is worth noting that Ober does not mention Wittgenstein as one of the philosophers who has helped him in formulating the idea of 'democratic knowledge'. As pointed out in the previous chapter (see above,), in order to define 'democratic knowledge', Ober relies upon J.L. Austin's 'performative speeches' and M. Foucault's 'regime of truth'.

¹²⁷ Once again, this is by no means equivalent to saying that Protagoras' position is that "there is no moral standard more ultimate than the standard of respectability current in a given society" (Taylor quoted above, p. 77, n. 6.)

¹²⁸ See above, 165-66.

¹²⁹ See above, 126-7..

indeed an essential and primary activity. But for men it is also primary to have *politike techne*, in order to be able to give up their mutual fighting and find rules that will allow their peaceful cohabitation.¹³⁰ Were they not equipped with *politike techne*, men would be unable to live together and to do so happily. Protagoras' *politike techne* is thus related to a primary activity, as is Wittgenstein's form of life: both of them are not only *primary* activities, but they are *activities*. The notion of 'form of life' relates to an activity in which the language-game plays a relevant role and which is characterized by some kinds of skill common to all those who enjoy such activity. Protagoras' *politike techne* is an activity that aims at defining political virtues, namely (shareable) ethical values, and that seems to be defined by a kind of political skill common to all men (as such). As seen many times above, men are provided with different degrees of political virtue. Political skill, or at least its quality and quantity, varies from man to man so that it easily happens that good citizens may have bad (i.e., not good) sons.¹³¹ This difference of talent in using political skill does not imply that only some men possess such skill and others do not: the difference in skill in handling a language-game (in a certain form of life) does not mean that only those who are best at the skill in question possess it. All men have a political skill, although they have different talent for using it.

Wittgenstein's notion of 'form of life' and Protagoras' idea of political virtue (and *techne*) undeniably share common features. They both seem to be the original datum, the given and delimitate the practical and epistemological limit beyond which men cannot go. Furthermore, both of them seem to be strictly related to a primary activity: the former relates to an activity in which language-games play a relevant role, whereas the latter relates to an activity that aims at defining ethical values. That being so, may we say that the two different activities to which Wittgenstein's 'form of life' and Protagoras' political virtue (and *techne*) refer to are of the *same sort*? That is (and this is the most controversial

¹³⁰ 322a5-b8.

¹³¹ See the *logos* (324d2-328c2), especially the *aulos*-player argument (326e6 ff).

point I wish to make about the legitimacy of comparing Wittgenstein's 'form of life' and Protagoras' political virtue), does the primary activity of Protagoras' political virtue define *the* epistemological limit, as the primary activity of Wittgenstein's 'form of life' does?¹³² As seen above, Wittgenstein's 'form of life' has a lot to do with language-games and language.¹³³ If there is something that links the speculation of the first Wittgenstein with that of the second, it will be the importance he always attributed to language.¹³⁴ Proposition 5.6 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, viz. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", was always true for Wittgenstein.¹³⁵ He has changed his idea about (the nature of) language, but it may be stated without fear of contradiction that in Wittgenstein's opinion language provides the epistemological limits of human (possibility of) knowledge.¹³⁶ In other words, Wittgenstein's forms of life and the primary activities connected to them seem to define the epistemological limits of human knowledge.

If this is the case, may it be argued that this is so also for Protagoras' political virtue (and *techne*)? I have just said that man's 'being political' may be taken as a practical limit but also as an epistemological limit. People do not have reasons to explain why they act politically. This is indeed different from assuming that their 'being political' indicates *the* epistemological limit of human knowledge. May we also say that in Protagoras' opinion their 'being political' could represent the ultimate epistemological standard with which all other epistemological stances have to comply? Going back to what I have said before,¹³⁷ may we state that for Protagoras man's 'being political' defines, in some way, a kind of

¹³² See Baker-Hacker, quoted above, p.165, n. 115.

¹³³ See above, 163-64.

¹³⁴ On the continuity (and the inner coherence) between the two phases of Wittgenstein's speculation, see Kenny [264], chapter 11.

¹³⁵ I here follow C.K.O. Ogden's classical translation of the *Tractatus*, London 1921 (reprinted with few corrections in 1933, with an Introduction by Bertrand Russell).

¹³⁶ Be it the 'pure' language of the *Tractatus* or the language of the language-game of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in both cases it seems to me that Wittgenstein takes as true his proposition in the *Tractatus*.

¹³⁷ See above, p. 157.

‘Background X’ that provides the epistemological rules through which *poleis* make their ethical judgements and individuals their perceptual ones?¹³⁸ Again, may we say that ‘Background X’ defines the epistemological rules that govern the principle of ‘Ethical Autonomy’, viz. (EA), and that of ‘Perceptual Cohabitative Autonomy’, viz. (PCA)? May it be further said in ‘Background X’ (EA) could claim a kind of epistemological superiority over (PCA)? Does (PCA) find its epistemological limit in (EA), to the extent that the ethical autonomy of the *polis* is in *some way* responsible for the epistemological structure through which the individual perceives his perceptions and feels his feelings? In other words, may we say that the principle of Ethical Autonomy is also a principle of Epistemological (and Ethical) Autonomy, namely may we say that (EA) is (EaEA)?

If that were the case, (EaEA) would resemble rather closely a position of modern relativism, for which there is an epistemological framework of reference, call it ‘Background X’ or what you like most, for the whole of human knowledge, be such knowledge individualistic or collective, perceptual or ethical. I am aware that in introducing this kind of consideration, I am rather far from Protagoras’ philosophical horizon. These are modern questions and Protagoras probably did not ask any of them. Furthermore, what Myles Burnyeat has said about the *Theaetetus* remains true, viz. that “[it] simply admits collective subjects on a par with individual ones, leaving aside questions about the relation between the judgement of the collective and the judgements of the individuals composing it.”¹³⁹ Protagoras seems to not have been (fully?) aware of, or taken fully into account, the epistemological links that there necessarily are between the perceptual and individualistic side of knowledge and its collective, or at least its more general, epistemological counterpart.

¹³⁸ I am here obviously referring to the modern debate about philosophical relativism, on which see above, p. 81, n. 138. It may be of some help to recall here the definition of relativism that Richard Bett has offered, namely that “[Relativism] is the thesis that *statements in a certain domain can be deemed correct or incorrect only relative to some framework*” (Bett [84], 141).

¹³⁹ Burnyeat, *Intr.*, p. 23, n. 31.

All this is true. Still, it is also true that in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras has developed a general theory of knowledge in which his Theory of Perception plays an important part but not the only one. I have argued that the Protagorean Theory of Perception of the *Theaetetus* does not commit Protagoras to holding any form of perceptual relativism, the trivial epistemological position often attributed to him.¹⁴⁰ Such a Theory of Perception may well be taken as involving a kind of inter-subjectivist theory, as already said above.¹⁴¹ I have argued that the kind of perceptual relativism often ascribed to Protagoras is an underestimation and a reductive assessment of Protagoras' epistemology as a whole, at least of the epistemology he develops in the *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue, Protagoras is allowed to suggest a wide and coherent theory of knowledge that both concerns individualistic perceptions and collective judgements. Protagoras does not confine his own theoretical speculation to a form of perceptual relativism (or whatever one calls it) but widens it until it includes a theory of ethical judgments. He is allowed to sketch a picture of his epistemology as a whole in which the collective epistemological stances seem to be predominant over the individualistic ones. He seems quite aware of the complexity of the whole question about *episteme*, or at least of the fact that epistemology is a kind of Janus, to whose two faces, i.e. the private and the collective, a real philosopher has to pay his full attention. The fact that Protagoras has not fully accounted for the manner in which the two faces are, or at least may be, joined does not mean that he was not aware of such a joining.

The *Protagoras* provides us then with a picture of the inevitability of man's 'being political', which the *Theaetetus* had already shown. In the myth of the *Protagoras*, political virtue and political *techne* indicate the limits of the human condition: man is inevitably a political animal and he cannot avoid being such. This inevitability seems to suggest, through the use of some Wittgensteinian fascinations, that Protagoras is in *some way* aware of the epistemological superiority of the collective over the individual. That is, all this

¹⁴⁰ See above, p. 156.

¹⁴¹ See above, pp. 46 ff.

seems to emphasize Protagoras' awareness, namely the one he has been shown to have in the *Theaetetus*, that the political aspect, the collective side of the things deserves a greater attention than the individualistic side. If this awareness is attributed to Protagoras (and I cannot see why it should not be), the whole of Protagoras' epistemology deserves to be called a rather sophisticated theory of knowledge. Protagoras' epistemology as mainly developed in the *Theaetetus* and confirmed in the *Protagoras* offers a form of philosophical relativism, both cognitive and moral, which is far from being a naive form of perceptual relativism. Protagoras' relativism is a relativism of a quite complete form and, above all, it seems to be a kind of relativism that already presents *in nuce* all the features (and the problems) that nowadays trouble philosophical relativism. If Protagoras is a relativist, he is not a perceptual relativist (he is an inter-subjectivist there) but he is a relativist in the fullest sense of the term. Richard Bett's remark that "relativism, in a deep sense, is largely foreign to Greek philosophy as a whole"¹⁴² will stop being true, if we listen carefully and with no prejudice to Protagoras' famous words that man is the measure of all things.

¹⁴² See Bett [84], 168.

5 Conclusion.

What appears is the sight of what is unclear.¹

Anaxagoras

Here we are, at the end of our investigation into Protagoras' epistemology. It is now time to sum up the main points of my interpretation of Protagorean epistemology. My research has attempted to get a hold on Protagoras' theory of knowledge. Since his extant fragments are few, I needed to read and understand the ancient sources and texts that dealt with Protagoras and his philosophical tenets. Plato is, uncontrovertibly, by far the most important (ancient) philosopher who dealt with Protagoras. The present research has been thus an inquiry into the Protagoras of Plato. Although in this research we have always read Protagoras through Plato's eyes, I do not think that this has prevented us from understanding the real Protagoras. Throughout the whole inquiry, a lot has been done in order to discover the genuine Protagorean material that is lying sometimes beneath Plato's treatment of Protagoras. This attempt to find the real Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* has allowed us to find a good amount of reasonably certain Protagorean stuff, on which my interpretation of Protagoras' epistemology has been based.

Protagoras' epistemology, as I have reconstructed it, is not only an interesting theory of knowledge, but also a rather developed one for ancient Greek epistemology. Protagoras' theory of knowledge is a complete epistemological theory, which has to do with the individual's perceptions (and feelings) and the ethical judgements of the *polis*. First, Protagorean individuals are *perceptual* individuals. They have perceptions and feelings and are largely autonomous in such perceptions and feelings: each and every

¹ 59DKB21a: see below, 181.

individual is the *metron*, the measure of his perceptions. In the Protagorean world, an individual may feel the wind as cold, whereas another individual may feel it as warm. Both of them have true perceptions, which are private to them. The first individual has a private perception of coldness (of the wind), which is true for him. Nobody can deny that his perception of coldness is true and real for him. On the other hand, the second individual has a private perception of warmth (of the wind), which is true for him as well. Once again, nobody can deny that the perception of warmth he has is true and real for him. Neither can the first individual deny all that.

Although they have private perceptual worlds, these two Protagorean individuals are not solipsistic individuals. They can talk to each other and the private perceptual world of the first individual may become open to the epistemological intrusion of the second individual, and vice versa. Although the second individual does not have the same feelings as the first, the former can understand the private (up to now) feelings of the latter. This understanding is made possible by the fact that the second individual is, in some way, aware of the perception of coldness that the first individual has. The second individual does not feel the wind as cold, but he has experienced many things as cold. He can remember the perception of coldness he has had many times in his life and, further, he can recognize the signs of coldness in the first individual, according to what the latter says and does. Lastly, these two Protagorean individuals speak the same public language and thus they understand each other's descriptions of their perceptual worlds. I cannot see any element here to justify calling this Protagorean position on perceptions a kind of perceptual relativism in which each and every individual has unerring and solipsistic perceptions that trap him into a one-man made world. I would rather call Protagoras' epistemological position on perceptions a kind of inter-subjectivist position, for which the subjective perceptual world of each and every individual is understandable to other individuals, and thus making it an inter-subjective world.

Protagorean individuals are not only perceiving individuals but also, and above all, *political creatures*. Both the (second part of the) Protagorean section of the *Theaetetus* and, above all, the myth of the *Protagoras* have told us that. Protagorean individuals need to live in a *polis* and thus have respect for the ethical values of that *polis*. In the Protagorean world, the *polis*, the community of many individuals, is the *metron*, the measure of (its) ethical judgements. The *polis* decides what may be taken as good, bad, pious, irreligious, just, unjust, etc. As Protagoras has said, “whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself” (*Tht.* 167c4-5). These words may indeed be taken as expressing a form of moral relativism, according to which ethical judgements and values vary according to those who make them, to different historical conditions, and to diverse geographic placements.

If he is an inter-subjectivist in relation to perceptual knowledge, Protagoras is a relativist so far as concerns ethical knowledge. That is true, but there is something to add. Through a particular reading of the myth of the *Protagoras* (and I say ‘particular’ because my reading of the myth is not common and because in interpreting the myth, I have made use of some rather modern philosophical speculations), Protagoras’ moral relativism may be taken as hinting at a more complete form of philosophical relativism, both cognitive and moral. In the myth of the *Protagoras*, Protagoras’ emphasis is on the inevitability of the individual’s being a political creature. An individual’s ‘being political’ describes the practical limit beyond which the Protagorean individual cannot go. Protagorean individuals are political creatures and they cannot avoid being such. Given such emphasis on individuals as political animals, one may reasonably think that the political, ethical side of Protagoras’ theory of knowledge is likely to have a kind of strong epistemological influence on the perceptual, individual side of that theory. The epistemological framework to which the ethical judgements of the Protagorean *polis* are relative may be taken as determining *in some way* the epistemological background through which Protagorean individuals learn to perceive their private perceptions and feel their private feelings. I have

not claimed that Protagoras actually held such a complete form of philosophical relativism, only that his epistemology may be regarded as suggesting or hinting at it. I am aware that ascribing to Protagoras such a developed epistemological position is a long shot, but he is more likely to hold this complete form of philosophical relativism—I claim—than the trivial (perceptual) one, often attributed to him. If Protagoras is a relativist, he is so in the deep sense (to use Bett's expression), not in the trivial one.²

At any rate, beyond this labelling, Protagoras remains one of the leading figures of ancient Greek Epistemology. He was well aware of the philosophical debate of his time about the sources and the limits of knowledge. Protagoras is thus an important philosophical opponent for Plato exactly for the importance of his (Protagoras') epistemological (and philosophical) speculation. Protagoras' famous dictum that "man is the measure of all things" is the kernel of his theory of knowledge. Plato's interpretation of Protagoras' epistemology is all based upon the manner in which he (Plato) understood Protagoras' maxim. Also my interpretation of Protagoras' theory of knowledge derives from my own understanding of such maxim. Leaving aside the question about the various meaning attributed to Protagoras' maxim, the maxim is, beyond any doubt, a maxim about *human* knowledge, and this is the further and last point I wish to make about Protagoras' epistemology.

Protagoras declares that *anthropos* is the measure of all things, not baboon, pig, or gods.³ While he was attempting to define the limits of knowledge, Protagoras was speaking of human knowledge, that is knowledge of human beings about human objects and facts. A human being, the individual, is the measure of his perceptions and feelings; many human beings collectively are the measure of the ethical judgements that their *polis* makes. The perceptions and feelings for which Protagoras shows concern are human perceptions and feelings; the ethical judgements of which Protagoras speaks are those of human gatherings,

² See Bett [84].

³ *Tht.* 161c4-5 and 162c5-7.

those of the human political community. Following, and indeed fostering, the process of Greek ‘enlightenment’, Protagoras was keen not to deal with divine affairs, but only with human situations. He does not have any epistemological concern for divine things. They are unknowable, beyond the limits of human knowledge, the only knowledge Protagoras cares for. Knowing divine things, viz. the gods or their existence, is impossible for mere humans. Human beings are better off leaving such attempts out of their (epistemological) life.

Protagoras himself says this in his fragment on gods. The fragment (80DK4) runs:

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὔθ' ὥς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὥς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὅποιοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἢ τ' ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὧν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life.⁴

As Protagoras says, there is much that prevents human beings from knowing divine things: the subject is *adelon*, and man's life is *brachus*. The subject is ‘obscure’, to the extent that it is not certain, it is dark, *aphanes*, not clear, evident to the senses. In other words, the subject cannot be *seen*, at least experienced by human beings. All Greek pre-Platonic epistemology gives epistemological priority to sight as the (best) instrument for knowing truth. For all Greek pre-Platonic epistemology, only what can be seen can be known. I take Anaxagoras' famous fragment “*opsis gar ton adelon ta phainomena*” as expressing this common pre-Platonic attitude toward knowledge.⁵ Protagoras is no

⁴ J. Mansfeld's translation.

⁵ 59DKB21a. J. Barnes translates the fragment in this way: “what appears is the sight of what is unclear.”

exception to that. For Protagoras, what can be seen can be known; being unseen, gods (or their forms and existence) cannot be known.

The second element to which Protagoras imputes the human inability to know divine things is the shortness of human life. Human life is too *brachus*, too short, to allow us to know divine things. With this sentence about the shortness of human life, I take Protagoras as suggesting two ideas. First, I take Protagoras' remark as an expression of epistemological optimism: human epistemological capacities are so strong that what is now taken as being unknowable, would cease to be such, had human beings a life longer than the one they actually have now. Secondly, I understand Protagoras' remark as suggesting that human life is the place where human wisdom lies and must be looked for. When can a human being be called *sophos*?

A human being is *sophos* when he has (had) a life in which he sees or has seen many things. The *sophos* is one who has experienced the wide range of human perceptions and feelings, because life has allowed him to do so. The *sophos* is one who has traveled in many places and seen the wide spectrum of human customs, habits, beliefs, conventions, laws.⁶ The *sophos* is one who is "full of life", to use John Fante's expression. It is exactly such a wide background of different experiences that allows the Protagorean *sophos* to understand that the only possible wisdom that a human being can have is a human wisdom and that the only possible knowledge that a human being can have is a knowledge of human things. It is exactly the awareness that human wisdom and human knowledge exclusively arise from (the great variety of) human experience that allows Protagoras to proclaim that "*anthropos* is the measure of all things." Lastly, it is exactly the deep experience of human things that the Protagorean *sophos* has that allows him to understand when a thing is better than another, when a perception is better than another, when an ethical judgement is better than another. It is exactly the great variety of human things experienced by the Protagorean *sophos* that allows him to perform a therapeutic function

⁶ On wandering philosophers in ancient Greece, see Montiglio [46].

on individuals unsatisfied with their perceptions and *poiesis* unhappy with their ethical judgements.

Once again, when the adjective 'therapeutic' is brought in a philosophical discussion, one cannot help but think of Wittgenstein's idea of philosophy as therapy. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: "the philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness" (§255). Or, "There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (§133). Further, "The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery" (§119). For Wittgenstein, the philosopher is a therapist for philosophical problems. Since every genuine philosophical problem is a problem concerning (the uses of) language, the philosopher is a therapist for problems connected to the ways human beings use their language. For Wittgenstein (at least for the 'later Wittgenstein'), the philosopher is also one who extensively knows the wide grammar of the innumerable language-games that constitute human language.⁷ The Wittgensteinian philosopher may be regarded as one who knows the great variety of language-games that human beings use; he knows better than any other how these language-games work. The wisdom of the Wittgensteinian philosopher is the kind of

⁷ On philosophy as grammar, see *PI*, §90: "We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phaenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phaenomena, but, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phaenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phaenomena. Thus Augustine recalls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration, past, present or future, of events. (These are, of course, not *philosophical* statements about time, the past, the present and the future.) Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.—Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an 'analysis' of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing part."

wisdom that arises from a wide knowledge of human linguistic (and thus epistemological) customs.

As in the case of Protagoras' *sophia*, Wittgenstein's wisdom is a wisdom of human things. Both Protagorean and Wittgensteinian wisdoms are changing wisdoms: such wisdom changes according to the new things (be they new perceptions and unknown ethical judgements or new language-games) that both the Protagorean *sophos* and the Wittgensteinian philosopher have to face in their (speculative) life. Protagorean *sophia* and Wittgensteinian philosophy both proclaim a kind of human truth that changes, as human life inevitably does. Not to bother my reader, I shall not pursue the comparison between Protagoras and Wittgenstein any further. With this comparison, my aim has been to emphasize not only that great minds often think same thoughts, but also that Protagoras is an ancient thinker who is, in some way, rather modern and who seem to have a lot to tell us. I hope my thesis has helped to put Protagoras under a new, brighter, philosophical light, so that his philosophy can be better understood and discussed.

Bibliography.

The bibliography is divided into four sections. The first one is about Protagoras' life and about general scholarship on him; the second one is on the *Theaetetus*. The third section is on the *Protagoras*, whilst the third section lists the works and articles of contemporary philosophy that I have read or consulted during the preparation of this thesis.

In preparing the bibliography, I have made great use of C.J. Classen, 'Bibliographie zur Sophistik', *Elenchos* 6 (1985), 74-140.

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