

Not bringing things to a standstill: the *Theaetetus*
on how (not) to speak about a world in which
knowledge is perception.

Guus Eelink

14 December 2018

Abstract of the dissertation

In Plato's *Theaetetus* the interlocutors attempt to define knowledge, and the first definition they consider is 'knowledge is perception'. Socrates initially equates the first definition with Protagoras' Measure Doctrine ('man is the measure of all things'), and he introduces a metaphysical underpinning for the Measure Doctrine in the form of an allegedly Protagorean Secret Doctrine, a doctrine of flux. (151-160) The discussion ends with two refutations: a refutation of a radical variant of the doctrine of flux (179-183), followed by a direct refutation of the first definition (184-187). In the dissertation I defend interpretations of Protagoras' theory (chapter 1) and of the final two refutations (chapters 2 – 4).

In chapter 1, I argue that Protagoras is a *revisionary infallibilist*. According to revisionary infallibilism, (i) all beliefs are true (infallibilism) and (ii) the properties of things are relative to believers (a revisionary metaphysical view): x has a property F in relation to a believer a if and only if a believes that x has the property F . My interpretation contrasts with

the influential relativist interpretation, according to which Protagoras holds that (a) no belief is true *simpliciter*, but (b) each belief is true *in relation to the believer*. I argue that Protagoras' theory does involve a form of relativism, but not relativism about truth: instead, Protagoras relativizes *the properties of things* to believers. I show that the Secret Doctrine underpins revisionary infallibilism with regard to perceptual beliefs. Further, I argue that my interpretation is able to account for the notorious alternation between two formulations of the Measure Doctrine ('all beliefs are true' versus 'each belief is true *for the believer*') and for the refutations of the Measure Doctrine.

In chapter 2, I analyse the refutation of radical flux. I focus on two key issues. The first issue is why radical flux is supposed to lead to the equal correctness of contradictory characterizations of the changing thing ('*F*' and 'not *F*'). The second issue is why radical flux is supposed to undermine the possibility of definition: definitions concern universals, whereas only particulars seem to be in radical flux. With regard to the first issue, I argue that the text is ambiguous between an epistemic and an ontic reading. On the epistemic reading, changing things elude determinate characterizations due to their being too fleeting to be described in a determinate way. On the ontic reading, changing things elude determinate characterization due to radical flux's implying *ontic indeterminacy*: particulars do not instantiate universals. With regard to the second issue, I argue, against recent interpretations, that Socrates does not assume that universals (or meanings) are in radical flux. Instead, I argue that Socrates takes the impossibility of definition to follow from the repercussions of radical flux for particulars. I argue that the inference is more plausible on the ontic reading (which indirectly supports the ontic reading): only the ontic reading implies that universals are not

instantiated, and I argue that in the dialectical context of the refutation the non-instantiation of universals suffices to warrant Socrates' conclusion that definitions are impossible.

In chapter 3, I discuss the relevance of the refutation of radical flux. I argue that Protagoras is not committed to radical flux. I argue that the refutation bears on Protagoras' theory in a more indirect way: it shows that some of the fluxist claims in the Secret Doctrine ('the universe is change and nothing else', 'everything is changing') are exaggerations. Socrates first argues that only those who endorse radical flux are entitled to make such claims. He then shows that radical flux is incompatible with Protagoras' philosophical views, and indeed with any philosophical view. In effect, this confronts Protagoras with a dilemma: either he should give up his Heraclitean pretensions (by acknowledging that his theory in fact allows for, and indeed requires, stability as well as change), or he should stop making assertions altogether.

In chapter 4, I analyse the final argument. According to the final argument perception is not knowledge, as knowledge attains being and truth, and perception cannot attain being or truth. (Attaining being is necessary for attaining truth.) I argue against the two most influential recent interpretations: attaining truth consists in making true judgements (propositional interpretation) and attaining truth consists in making true judgements in a specific objective way (objectivity interpretation). Instead, I defend a variant of a third interpretation (recently only defended by Lesley Brown in unpublished work)¹: attaining being and attaining truth are extensionally equivalent; the being and truth at stake are the being and truth of *something*; attaining the being and truth of something consists in grasping

¹In 'Plato's *Theaetetus* and the hunting of the proposition.' (ms) (Lesley Brown gave me permission to refer to her paper.)

what it really is, i.e., grasping its essence. Whereas propositional interpretations see a connection between being as a *koinon* (common property) and concepts or propositions, I argue that the notion of being operative in the argument is not an epistemic or logical notion, but an ontological notion, significantly related to the notion of essence (what something really is). I argue that Socrates draws an increasingly specific contrast between perception and progressively more complex thoughts about perceptibles involving *koina*, in particular being: ultimately, such complex thoughts may culminate in the success state of attaining the being of a perceptible, i.e. grasping its essence.