

# Research Statement

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## 1 General plan

I intend to write a monograph based on my dissertation ‘Not bringing things to a standstill: Plato’s *Theaetetus* on how (not) to speak about a world in which knowledge is perception’. Besides this, I intend to work on various independent research projects.

## 2 The monograph: perception, change, and truth in Plato’s *Theaetetus*

### Chapter 1: Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine and its Heraclitean foundation (*Tht* 151-179)

Socrates initially equates the first definition (‘knowledge is perception’) with Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine (‘man is the measure of all things’). He also ascribes to Protagoras a Heraclitean doctrine of constant change.

According to the influential ‘relativist reading’ of the Measure Doctrine, Protagoras is a *relativist about truth*: Protagoras rejects absolute truth in favour of a *relational* notion of truth (true-for-someone), and he holds that each belief is true *for the believer*. According to an alternative reading, which

I favour, Protagoras is *not* a relativist about truth: Protagoras holds that each belief is *absolutely* true.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Protagoras is a *revisionary infallibilist*. As an *infallibilist*, Protagoras holds that all forms of cognition are infallible and grasp *absolute* truths. As a *revisionary* metaphysician, Protagoras underpins his infallibilism by means of a mutual dependence between various features of reality and our cognition of them. I argue that Protagoras' relativism is 'internal to reality' and it does not give up on the notion of reality itself: this makes it fundamentally different from relativism about *truth*. I show how Protagoras' theory involves a form of Heracliteanism. In the monograph I wish to relate this chapter to the discussion of Protagoras' position in the *Cratylus* (385e-386e) and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ 5 and 6.

## **Chapter 2: The refutation of Radical Heracliteanism (*Tht* 179-183)**

I argue that Socrates *infers* from the constant change of concrete, individual objects that *definitions* are impossible. This inference *seems* invalid given that definitions have as their object concepts or universals, *not* concrete, individual objects. Most interpreters seem to assume that Radical Heracliteanism implies *epistemic indeterminacy*: things are too fleeting to be described in a determinate way. I argue that Socrates' problematic inference is more intelligible if Radical Heracliteanism is supposed to imply *ontic indeterminacy*: there are no instantiations of properties at all (not even fleeting ones). In the monograph I intend to examine whether my interpretation of Radical Heracliteanism also applies to its occurrences in the *Cratylus* (439d-440d) and in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ 5.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Gail Fine. Protagorean Relativisms. *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 11:211-43, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>C. Strang, Plato and the Instant, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, Vol. 48 (1974), pp. 63-79, disregarded in subsequent literature on the

### **Chapter 3: The connection between Protagoras and Radical Heracliteanism (*Tht* 151-183)**

I argue that Protagoras is not committed to *Radical* Heracliteanism: instead of refuting him, the argument *deflates* Protagoras' Heraclitean *pretensions* by showing that his theory is in fact incompatible with *Radical* Heracliteanism. In the monograph I intend to defend the plausibility of this reading in the light of other 'deflationary refutations' in Plato, such as (arguably) the refutation of the monists in the *Sophist* (244a-245d). Further, I intend to examine how the refutation relates to *Plato's own* Heraclitean depiction of the sensible world (for instance, at *Timaeus* 27d-28a).

### **Chapter 4: The direct refutation of the first definition (*Tht* 184-187)**

Plato argues that knowledge cannot be defined as perception: knowledge attains being and truth, whereas perception does not. Recent interpreters explain this deficiency of perception in terms of forming true beliefs simpliciter (propositional reading) or forming them in a specifically objective way (objectivity interpretation). I argue that attaining being and truth should be understood in terms of understanding the essence ('what-it-really-is') of a (perceptual) property. I argue that the refutation draws an *increasingly specific* contrast between perception and progressively more complex forms of thought, culminating in a contrast between perception and an apprehension of essence.

In the monograph I intend to expand my account in three directions. First, how should we understand the notion of being in the refutation? Second, how are being and the other 'common properties' (*koina*) related to *Theaetetus*, construes Radical Heracliteanism similarly.

the Great Kinds in the *Sophist* (254b ff.)? Third, how does the refutation relate to other Platonic passages pertaining to the relationship between perception and thought (*Phaedo* 65a-66a and 99d-100a, *Republic* 523a-525b, *Sophist* 263e-264b, *Philebus* 20e-22b and 38b-39c, and *Timaeus* 27d-28a)?

### 3 Independent research projects

#### 3.1 Sensibles in flux and the need for Forms in Plato

According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A 6), Plato postulated Forms as the objects of definition after Cratylus convinced him that the sensible world is subject to constant change. According to what I find a philosophically attractive interpretation<sup>3</sup>, the change at hand is not diachronic change, but compresence of opposites: because sensibles suffer from compresence of opposites, we cannot define Forms (the objects of definition) in terms of sensibles. I shall examine whether and how *diachronic* change in the sensible world (emphasized in passages such as *Timaeus* 27d-28a) may nonetheless *also* motivate the postulation of Forms.

#### 3.2 False belief and intentionality in Plato

The ‘knowledge paradox’ about false belief in the *Theaetetus* (188a-c) hinges on the problem of how we can have a sufficiently strong grasp of something for it to be an object of thought but a sufficiently weak grasp for it to be possible to make false judgements about it. I shall examine the relevance of this paradox to the nature of intentionality and its connections with Meno’s paradox (*Meno* 80d5-e5). I shall also examine whether the *Sophist* addresses this paradox.

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<sup>3</sup>Stemming from T.H. Irwin. Plato’s Heracliteanism. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, No. 106:1-13, 1977.

### 3.3 The Presocratics on truth, belief, and logic

In *Metaphysics*  $\Gamma$ , Aristotle argues that Presocratic theories have unpalatable implications for belief, truth, and logic. For instance, Aristotle ascribes to some Presocratics ‘deterministic infallibilism’: our beliefs are determined by our physical condition and they are all true (*Metaphysics*  $\Gamma$  5, 1009b12-31). I shall reconstruct Aristotle’s diagnosis of such supposed anomalous consequences of Presocratic theories.