

# 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 the monograph, I intend to work on various independent research projects.

## 2 The monograph: perception, knowledge, 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: ‘nothing ever is, but everything is always becoming’.

According to the influential ‘relativist interpretation’ 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 interpretation, which I favour, Protagoras is *not* a relativist about truth: Protagoras holds that each belief is *absolutely* true. I argue that Protagoras is a *revisionary infallibilist*. As an *infallibilist*, Protagoras holds that all forms of cognition are infallible and grasp *absolute* truths.<sup>1</sup> 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. Further, I intend to relate my interpretation of Protagoras' doctrine to debates in contemporary philosophy on truth and disagreement in moral and aesthetic discourse.<sup>2</sup>

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

I argue that Socrates *infers* from the supposed constant change of concrete, individual objects (Radical Heracliteanism) that *definitions* are impossible. This inference *seems* invalid given that definitions have as their object concepts or universals, *not* concrete, individual objects. Various interpreters have sought to understand the problematic inference as based on the premiss that Radical Heracliteanism entails *epistemic indeterminacy*: instances

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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 for an earlier variant of the infallibilist interpretation, significantly different from my variant. I take over the label 'infallibilism' from Fine.

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, J. MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and Its Applications*. Oxford: University Press, 2014.

of properties are so fleeting that they cannot be adequately captured by our descriptions of reality. I argue that Socrates' inference is invalid if understood in this way. I argue that the inference should instead be understood as based on the premiss that Radical Heracliteanism entails *ontic indeterminacy*: properties are not instantiated at all. 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>3</sup>

Further, I argue that Protagoras is not committed to *Radical* Heracliteanism: instead of refuting Protagoras, 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* (seemingly) Heraclitean depiction of the sensible word (for instance, at *Timaeus* 27d-28a).

### **Chapter 3: The direct refutation of the first definition (*Tht* 184-187)**

According to the direct refutation (targeting the first definition in isolation from its supposed connection with the Measure Doctrine), knowledge is not perception: knowledge attains (*tuchein*) being (*ousias*) and truth (*alētheias*), whereas perception does not. Recent interpreters have argued that the deficiency of perception (relative to knowledge) consists in the sup-

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<sup>3</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 *Theaetetus*, construes Radical Heracliteanism similarly.

posed fact that perceiving does not involve forming true beliefs (propositional interpretation) or forming true beliefs in a specifically objective way (objectivity interpretation). I argue instead that attaining being and truth consists in 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 a comprehension of essence.

In the monograph, I intend to expand my account in three directions, by addressing three further questions. First, how should we understand the notions of being (*ousia*) and truth (*alētheia*) operative in the refutation? Second, how are being and the other 'common properties' (*koina*) related to 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

I intend to analyse and assess Aristotle's claim (in *Metaphysics* A 6) that Plato's own Heraclitean view of the material world motivated his postulation of a realm of immaterial Forms as the objects of Socratic definitions. Aristotle's claim is often explained on the basis of the assumption—which has recently come under fire—that Plato's Heracliteanism consists (solely or partly) in the 'compresence of opposites' in the material world.<sup>4</sup> I shall

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. T.H. Irwin. Plato's Heracliteanism. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, No. 106:1-13, 1977, criticized by F. Ademollo. On Plato's Conception of Change. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 55: 35-83, 2018.

assess Aristotle's claim and the interpretation of it in terms of compresence of opposites on the basis of a detailed analysis of passages in Plato on change in the material world, such as *Phaedo* 78d-e, *Republic* 479a-d, and *Timaeus* 27d-28a.

### **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). Further, I wish to analyse the discussion of false belief in the *Sophist* and address a question that has not received much attention in the literature: does the analysis of false belief in the *Sophist* also have a bearing on the knowledge paradox, or is its significance restricted to the other paradox in the *Theaetetus*, the 'not being paradox' (188d-189b)?

### **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.