

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

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Abstract of the dissertation

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, the interlocutors attempt to define knowledge (*epistēmē*). One of the definitions that is considered at length is 'knowledge is perception (*aisthēsis*)'. Socrates initially equates the definition of knowledge as perception with Protagoras' Measure Doctrine ('man is the measure of all things'). He introduces a metaphysical underpinning for the Measure Doctrine in the form of an allegedly Protagorean Secret Doctrine. The Secret Doctrine includes a doctrine of flux: 'everything is always becoming'. (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 definition of knowledge as perception (independently of its supposed connection with the Measure Doctrine) (184-187). In the dissertation, I defend interpretations of the Measure Doctrine (chapter 1), the refutation of the radical variant of the doctrine of flux (chapter 2), and the direct refutation of the definition of knowledge as perception (chapter 3).

In chapter 1, I analyse Protagoras' theory. According to the influential

‘relativist interpretation’, Protagoras is a relativist about truth: he holds that each belief is true (not *simpliciter*, but) *in relation to the believer*. I defend a less common interpretation (rejected by most recent interpreters), according to which Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine amounts to *infallibilism*: all beliefs are true *simpliciter*. I defend the infallibilist interpretation against objections by recent relativist interpreters. In particular, I argue that Protagoras does not have a revisionary (relativist) account of the truth of beliefs: instead, he has a revisionary account of the *truth conditions* of beliefs. I show how Protagoras’ Secret Doctrine and his ‘linguistic reforms’ have revisionary implications for the truth conditions of beliefs and how his account of the truth conditions of beliefs underpins his infallibilism. Further, I show that the ‘self-refutation argument’ (169–171) targets the view that I ascribe to Protagoras.

In chapter 2, I analyse the refutation of the radical variant of the doctrine of flux (Radical Flux). I address two issues. First, whilst the refutation only seems to assume that *particulars* are subject to Radical Flux, it purports to establish that Radical Flux undermines the definition of knowledge as perception, which concerns a *universal* (what knowledge is): how does the flux of particulars have repercussions for the possibility of defining universals? Second, why does a refutation of Radical Flux contribute to a refutation of the Measure Doctrine (or the definition of knowledge as perception, initially equated with it), given that Protagoras is not obviously committed to Radical Flux? In relation to the first issue, I distinguish between an epistemic and an ontic interpretation of Radical Flux, not clearly distinguished in existing literature. On the epistemic interpretation, Radical Flux entails that universals can only be instantiated fleetingly, rendering an adequate description of the resulting fleeting reality impossible. On the ontic interpretation,

Radical Flux entails that universals cannot be instantiated at all. I argue that only the ontic interpretation can make sense of the supposed repercussions of Radical Flux for the definition of knowledge as perception. In relation to the second issue, I argue that Protagoras is indeed not committed to Radical Flux: I argue for a deflationary interpretation of the refutation, on which the refutation targets a radical variant of the Secret Doctrine (not one Protagoras is committed to).

In chapter 3, I analyse the direct refutation of the definition of knowledge as perception. According to the refutation, perception cannot, and knowledge does, attain (*tuchein*) being (*ousias*) and truth (*alētheias*) (attaining being is necessary for attaining truth): therefore, knowledge is not perception. According to an influential interpretation, attaining truth consists in making true judgements: the point of the argument is that perceiving does not involve making true judgements (or, indeed, making any judgements, whether true or false), whilst knowing does involve making true judgements. Given this interpretation, attaining being (necessary for attaining truth) could then be interpreted as applying concepts (thinking of something *as* something): the point of the argument would then be that perceiving consists in a non-conceptual awareness of the perceived, whereas knowledge is conceptual (and being conceptual is necessary for being judgemental). I argue that, whilst the refutation does imply that perceiving is non-conceptual and non-judgemental, attaining being and truth are not best interpreted as (respectively) applying concepts or making true judgements. Instead, I argue that, in this context, attaining truth amounts to attaining the truth *of something*, attaining the being of something is equivalent to attaining the truth of something, and attaining the being/truth of something amounts to grasping what something really is/grasping its essence.¹ I show

how the refutation consists of a series of steps culminating in the claim that perception cannot attain the being or truth of something, and that it makes various interesting points about the cognitive reach of perception along the way.

¹ In developing this interpretation, I draw on unpublished work by Lesley Brown: ‘Plato’s *Theaetetus* and the hunting of the proposition.’ (ms) (Lesley Brown gave me permission to refer to her paper and engage with it in my dissertation.)