Theaetetus 151e–186e: Did Plato Refute Protagoras?

DOI: 10.14746/PEA.2024.1.12

GUIDO CALENDA / *Università di Roma Tre* /

1. Introduction

In the preface to his volume *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* Jonathan Barnes[1] states that in the study of Greek philosophy he has "little concern with history," since "philosophy lives a supracelestial life, beyond the boundaries of space and time." Although philosophical writings are valuable in their own right, stimulating thoughts and arousing emotions, philosophy is also a glimpse into the problems that the people of its time were facing, and in its own way answers to those problems. Thus, by neglecting history, one can lose a substantial part of the *raison d'*être of philosophy, and risks turning it into an abstract formulary.

Protagoras has often been one of the victims of such a reading,[2] perhaps since we know very little about him. The main source of his thought is Plato, who discusses him in two dialogues, the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*. In both Plato's hostility to Protago-

[1] Barnes (1979: xii).

[2] Schiappa (1991: 22): Protagoras "has been called a skeptic, a phenomenalist, an empiricist, a utilitarian, and a relativist. The use of some of these labels implies that certain intellectual boundaries existed in Protagoras' time when, in fact, they did not."

ras is undisguised.[3] Thus, in order to understand Protagoras, we must shed light on the historical position not just of Protagoras himself but also of Plato, and on the reasons for such hostility.

To refute Protagoras' doctrine of *homo mensura*, Plato in the *Theaetetus* distorts it from three points of view: first by identifying it with the Theaetetus' definition '*knowledge is perception*'; then by assimilating it to an alleged Heraclitean doctrine '*everything flows and nothing stands still*'; and, finally, by reading it as the absurd statement that '*all judgements are true*'.[4]

The testimony of the *Theaetetus* has been variously criticised since the mid-19th century, and the only passage of the dialogue whose attribution to Protagoras is now universally accepted is the enunciation of the *homo mensura* doctrine in 151e2–3. For this reason, many modern interpreters of the *Theaetetus* specify that their purpose is not to understand the thought of the historical Protagoras, but only to analyse Plato's representation of him.[5] However, by so doing, not only the historical Protagoras, but also Plato's motivations are completely lost. To assess the reasons of Plato's misrepresentation of Protagoras, one must first state a likely interpretation of the *homo mensura* doctrine.

2. Protagoras' epistemological doctrine

In *Adversus mathematicos* Sextus Empiricus reports the fragment DK 80 B 1, adding that it is the opening of Protagoras book *the Down-Throwers* (τῶν καταβαλλόντων):[6]

> πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος,
> τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ
> ἔστιν.[7]
> Of all things the measure is man, of things that are how they are and of things that are not how they are not[8] (S.E. *M.* 7.60.7–61.2).

This fragment fits coherently into an epistemological thought that can be traced back to Xenophanes and Heraclitus, it is more explicitly formulated by Parmenides and it is later taken up by Gorgias. Xenophanes introduces the limit of human knowledge as

---

[3] Maguire (1973 and 1977). See Zilioli (2007: 15).

[4] Brodie (2003: 81): "Plato, however, (...) is using *Protagoras* to represent a doctrine he will refute; and it is difficult to believe that the highly respected and practical Protagoras based his teaching on the view that any answer thrown out to any question was automatically on target."

[5] E.g.: Burnyeat (1990: 7, n. 12); Fine (1998b: 201, n. 1); Ioppolo (1999: XIX); Erginel (2009: 2, n. 2); Ferrari (2011: 42); Aronadio (2016: 35).

[6] S.E. *M.* 7.60.6.; Pl. *Tht.* (161c4, 162a1 and 171c6) names Protagoras' book Ἀλήθεια.

[7] Plato reported it in almost identical form in *Tht.* 152a2–4 and so D.L. 9.51.1–7; Sextus reports it indirectly in S.E. *P.* 1.216.1–4.

[8] Transl. Bury (1935).

a philosophical theme. Heraclitus develops this theme in linguistic terms: "*in the same rivers other and other waters flow*" (DK 22 B 12), nevertheless every river is always the same, because that is how men identify it; similarly "*the path up and down is one and the same*" (DK 22 B 60): men give names according to their needs. The same goes for ethics: "*to God all things are fair, good and just, whereas men have taken some as unjust, others as just*" (DK 22 B 102): the distinction between good and evil is anthropic. The proof both empirical and logical of this outlook is provided by Parmenides in the epistemological premise to his description of nature: what exists, *being* – that is, everything that is around us and of which we are part – is an uninterrupted continuum (DK 28 B 4), since *non-being* does not exist (DK 28 B 2). For Parmenides, true knowledge is *being* itself (DK 28 B 3), but men cannot grasp it; human knowledge (δόξα) posits entities, objects, events which each man, from his own point of view, carves out of the unity of being and gives names.[9] However, as the strong correlation between languages shows, the existence of *being* is a robust conditioning for human knowledge.[10] Gorgias who, just like Protagoras, lives in a world where public debates dominate political life and judicial trials, addresses the same issue from the point of view of communication: we communicate with words, but the listener does not understand our speech in exactly the same way as we do. Thus, not only thinking does not catch *being* – what is 'out there' – but something is also lost in the transmission of thought.[11] Rhetoric is the art of conveying a message that elicits in the listener a thought as close as possible to what the speaker wants him to understand. Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Gorgias drew their conclusions from their empirical knowledge of human behaviour. Protagoras' *homo mensura* is an extreme synthesis of this epistemological insight.

The words of fragment DK 80 B 1 can be read as:

ἄνθρωπος: man, every man;

μέτρον: measure, sensation, evaluation, judgment...;[12]

χρημάτων: what man cares about, what he considers;[13]

πάντων: all, nothing excluded;[14]

---

[9] DK 28 B 8.38–41: "so everything will be name, / the things that mortals established, convinced they are true: / to be born and to perish, to be and not to be, / and to shift place and change brilliant colour." See Calenda (2020).

[10] Mandelbaum (1979: 416) writes: "That there are significant differences of this sort in the structure of different languages cannot be questioned. What must not be overlooked, however, is that (...) in spite of linguistic differences, users of different languages in many cases refer to precisely the same objects and activities." Thus, (1979: 418): "it cannot be maintained that those whose thought is expressed in different languages do not share a common world."

[11] Arist. *Metaph.* 980b8–14.

[12] Schiappa (1991: 119): "Protagoras was fundamentally concerned with the *judgements* of humans, in which perception plays only a part."

[13] Schiappa (1991: 118): "Protagoras used the word *chrêmata* because it implied things that one uses or needs, such as goods or property, which derive their status as things from their relationship to humans," and quotes Versényi (1962: 182).

[14] Schiappa (1991: 118): "*pantôn chrêmatôn* clearly conveys the widest possible range of things as subject of the statement."

ὄντων – μὴ ὄντων: being – not being, refers to assent – dissent judgments;
ὡς ἔστιν – ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν: that/how it is – that/how it is not; qualifies the judgment.

The epistemological doctrine of Protagoras states that man is judge of everything that concerns man. Every feeling, every opinion, every judgement, every belief is felt, conceived or expressed by a subject.[15] The text of the fragment stops here; yet, if this text was at the beginning of Protagoras' book, we can assume that it was not an isolated synthesis of Protagoras' doctrine, but was followed by an explanation or a demonstration.

It is men who devise entities, objects, events, a world surrounding them, a world to which they are related. We infer that judgments, opinions, beliefs are human prerogatives by judging from our inner experience and from our interactions with other humans, that we recognize as *measure* just like ourselves. Everyone is *measure* in that he has opinions, judges, evaluates, persuades and is persuaded.[16] This is Protagoras' opinion – a well justified opinion according to him – but an opinion all the same: other men may think otherwise, and if so, Protagoras believes they are wrong.

The doctrine of *homo mensura* implies that all representations of the world are influenced by the character, cognitive faculties and culture of the subject;[17] hence they always refer to specific aspects of being, seen from a subjective point of view. In Protagoras' logical world there is no absolute truth: *being never reveals itself* in its immediacy.

No one is always sure of his own opinions: man, who is *measure*, has a greater or lesser level of confidence in his own judgments, depending on the case: men usually act under uncertain conditions. Moreover, they are not isolated monads, but interact with other people and judge the opinions of others. *All this is perfectly compatible with the letter of 'homo mensura'.* In Protagoras' world, every opinion is held at least by one subject and is therefore questionable: so no one can impute to Protagoras the absurd doctrine that 'all judgements are true'.

It follows from the doctrine of *homo mensura* that *true* always means *true for someone*, even in the limit case (e.g. mathematical truths) where it is possible to prove an assertion so rigorously that everyone is bound to agree. Unfortunately, in most complex cases strict proof is not available due to insufficient information, as Gorgias says in the *Helen*:

> now, neither remembering the past, nor investigating the present, nor predicting the future is easy: therefore, regarding most things, most men offer their opinion to the soul as counsellor (Gorg. *Hel.* 68–70).

---

[15] Grote (1888: III 116): "A man cannot in any case get clear of or discard his own mind as a Subject. Self is necessarily omnipresent." Mansfeld (1981: 49) speaks of "personal knowledge."

[16] Mansfeld (1981: 46): "someone whose present state of mind and outlook are to a large extent the outcome of his personal history." Zilioli (2007: 83): "Protagoras maintains a quite commonsensical conception of knowledge on the basis of which the only knowledge human beings are able to obtain is that relative to their own peculiar and modifiable perspectives." Van Berkel (2013: 61): "saying that measuring always contains reference to human being may be a metaphor to indicate that we cannot but see things from a first person perspective."

[17] Brancacci (2011: 89) speaks of the "assoluta primazia del soggetto percipiente sull'essere."

We can therefore agree with Protagoras, who

> was the first to say that about everything there are two opposing speech (D.L. 9.51.2),

or 'at least' two speeches, depending on the number of competing opinions.

The fragment of Protagoras is out of context: neither Plato nor Sextus quote other passages from the book to which the fragment belonged. However, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato's Socrates stages a self-defence of Protagoras, in which the latter states that wisdom varies greatly (μυρίον) between men. Wise men are those who can change others' opinions from bad to good (Pl. *Tht.* 166d1–8), but not, he adds, from false to true (Pl. *Tht.* 167b3–4). He gives several examples, such as:

> the wise and good orators make the good, instead of the evil, seem to be right to their states[18] (Pl. *Tht.* 167c2–4).

In this, Schiller (1908) detects an "anti-intellectualism, the emphasis on the practical side" (16) rather than on the theoretical; on the 'best' rather than on the 'truest'.[19] In fact, anyone who develops mathematical models of complex phenomena, such as those concerning natural environments, compares alternative models in terms of 'performance criteria' rather then of 'truth': 'better' or 'worse' according the usefulness of the results, not more or less 'true'. The same can be said of mental representation of the 'state of the world'. Xenophanes does not speak of truth, but generally says that men "*by searching discover over time what is best* (ἄμεινον)" (DK 12 B 18); and for Parmenides human knowledge (δόξα) has no part in truth (ἀλήθεια); however, the fact that the plausible order (διάκοσμον ἐοικότα) he is about to describe will never be surpassed by any mortal (DK 28 B 8.60–61) implies a concept of superiority not based on truth.

Of course, Schiller's *humanism* is a form of *pragmatism*,[20] that may lead him to look for precursors in ancient thought. However, Plato has no use of Protagoras' performative criterion, but drops it unchallenged:[21] this may suggest that he had hints of a similar doctrine in Protagoras' book. Since Protagoras taught management of public and private affairs,[22] a pragmatic leaning of his thought cannot be ruled out. This interpretation does not conflict with the principle of *homo mensura*, which does not limit μέτρον to purely theoretical criteria.

---

[18] I follow Fowler's translation of the *Theaetetus*, except for passage 171a6–9.

[19] Beresford (2013: 147): "our intelligence (...) is a mechanism of survival. We think in order to live," (2013: 148) just as, he adds, "morality (...) is essentially a tool for survival." This view agrees with the myth of Plato's *Protagoras.*

[20] Schiller (1907: 1–21). See also, Mondolfo (1958: 245).

[21] Schiller (1908a: 23).

[22] Pl. *Prt.* 318e5–319a2.

3. Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*

Knowledge is perception

Plato spends almost half of the *Theaetetus* arguing against Protagoras; therefore, one might expect him to thoroughly analyse the *homo mensura* fragment; yet, he is careful not to do so. Instead, by a genuine stroke of genius, he undertakes to distort the fragment even before quoting it. Indeed, yielding to Socrates' insistence, a reluctant Theaetetus attempts to define knowledge as follows:

> I think, then, that he who knows anything perceives that which he knows, and, as it appears at present, knowledge [ἐπιστήμη][23] is nothing else [οὐκ ἄλλο τί ἐστιν] than perception [αἴσθησις] (Pl. *Tht*. 151e1–3).

In the *Theaetetus*, the meaning of αἴσθησις certainly implies sensation and also the perception of objects. After 35 Stephanus' pages (Pl. *Tht*. 186e12 ff.) Plato easily refutes the Theatetus' definition of knowledge; in the meantime he undertakes a much more challenging task: the refutation of Protagoras' *homo mensura* doctrine.[24] Since this doctrine is not easy to refute, Plato mobilises all the tools of his refined eristic technique to convince the reader that the doctrine is self-defeating, absurd and accordingly untenable. The initial move is crucial. Plato's spokesman, Socrates, identifies Theaetetus's inconsistent proposal with Protagoras' saying:

> it is not a bad description of knowledge that you have given, but one which Protagoras also used to give. Only, he has said the same thing in a different way. For he says somewhere that man is 'the measure of all things, of the existence of the things that are and the non-existence of the things that are not' (Pl. *Tht*. 151e8–152a4).

In fact, he interprets Protagoras doctrine as follows:

> Well, is not this about what he means, that individual things are for me such as they appear [φαίνεται] to me, and for you in turn such as they appear to you – you and I being 'man'? (Pl. *Tht*. 152a6–8)

Then he gives the example of a cold wind:

> Is it not true that sometimes, when the same wind blows, one of us feels cold, [ῥιγῷ] and the other does not? or one feels slightly and the other exceedingly cold? (Pl. *Tht*. 152b2–4)

---

[23] Casertano (2002b: 90), translates ἐπιστήμη with "sapere saldo," which is always true.
[24] Sedley (2004: 49).

Thus, Protagoras' μέτρον is understood as '*to appear*' (φαίνεται) (Pl. *Tht.* 152b2–11): it is perception (αἴσθησις) as 'a cold wind is blowing', or even simple 'sensation' as 'I am cold'. According to the example of the wind, perception exists (that 'I am cold' states a fact); so my perception is true for me:

> Perception, then, is always of that which exists [ὄντος] and, since [ὡς] it is knowledge, cannot be false [ἀψευδὲς] (Pl. *Tht.* 152c5–6).

By identifying the doctrine of Protagoras with the thesis of Theaetetus, Plato achieves a significant result: he reduces μέτρον to 'mere perception', trivialising a term carefully chosen by Protagoras to summarise the complex cognitive relationship between human beings and the world. Note that Plato does not justify his interpretation, but takes it for granted, although the text of the fragment does not lend itself to such a reduction. In what follows, Plato will never analyses Protagoras' sentence, and Socrates will pretend to exert every possible effort to save a doctrine – the *homo mensura* – that he himself, by clever substitutions, has condemned to nonsense.[25]

All things move

In lines 152e5–6 Plato states that according to Protagoras and Theaetetus, perception is knowledge and is therefore true (ἀψευδής), making the example of the wind. However, the example shows that perception is certainly true only for the perceiver (e.g. of a cold wind). But the Platonic concept of ἐπιστήμη implies absolute truth, not truth relative to someone: only a doctrine true in itself (simpliciter) is knowledge. Socrates does not resolve this contradiction, but simply ignores it; and immediately diverts attention from this logical inconsistency by abruptly changing the subject and pointing directly to Protagoras:

> By the Graces! I wonder if Protagoras, who was a very wise man, did not utter this dark saying to the common herd like ourselves, and tell the truth in secret [ἀπορρήτῳ] to his pupils (Pl. *Tht.* 152c8–10).

The saying of Protagoras therefore would conceals a secret doctrine: 'everything moves and everything changes, so that nothing is in any way the same' (Pl. *Tht.* 152d1–6):

---

[25] Aronadio (2016: 131): "il trattamento che Platone riserva alla tesi protagorea e l'elaborazione teorica cui contestualmente la sottopone inoculano in essa i germi della sua contraddittorietà (...) è il progressivo svuotamento del concetto di μέτρον."

> but it is out of movement and motion and mixture with one another that all those things become which we wrongly say 'are' – wrongly, because nothing ever is, but is always becoming (Pl. *Tht*. 152d7–9).

Surely everything moves; but the main proponent of perpetual motion is Heraclitus:

> Heracleitus says, you know, that all things move and nothing remains still, and he likens the universe to the current of a river, saying that you cannot step twice into the same stream[26] (Pl. *Cra*. 402a8–10).

This is, for Plato, the supposed meaning of the river fragments. With "*all things move and nothing remains still*" Plato trivialises Heraclitus as the philosopher of movement. There is much more than this in Heraclitus: what interests him is the nature of language, not the trivial statement that everything moves. It is men who preserve identity through change, and they do so because it is practical. Every human being changes from birth, but it would be impractical for him to constantly change identity throughout his life.

By emphasising the role of the human beings in knowledge through language, Heraclitus shows an epistemological affinity with Protagoras that goes far beyond the recognition of the universal movement. However, Plato's Socrates abides to the 'universal movement', according to which nothing exists absolutely as a single subsistent reality, so that nothing can be affirmed or denied (Pl. *Tht*. 153a1–155d7). Socrates then tells a 'myth' (μῦθος) that describes the formation of sensation through movement and change (Pl. *Tht*. 155e–157d),[27] so that:

> nothing exists as invariably one, itself by itself, but everything is always becoming in relation to something, and 'being' should be altogether abolished, though we have often – and even just now – been compelled by custom and ignorance to use the word[28] (Pl. *Tht*. 157a8–b3).

Therefore, the 'eye that does not see' becomes a 'seeing eye' when it sees, and the previously indeterminate 'stone' becomes a 'white stone' when it is seen. Plato thus conceives an *ad hoc* 'mechanics' of sensation to emphasise change and explain how, from a Heraclitean or Protagorean perspective, change is universal, even at the ontological level.

By entrusting Protagoras with the doctrine of '*everything flows*', meant to guarantee the infallibility of perception, Plato pretends to identify it with *homo mensura* and with Theaetetus' thesis '*knowledge is perception*' (Pl. *Tht*. 160d5–e2), although he does

---

[26] Transl. Fowler (1921).

[27] One may doubt the attribution of this "myth" to Protagoras: e.g. Cornford (1957: 49); Chappell (2004: 72, n. 50); Burnyeat (1990: 18); Ferrari (2011: 267, n. 92); Ambuel (2015: 51).

[28] Ioppolo (1999: 229, n. 47): "Il relativismo, spinto alle estreme conseguenze, trasforma non solo le qualità, ma anche le cose in processi in continuo movimento."

not prove it. After about twenty Stephanus' pages, Plato will dismiss the doctrine that '*everything flows*', stating that about what perpetually changes no science is possible, since every statement would be equally valid (Pl. *Tht.* 183a4–7).[29]

All opinions are true

Up to this point, Plato interpreted Protagoras' doctrine in terms of perception, and this allows him to feign astonishment:

> I am amazed by the beginning of his book. I don't see why he does not say in the beginning of his Truth that a pig or a dog-faced baboon or some still stranger creature of those that have sensations is the measure of all things (Pl. *Tht.* 161c3–6).

What is valid for man is also valid for all other sentient creatures who rely on their own perceptions; but, what then? The reference to unclean or repugnant animals, such as a pig or a cynocephalus, is meant to compensate with ridicule for the dialectical irrelevance of the topic.[30] Having landed this blow, for what it is worth, Plato goes on, affecting indignation:

> Then he might have begun to speak to us very imposingly and condescendingly, showing that while we were honouring him like a god for his wisdom, he was after all no better in intellect [φρόνησς] than any other man, or, for that matter, than a tadpole (Pl. *Tht.* 161c6–d2).

This is the key point: Plato deceitfully turns the table. Indeed, this passage implies, first, that according to *homo mensura*, not only is every perception true for the perceiver, but all judgements and opinions are also true for those who judge. Indeed φρόνησις (intelligence) has certainly a much broader meaning than simply 'perceiving'. But, what is worse, comparing Protagoras to a tadpole implies that *all judgments are on the same plane* and *all* are *true*, because only on this assumption can we admit that, in terms of wisdom, there is no difference between Protagoras and a tadpole – an obviously absurd conclusion. But this is exactly what Plato *is seeking*: to pin on Protagoras the absurd conclusion that according to the doctrine of *homo mensura* all opinions are true. This conclusion is obviously false; but Plato, who in 161c6–d2 managed to subtly foist this on the reader, feels free to ask:

---

[29] Thus Plato pretends that *homo mensura* is also rejected as being identified with *everything flows* (Pl. *Tht.* 183b7–c4).

[30] Gavray (2013 : 33): "image rebutante et ridicule."

> if each man is to form his own opinions by himself, and these opinions are always right and true, why in the world, my friend, was Protagoras wise [*σοφός*], so that he could rightly be thought worthy to be the teacher of other men and to be well paid, and why were we ignorant creatures and obliged to go to school to him, if each person is the measure of his own wisdom [σοφία]? (Pl. Tht. 161d7–e3).

When someone tells me he feels cold, I cannot claim that he feels hot: it concerns his private 'condition' (what he 'feels'). It is not a consequence of the *homo mensura*, but of the fact that I have no other pertinent information about his feelings. However, when we come to opinions, there are arguments to be judged. Nonetheless, Plato, having interpreted the doctrine of *homo mensura* as '*all opinions are true*', denies that a human being can be wiser then others. This is an obvious nonsense, since one's own opinions (*measure*) also include one's judgements of the opinions of others, and one can judge another man wiser than himself.

Plato's arguments against the doctrine of *homo mensura* are inconsistent; but this does not mean that they are not effective from an eristic point of view. In fact, generations of readers have allowed themselves to be persuaded by Plato, and ascribed to Protagoras the absurdities that Plato claims to derive from *homo mensura*. If all opinions were true, says Socrates, how ridiculous would I appear with my maieutic pretentions (Pl. *Tht.* 161e4–162a3)! And what would our philosophical discussions be for? And Protagoras would be guilty of impiety for equating the wisdom of Theaetetus with that of the gods (Pl. *Tht.* 162c2–6).

Protagoras' self-defence

Plato wrote for the sake of readers eager to be persuaded, but it was also advisable for him to reassure them from time to time by providing evidence of impartiality: thus he devises an official defence for Protagoras, where Socrates is allowed to speak on his behalf (Pl. *Tht.* 166a2–168c2). Socrates' Protagoras claims to perceive significant differences between people:

> I do not by any means say that wisdom and the wise man do not exist; on the contrary, I say that if bad things appear and are to any one of us, precisely that man is wise who causes a change and makes good things appear and be to him (Pl. Tht. 166d5–8).

Thus no one has wrong opinions, but some people are wiser than others, because they are able to turn others into better people; people who have 'better', but not 'truer' opinions:

> in fact, no one ever made anyone think truly who previously thought falsely, since it is impossible (...) to think any other things than those which one feels; and these are always true [ταῦτα δὲ ἀεὶ ἀληθῆ][31] (Pl. *Tht.* 167a6–b1).

I see two main alternatives: either Protagoras' entire self-defence is an invention of Plato, or Protagoras actually endorsed the proto-pragmatic position that Schiller recognized in him, and in his book on Truth he argued that greater wisdom implies more effective but not truer judgments.

In the first case, one might think that Protagoras' self-defence was conceived by Plato to get Protagoras himself to admit that wisdom is matter of efficacy rather than truth, for the sole purpose of making him declare that all opinions "are always true" (Pl. *Tht.* 167a8–b1). In the second, decidedly more interesting case, Protagoras actually argued that the difference between men depends on effectiveness, while truth is never at stake; but from this it does not follow that 'all opinions are true', as Socrates makes Protagoras say, but rather that 'no opinion is true'.[32] This is by no means an absurd conclusion: all human judgements are questionable for Protagoras.

Plato, by having Protagoras declare that opinions are '*always true*' (Pl. *Tht.* 167b1), not only states that the doctrine of *homo mensura* entails absurd consequences, but has it confirmed by Protagoras himself. Had Protagoras been free to speak, he would have surely refused Plato's interpretation, but Plato is free to write what he wants, and charges on Protagoras what he writes. Besides, having managed to pull off the magic trick of making the 'for' qualifier *de facto* disappear in 161c3–6, he is certainly not willing to back down. In order to mask the irrelevance of his own arguments, Plato resorts to the eristic expedient of exhibiting his opponent's greed, making him claim the right to lavish fees for his educational function as a Sophist (Pl. *Tht.* 167d1). Thus, Plato stages a defence of Protagoras which is not only fictitious, but also incriminating. In fact, Socrates receives the consent of Theodore, whose task apparently would have been to act as a guarantor of all that is taking place, so that the consent he gives becomes the consent of Protagoras, his deceased friend.[33]

Plato, however, is unwilling to actually grant Protagoras the right to admit that some men excel over others in terms of best and worst, and Socrates, after his show of pretended fair play, retracts Protagoras' self-defence under the pretext of not being authorized

---

[31] Schiller (1907: 37): "the 'defence of Protagoras,' so far as it goes, embodies genuine doctrine of his, greatly curtailed, no doubt, and perhaps somewhat mangled in the reproduction. For the reason, mainly, that Plato manifestly has not understood its argument at all;" Capizzi (1955: 47): "è certamente un rimaneggiamento platonico di concetti protagorei;" Cornford (1957: 72): "We may conclude that Plato here is fairly reproducing the standpoint of the historic Protagoras;" Mansfeld (1981: 46): "The expert is not possessed of ultimate truths, but he is capable of changing things which appear to be the case to people on the basis of what he knows as a person."

[32] Mansfeld (1981: 40): "what Protagoras claims is that he *cannot help* not knowing."

[33] Decleva Caizzi (2002: 70).

to speak on behalf of Protagoras (Pl. *Tht.* 169d10–e3).[34] He therefore resumes the debate from the point where he had interrupted it before the self-defence, going back to his own interpretation of *homo mensura*:

> He [Protagoras] says, does he not? 'that which appears to each person really is to him to whom it appears' (Pl. *Tht.* 170a3–4);

but shortly afterwards he also declares:

> Well then, Protagoras, what shall we do about the doctrine? Shall we say that the opinions which men have are always true, or sometimes true and sometimes false? (Pl. *Tht.* 170c2–4).

Initially, according to Socrates the doctrine of Protagoras stated that all 'perceptions are true *for* those who perceive'; then 'perceptions' almost stealthily became 'opinions'; and now Plato wants the reader to associate Protagoras with the new interpretation that deprives truth of the qualifier '*for*'. Thus Socrates goes on as if the meaning of *homo mensura* were '*all opinions are true*' simpliciter. Note the mastery of the passage: Plato never says that he drops the qualifier '*for*'; – on the contrary, he takes it up momentarily in 170a3–4, then quietly drops it again for good (Pl. *Tht.* 170c2–4) by simply associating with Protagoras the statement 'all opinions are true' and its related consequences, as if this had always been Protagoras' thesis and there was no need to specify it further. From this point onward he understands the doctrine of Protagoras in this sense, and the qualifier has tacitly disappeared in order to allow Plato to conclude the argument as he wishes.

Alleged self-refutation of Protagoras

Therefore, the alleged doctrine of Protagoras becomes preposterous, and all of Plato's subsequent arguments are aimed to show such nonsense. Who can ever dare to claim that all opinions are true? Not even the followers of Protagoras, like Theodore himself (Pl. *Tht.* 170c5–8): if the majority does not believe it, not even Protagoras, who does believe it (Pl. *Tht.* 170e7–171a3)? If, on the other hand, Protagoras believes it, but there are many more people who say he is wrong, he has the majority against. Is Plato suggesting that Protagoras was wrong because he was in the minority? Yet, it is Plato himself who in the *Gorgias* makes Socrates declare proudly:

---

[34] Schiller (1908b: 19): "By this master-stroke of dialectical manipulation the whole defence of Protagoras is declared invalid and set aside."

> But I, alone here before you, do not admit it, for you fail to convince me: you only attempt, by producing a number of false witnesses against me, to oust me from my reality, the truth[35] (Pl. *Grg.* 472b3–6).

Could Plato have changed his mind and now argue that truth depends on the number of witnesses? The argument is purely eristic: Plato is just piling up arguments for a dispute of enormous importance to him.

Outraged by the preposterous consequences of a doctrine that accepts all opinions as true, the reader has now swallowed the bait along with the hook, and Plato can reel his prey in, using his most exquisite (κομψότατον) argument:

> Then comes the most exquisite: since he claims that everyone thinks what is, he must somehow agree that the opinion of those who contradict him, believing him to be in error, is true (Pl. *Tht.* 171a6–9).

The 'exquisite' argument, which reveals the self-refutation of Protagoras' doctrine – known as *peritropé*[36] – depends exclusively on having omitted the qualifier '*for them*' after '*it is true*'.[37] But, if Protagoras recognizes that the opinion of those who consider his doctrine false is true *for them* (that is: he believes they believe in their opinion), this does not mean that it must also be true *for him* (Protagoras). Therefore, all the consequences Plato draws from his distortion of the doctrine of *homo mensura* do not apply to the doctrine as originally formulated by Socrates, let alone as written by Protagoras.[38]

How could Plato be so grossly mistaken? Burnyeat writes:

> Critics from George Grote[39] to Gregory Vlastos have protested at the way Socrates at the climatic moment drops the relativizing qualifiers with which Protagoras specifies for whom a judgment is true, but few have thought it necessary to wonder why Plato should make Socrates proceed in this fashion and none, to my mind, has convincingly explained his foisting upon Protagoras the unrelativized premise (Burnyeat 1976: 174).

We must try to explain this. On Vlastos' opinion, Plato was careless.[40] Still, as an oversight, it would be a serious one, because the omission is crucial, since it is the necessary

---

[35] Transl. Fowler (1921).

[36] '*overturning*'; S.E. *M.* 7.389–390.

[37] Mendelson (2002: 19): "peritrope is sound only if one allows the objectivism of the master tradition to dictate the terms of the critique;" "the radical reconstruction of the human-measure doctrine required for self-refutation to succeed strikes me (as it did Montaigne) as an argument in bad faith;" "the discussion of relati-vism has been consistently framed in the language of its opponents."

[38] Rossetti (1990: 60): "l'attenzione dei teorici della *peritrope* si concentra, di preferenza, non sull'*homo mensura* ma sulla inferenza in virtù della quale tutte le opinioni (ovvero tutte le rappresentazioni) sono vere."

[39] Grote (1888: 3.329): "Plato omits the qualification annexed by Protagoras to his general principle (...) Plato therefore does not make out his charge of contradiction."

[40] Vlastos (1956: xiv, n. 27).

premise for Plato's thesis. Runciman considers the omission to be intentional.[41] Burnyeat cannot accept this, since Plato himself made Protagoras ask to be fairly treated:

> do not be unfair in your questioning; it is very inconsistent for a man who asserts that he cares for virtue to be constantly unfair in discussion; and it is unfair in discussion when a man makes no distinction between merely trying to make points and carrying on a real argument. In the former he may jest and try to trip up his opponent as much as he can, but in real argument he must be in earnest and must set his interlocutor on his feet (Pl. *Tht*. 167e1–6).

A pitiable request. Plato's Socrates listens to Protagoras' prayer but does not pledge to heed it. Burnyeat objects: is it ever possible for Plato to say one thing and do another?

> After such a beginning it would be nothing less than perverse dishonesty were Plato without reason to make Socrates argue in the sequel in a way that depended for its damaging effect on omission of the relativizing qualifiers. I need hardly say that perverse dishonesty is not a charge to be levelled lightly against a philosopher of Plato's stature and integrity (Burnyeat 1976: 177).

Burnyeat is willing to open an unlimited credit to Plato. However, Socrates' arguments against Protagoras are clearly eristic from the outset, namely from the identification of *homo mensura* with Theaetetus' thesis that '*knowledge is perception*'. Nothing in Protagoras' fragment shows that he identifies *measure* with perception alone: it is neither a necessary interpretation, nor the most reasonable, nor the most charitable. Besides, one may object to Burnyeat: would it be really perverse for Plato to make the '*for*' disappear? Plato's argument is wrong, but perverse certainly not. As we shall see, Plato has very good reasons to deceive: he firmly believes refuting Protagoras an ethical obligation; he must find a way to do so and makes a virtue out of necessity.[42] But Burnyeat has his loyalties, and would rather be charitable to Plato than to Protagoras:

> the most charitable hypothesis, asks rather less of one's credulity than the rival suggestions of inadvertence, conscious overstatement, and perverse dishonesty (Burnyeat 1976: 184).

McDowell states that, although Plato's 'exquisite argument' is untenable, dropping it still leaves Protagoras in a vulnerable position:

> If all that Protagoras can say to us is '(P) [All judgements are true for those who make them][43] is true for me; it may or may not be true for you', we are justified on wondering why we should

---

[41] Runciman (1962: 16).

[42] Gadamer (1978: 63): "the sophistry of these means presupposes in principle that Plato is secure in what he is aiming at: the sophistry is there to serve his purposes."

[43] McDowell (1973*:* 169).

> find what he says interesting.[44] It seemed to be interesting originally because he seemed to be assessing the truth, simpliciter, not just the truth for himself (McDowell 1973: 171).

Why not interesting? Because if McDowell understands the doctrine of Protagoras as (P) – that is, '*all judgements are true for those to make them*' – this, stripped to the bone, means that 'every opinion is true for the one for whom it is true'. This is tautological, regardless of whether others believe it or not. What interest could it possibly have? It seems that for McDowell a false argument is still more interesting than a trivial one. Perhaps he is right. But, as we saw in point 2, Protagoras' *homo mensura* is far from trivial. A text rich in meaning[45] cannot be reduced to a logical structure such as (P), which almost completely obliterates it. Otherwise, why did Plato take the trouble to devote the longest part of the *Theaetetus* to refuting such an irrelevant thesis? As Plato is well aware, the doctrine of *homo mensura* is not irrelevant, especially for a man who shares Plato's own ideas. Unfortunately, the loss of the book *on Truth* has forever deprived us of the arguments that Protagoras used to illustrate his thesis, but it is not a difficult thesis to defend: *knowledge takes place in people's minds, so all judgements are questionable and 'being' is never directly revealed, but always interpreted*.

In order to highlight the absurdities arising from the thesis that all opinions are true, Plato repeatedly uses the argument of *competence* (Pl. *Tht*. 171d5–7), linked to that of the *future outcome* of the judgments, both in medicine (Pl. *Tht*. 171e4–7) and in the government of the city (Pl. *Tht*. 172a1–b2):[46] if all judgments were true, even a simple woman or a beast could claim the same authority as a doctor (Pl. *Tht*. 171e5). But the doctrine of *homo mensura* does not prevent anyone from judging the judgments of others, nor from assessing their competence, therefore such nonsense cannot be blamed on Protagoras.

Conversely, what is certainly to be attributed to Protagoras is what Plato denounces in a later passage:

> But in the other class of things – I mean just and unjust, pious and impious – they [Protagoras and followers] are willing to say with confidence that no one of them possesses by nature an existence of its own; on the contrary, that the common opinion becomes true at the time when it is adopted and remains true as long as it is held; this is substantially the theory of those who do not altogether affirm the doctrine of Protagoras (Pl. *Tht*. 172b2–8).

Plato is right: for Protagoras and his *homo mensura* doctrine, 'just' and 'unjust', 'holy' and 'impious' have no *existence of their own*. Like all other conceptual entities, they are a product of the mind, exist only insofar as they are someone's opinions and will continue to exist as long as there is someone who professes them. This is the basic conflict between

---

[44] So also Waterlow (1977: 36).

[45] Schiller (1907: 33): "compressing the largest quantum of vital meaning into the most compact form."

[46] And others (Pl. *Tht.* 177c6–179b2).

Plato and Protagoras: for this very reason Protagoras is Plato's *arch-enemy*.[47] When Plato wrote the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras had already been dead for several decades, but some of his ideas were still supported not just only by Protagoras' disciples, but also by many Athenian citizens who were not his followers.[48]

4. Plato versus Protagoras

Protagoras' doctrine places all men on the same level of potential parity: since each citizen is the master of his own judgements, his convictions count. It is he who must be listened to, and it is he who must be convinced. Therefore, in a democratic society, it is of the utmost importance to be able to persuade.[49] Protagoras, who is a legislator and a teacher of civic virtues, has citizens as his disciples: it may be assumed that he teaches them to analyse situations, to understand what ought to be done on a given context, what other citizen may be persuaded of, and what are the best arguments to persuade them. Hence the importance of eloquence and rhetoric.

However, the doctrine of *homo mensura* has a broader epistemological value: the individual man is 'measure' in every situation, regardless of the historical context. What changes with the political system is not the nature of knowledge, but the means used to obtain consent: by persuasion, in states where decisions are made by free debate; or, in autocratic states, by force to suppress dissent and make indoctrination possible. Protagoras' epistemological doctrine is not intrinsically democratic, but a supporter of oligarchy still has excellent reasons to oppose it: by emphasising individual judgement, this doctrine reveals the mechanisms of power, while *if one wants to lay the foundations of an authoritarian ideology, it is essential to conceal its nature*.

Plato tragically felt the failure of the Thirty, which deeply affected him and his family.[50] He sees the restoration of democracy and the *damnatio memoriae* of the oligarchic regime not only as a personal catastrophe, but also as an event against nature and against all logic: the rabble has no right to govern. For a man of his ideological consistency, the first task of indoctrination is to provide a convincing justification for the exercise of power by a few competent citizens: thus, his ideal state is ruled by philosophers, who are endowed with the knowledge of *Good*. But *Good cannot simply be the provisional outcome*

---

[47] Cornford (1957: 83).

[48] Decleva Caizzi (2002: 85): "Platone sente il bisogno di ricordare al lettore che il modo di pensare "protagoreo" gode di una diffusione ben più ampia di quanto non sia la sfera operativa del sofista."

[49] Giorgini (2016: 15): "democracy was government of the word and by the word."

[50] See Calenda (2022: 36 f.).

of a debate,[51] it must have a *strong ontological status*: it exists in itself, in an ideal world, and only a few wise men can get to know it.[52]

Since Plato's *Good* may be understood only by a few sublime minds,[53] ordinary citizens – the auxiliaries and the remaining population – cannot be persuaded by teaching them what *Good* is – a knowledge that is far beyond their understanding – but only by indoctrinating them with a substitute ideology that has the desired effect. Thus, the essential tool suggested by Plato in the *Republic* is the noble (γενναῖον) falsehood:

> how can we contrive to use one of those necessary falsehoods we were talking about a little while back?[54] We want one single, grand lie which will be believed by everybody – including the rulers, ideally, but failing that the rest of the city[55] (Pl. *R.* 414b7–c2).

The 'necessary falsehood' is the mythical[56] easy-to-understand tale that Plato wants all citizens to believe, in order to make them behave as their rulers want them to behave. In the *Republic* indoctrination begins with the myth of the common birth of all men from the earth. They are all brothers, but they are born with different natural abilities, so they belong to different value groups:[57] some are gold, some silver, some bronze or iron (Pl. *R.* 415a1–7). Thus, their duties are different. The government belongs to the golden men, the philosophers, who, having knowledge of the *Good*, know what is beneficial to the city as a whole (Pl. *R.* 519e1–4). They educate warriors, men of silver, who defend their *polis* from external aggression and help lower rank citizens to respect the laws established by the philosophers for the common good.[58]

Philosophers will teach dialectics – which leads to true knowledge – only to a few intellectually gifted men: in the future it will be their turn to take care of the state.[59]

---

[51] Giorgini (2016: 17).

[52] Brisson (1975: 36).

[53] Plato defines (*R.* 505a2) "the most important branch of study is the form or character of the good". Socrates speaks about this in Book VI of the *Republic*, but admits (505a5–6) that we do not have adequate knowledge of it. Although Socrates has the concept of *Good*, it is in fact too high a notion for him to be able to communicate it (*R.* 506d7–e1): "For the moment you'll rest content, won't you, if we leave on one side the question of what the good itself is. Getting at my opinions on the subject seems too much for the momentum of our present discussion." All Socrates can do is to represent it with the analogy of the Sun (ὁ ἥλιος), child of the Good (*R.* 508b13–c2): "This is what you must take me to mean by the child of the good, which the good produced as its own analogue. In the world of thought the good stands in just the same relation to thinking and the things which can be thought as the sun, in the world of sight, stands to seeing and the things which can be seen." See Annas (1981: 244) and Vegetti (Sartori *et al.* 1997: XIX). Therefore, the establishment of the government of philosophers cannot be the result of conviction but must be imposed, for example, by the conversion of a tyrant to true philosophy.

[54] See Pl. *R.* 382d1–4.

[55] I follow the Griffith's English translation of Plato's *Republic* (Ferrari 2000).

[56] Calabi (1998: 446); Vegetti (1998c: 21).

[57] Vegetti (1998c: 22).

[58] Whom Plato calls (Pl. *R.* 414b1–3): "full guardians – making sure friends within do not *want* to harm it, and enemies without are not *able* to harm it." See Annas (1981: 105 and 113).

[59] Pl. *R.* 540a4–b5.

The mass of citizens, made of less precious metal, having perfectly assimilated the myth, accept the government of their more valuable brothers, who take care of them and keep them on the right path. Thus, in the καλλίπολις[60] described in the *Republic*, everyone knows his duty and there is no dissent; thus, strictly speaking, there should be no discussion, but only, one can presume, a polite exchange of ideas between philosophers themselves, all enlightened by the *Good*.

In this 'beautiful city' there is no place for teachers of rhetoric, who are not functional to the Platonic social project. Plato collectively brands them with the name of 'Sophists' and, rallying all the devices of his consummate eristic skill, exposes them to the contempt of his readers. Protagoras is the first of the Sophists and is also their archetype: not only is he a Sophist but, among the Sophists named by Plato, he is the only one who has clearly shown democratic sympathies, having helped Pericles in drafting the laws[61] for the *polis* of Turi.[62] For Plato, the emphasis on rhetoric entailed by *homo mensura* has a serious flaw, it is persuasive: even several aristocrats court sophists to learn how to run assemblies. This nonsense must stop. It is not surprising then that Protagoras became Plato's main target. All means to discredit him and his doctrine are legitimate: 'anything goes', as long as it works.

---

[60] Pl. *R.* 527c2.

[61] D.L. 9.50.4–5. Schiappa (1991: 179) sees these laws as essentially democratic, and recalls Arist. *Pol.* 1307b7.

[62] D.S. 12.10.3–7.35.1–3; Str. 6.1.13.13–18; Plut. *X orat.* 835D; D.H. *Lys.* 1; Plut. *Per.* 11.5.4–6.1.

BIBLIOGRAFIA

Ambuel, D., 2015, *Turtles All the Way Down. On Plato's* Theaetetus, *a Commentary and Translation*, Sankt Augustin.

Annas, J., 1981, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford.

Aronadio F., 2016, *L'Aisthesis e le strategie argomentative di Platone nel Teeteto*, Napoli.

Arruzza, C., Nikulin, D. (eds.), 2016, *Philosophy and Political Power in Antiquity*, Leiden–Boston.

Barnes, J., 1979b, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London (2nd ed. 1982).

Beresford, A., 2013, "Fangs, Feathers, & Fairness: Protagoras on the origins of right and wrong," in: Ophuijsen, Raalte, Stork 2013, pp. 139–162.

Berkel T. A. van, 2013, "Made to Measure: Protagoras' *Metron*," in: Ophuijsen, Raalte Stork 2013, pp. 37–67.

Brancacci, A., 2011, "La 'dottrina riservata' di Protagora (Plat. 'Theaet' 152c7–e1)," *Méthexis* 24, pp. 87–108.

Brisson, L., 1975, "Le mythe de Protagoras: Essai d'analyse structural," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 20, pp. 7–37.

Burnyeat, M. F., 1976, "Protagoras and self-refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *The Philosophical Review* 85, pp. 172–195.

Burnyeat, M. F., 1990, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, Indianapolis.

Bury, R. G. (transl.), 1935, Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, Cambridge–London.

Calabi, F., 1998, "La nobile menzogna," in: Vegetti 1998, pp. 445–457.

Calenda, G., 2020, "Epistemological Relevance of Parmenides' Ontology," *Anais de Filosofia Clássica* 14, pp. 96–120.

Calenda, G., 2022, *La condanna di Socrate. Audiatur et altera pars*, Baden-Baden.

Capizzi, A., 1955, *Protagora. Le testimonianze e i frammenti*, Firenze.

Casertano, G., 2002, *Il Teeteto di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, Napoli.

Casertano, G., 2002a, "Le definizioni socratiche di *Episteme*," in: Casertano 2002, pp. 87–117.

Chappell, T. D. J., 2004, *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*, Sankt Augustin.

Cornford, F. M., 1935/57, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge. The Theaetetus and the Sophist.* New York (Mineola 2003).

Decleva Caizzi, F., 2002, "Da Protagora al discorso 'Maggiore' (*Tht. 171d5–172c1*)," in: Casertano 2002, pp. 63–86.

El Murr, D. (ed.), *La mesure du savoir. Études sur le Théétète de Platon*, Paris.

Erginel, M. M., 2009, "Relativism and Self-Refutation in the *Theaetetus*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37, pp. 1–45.

Ferrari, F. (cur.), 2011, Platone, *Teeteto*, Milano.

Ferrari, G. R. F. (ed.), 2000, Plato, *The Republic*, Cambridge.

Fine, G., 1998, "Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*," *Apeiron* 31, pp. 201–234.

Fowler, H. N. (transl.), 1921, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Cambridge–London.

Gadamer, H.-G., 1978, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, Heidelberg (engl. transl. P. C. Smith, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, New Haven 1986).

Gavray, M.-A., 2013, "Comment ne pas interpréter un fragment philosophique. Le dialogue avec Protagoras dans le *Théétète*," in: El Murr 2013, pp. 25–47.

Giorgini, G., 2016, "The Power of Speech: The Influence of the Sophists on Greek Politics," Arruzza, Nikulin 2016, pp. 9–40.

Grote, G., 1885–1888[3], *Plato and the other companions of Sokrates.* London.

Ioppolo, A. M. (cur.), 1999, Platone, *Teeteto*, Bari.

Kerferd, G. B. (ed.), 1981, *The Sophists and Their Legacy*, Wiesbaden.

Maguire, J. P., 1973, "Protagoras – Or Plato?," *Phronesis* 18, pp. 115–138.

Maguire, J. P., 1977, "Protagoras... Or Plato? II. The 'Protagoras'," *Phronesis* 22, pp. 103–122.

Mandelbaum, M., 1979, "Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativisms," *The Monist* 62, pp. 403–428.

Mansfeld, J., 1981, "Protagoras on Epistemological Obstacles and Persons," in: Kerferd 1981, pp. 38–53.

McDowell, G. (ed.), 1973, Plato, *Theaetetus*, Oxford.

Mendelson, M., 2002, *Many Sides: A Protagorean Approach to the Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy of Argument*, Dondrecht.

Mondolfo, R., 1955, *La comprensión del sujeto humano en la cultura antigua.* Imán, Buenos Aires (Ital. transl. L. Bassi: *La comprensione del soggetto umano nell'antichità classica*, Firenze 1958; Milano 2012).

Ophuijsen, J. M. van, Raalte, M. Van, Stork, P. (eds.), 2013, *Protagoras of Abdera. The Man, His Measure*, Leiden–Boston.

Rossetti, L., 1990, "Sulla differenza tra il fenomenismo di Protagora e il fenomenismo scettico," in: Voelke 1990, pp. 55–68.

Runciman, W. G., 1962, *Plato's Later Epistemology*, Cambridge.

Sartori, F., Vegetti, M., Centrone, B. (cur.), 1997, Platone, *La Repubblica*, Bari.

Schiappa, E., 1991, *Protagoras and Logos*, Columbia.

Schiller, F. C. S., 1907, *Studies in Humanism*, London (Adamant Media 2005).

Schiller, F. C. S., 1908a, *Plato or Protagoras?*, Oxford.

Schiller, F. C. S., 1908b, "Plato or Protagoras?," *Mind* 17, pp. 518–526.

Sedley, D., 2004, *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus*, Oxford.

Vegetti, M. (cur.), 1998a, Platone, *La Repubblica*, Vol. II, Napoli

Vegetti, M. (cur.), 1998b, Platone, *La Repubblica*, Vol. III, Napoli.

Versényi, L.,1962), "Protagoras' Man-Measure Fragment," *The American Journal of Philology* 83, pp. 178–184.

Vlastos, G. (ed.), 1956, Plato, Indianapolis.

Voelke, A.-J. (ed.), 1991, *Le scepticisme antique. Perspective historiques et systématiques*, Lausanne.

Waterlow, S., 1977, "Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171a6–c7," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59, pp. 19–39.

Zilioli, U., 2007, *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism. Plato's Subtlest Enemy*, London.

GUIDO CALENDA
/ Roma Tre University, Italy /
guido.calenda@gmail.com

***Theaetetus* 151e–186e: Did Plato Refute Protagoras?**

In the *Theaetetus*, which seeks a definition of knowledge, the first definition of Theaetetus, namely that 'knowledge is perception', is easily refuted without the need to refer to Protagoras. But for Plato the refutation of Protagoras is a goal in itself, and he devotes almost half the dialogue to this task. He argues that the doctrine of *homo mensura* amounts to saying that 'all judgements are true' and, using his 'most exquisite argument', he claims to prove that it is self-refuting. As many scholars have recognised, this alleged demonstration depends on the arbitrary dropping of the relativistic qualifier that specifies 'for whom' a given judgement is true. Plato does not justify the disappearance of the qualifier, but rather tries to disguise it. Indeed, Protagoras has an epistemological conception that is opposed to Plato's theory of knowledge and that is fundamental to the logical justification of the political conceptions set out in the *Republic*. For Plato, therefore, the refutation of Protagoras' doctrine of *homo mensura* is an imperative ethical requirement. He is not too demanding in his choice of arguments: he does not seek rigour in argumentation, only persuasive effectiveness – more than two millennia of interpretations have proved him right.

KEYWORDS

Protagoras, Plato, *Theaetetus*, epistemology, politics