

All beliefs are true *simpliciter*:
a defence of the infallibilist interpretation of
Protagoras' Measure Doctrine in Plato's
Theaetetus

Outline of chapter 1

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Outline

Protagoras is often considered the first relativist in Western philosophy by virtue of his Measure Doctrine ('man is the measure of all things'). This chapter focuses on the discussion of the Measure Doctrine in the *Theaetetus* (152-183), which is the most elaborate treatment of Protagoras' doctrine in antiquity. I shall argue that Protagoras (as portrayed in the *Theaetetus*) is indeed a relativist, but that recent interpretations of Protagoras' relativism are mistaken in taking Protagoras to be a relativist about *the truth of beliefs*.

It is incontrovertible that Protagoras holds that belief is factive: there are no false beliefs, and all beliefs are somehow true. However, the way in which all beliefs are true according to Protagoras is controversial. According to the relativist interpretation, the consensus in recent scholarship, Protagoras is a relativist about the truth of beliefs: no beliefs are true *simpliciter*, but each belief is true *in relation to the believer*.¹ Relativist interpreters have offered various explanations of what it would mean for a belief to be true *in relation to a believer*. According to an alternative interpretation (currently widely

¹Cf. Erginel (2009), Castagnoli (2010), 4.2, and Evans (2015).

rejected), Protagoras is an infallibilist: all beliefs are true *simpliciter*.² I shall argue that Protagoras is an infallibilist: rather than relativizing the truth of beliefs, Protagoras' relativism is meant to underwrite the view that all beliefs are true *simpliciter*.

I shall argue that Protagoras' relativism is a restricted variant of *property relativism* (not relativism about the truth of beliefs). According to property relativism, things do not have properties by themselves, but only in relation to individual believers and in accordance with individual believers' beliefs. I shall argue that property relativism is a very different view from relativism about the truth of beliefs: relativism about the truth of beliefs is only an *instance* of property relativism (as truth is a property of beliefs). Protagoras' relativism, however, is a *restricted* variant of property relativism: it does not apply to truth itself.³ I shall show that Protagoras' variant of property relativism has implications for the *truth conditions* of beliefs: on the ordinary account, a belief is true if things *by themselves* are as the believer believes they are; on Protagoras' account, however, a belief is true if things are, *in relation to the believer*, as the believer believes they are. In the light of this implication for truth conditions, Protagoras' property relativism implies that all beliefs are true *simpliciter*. I shall interpret Protagoras' 'linguistic reforms' (157b1-c1 and 160b5-c2) (part of his so-called Secret Doctrine (152d-160c)) in this light: Protagoras rejects the ordinary way of expressing beliefs ('the stone is white') as it conceals the relational nature of properties and the actual compatibility of seemingly conflicting

²The infallibilist reading has been defended Fine (Fine (1995), Fine (1996), and Fine (1998)), from whom I borrow the label. All subsequent interpreters reject Fine's infallibilist reading. My infallibilist interpretation differs substantially from Fine's, and I shall argue that it is not vulnerable to the objections to Fine's interpretation that have been put forward by subsequent interpreters.

³Although in the context of the self-refutation argument (169e-171d) Protagoras extends his property relativism to the truth of beliefs, but still in a restricted way, compatible with infallibilism: see penultimate paragraph.

beliefs. Protagoras' revisionary way of expressing beliefs ('the stone is white in relation to me') makes explicit the relational nature of properties and the compatibility of seemingly conflicting beliefs.

I shall show that my interpretation is able to account for Socrates' notorious twofold characterization of Protagoras' position: 'all beliefs are true' and 'each belief is true *for the believer*'. According to relativist interpreters, the former characterization is not strictly correct, and we should always supply the qualifier 'for the believer'. I shall argue that the two characterizations represent two different perspectives on the truth conditions of beliefs. The former characterization ('all beliefs are true') presupposes Protagoras' revisionary perspective: taking for granted Protagoras' account of truth conditions, that all beliefs are true means that the Protagorean truth conditions of all beliefs obtain. The latter characterization ('each belief is true for the believer') presupposes the ordinary perspective: given the ordinary understanding of truth conditions, that each belief is true for the believer means that the truth condition of each belief *as ordinarily understood* obtains—not simpliciter, but—*in relation to the believer*.

I shall show that Protagoras' infallibilism implies *cognitive privatism*. According to cognitive privatism, the beliefs of different believers are logically disjoint: the truth condition of any belief of *a* is different from and compatible with the truth condition of any belief of *b*.

It is sometimes thought that infallibilism is very easy to refute by means of second-order beliefs, i.e., beliefs about the truth of other beliefs: infallibilism implies the truth of my second-order belief that your belief is false; consequently, your belief is false; therefore, infallibilism is false. However, I shall argue that Protagoras' avoids such an easy defeat (at 169e-171d) by applying his property relativism to truth and falsehood *in so far as they are*

the subject matter of second-order beliefs: this allows him to maintain that your belief is true *simpliciter* (by virtue of things being, *in relation to you*, as you believe they are) and that my second-order belief about your belief is true *simpliciter* (by virtue of your belief being false *in relation to me*). I shall argue that this move is not (obviously) self-defeating, although it is problematic for different reasons.⁴

In the chapter I shall discuss successive key passages of the text to defend my interpretation. I shall mainly focus on the Secret Doctrine and perceptual judgements (151-160), but in the final part of the chapter I shall also discuss second-order judgements and the self-refutation argument (169e-171d).

References

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⁴Lee (2005), chapter 3, offers a similar account of Protagoras’ treatment of second-order beliefs, but she thinks that Protagoras does end up being a relativist about the truth of beliefs (as opposed to an infallibilist) by virtue of this treatment.

and Argument in Late Plato, pages 105—133. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

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