

## Plato's Arguments on the Inconsistency of Relativism

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IN THE *Theaetetus*, Plato introduces Protagoras's statement "Man is the measure of all things" as a possible theory of truth and examines the consequences of such a theory. Plato takes the statement to indicate a type of relativism in regard to truth: "Any given thing 'is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you'" (152a) or "What seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so" (170a). Using two connected arguments (170a–171c), Plato shows that this theory of relativism is inconsistent. His analysis points out one of the most important philosophical objections to across-the-board relativism. I shall first analyze Plato's arguments and show their effectiveness in refuting Protagorean relativism. I shall then discuss the implications of these arguments for another hotly disputed theory, moral relativism.

Following Myles Burnyeat, I will represent more formally the theory that Plato attacks as the relativist principle R (see "Protagoras and Self-Refutation" 178):

For all  $x$ , if  $x$  seems  $F$  to  $P$ ,  $x$  is  $F$  for  $P$ .

Plato's discussion centers on putting the predicate 'true' in place of  $F$ .

Plato's first argument against Protagorean relativism argues from the premise that it seems to everyone that some people are wise and

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some are ignorant—everyone recognizes degrees of expertise in various matters. Socrates and Theodorus agree on this premise (170b). It also seems true to all that “wisdom lies in thinking truly, and ignorance in false belief” (170b). The next stages of the argument must be carefully interpreted from this paragraph spoken by Socrates:

Are we to say that what men think is always true, or that it is sometimes true and sometimes false? From either supposition it results that their thoughts are not always true, but both true and false. (170c)

If the Protagoreans take seriously their own statement that what men think is always true, then the previous premises lead to the conclusion that “it is true for everyone that some people think falsely,” which is a flat denial of *R*. If, however, the Protagoreans admit that people sometimes think falsely, they also deny *R*.

Burnyeat summarizes the above argument like this: If people are right to think there is false judgment, then there is. If people are wrong in thinking that there is false judgment, then there is false judgment, because this is an instance. But is Plato guilty of dropping the relativizing qualifier at the crucial point in the argument (*Plato* 29)? In this case, the omission does not matter. Socrates explicitly states that he is talking about what seems true for *everyone* and thus what is true for everyone. Such phrases as “their thoughts are not always true, but both true and false” (170c) have the same meaning as “all men’s thoughts are not always true for all men, but both true and false for all men” because the premises of the argument assert what all men believe.

The first argument, then, relies on the empirical fact that everyone, including Protagoras, admits degrees of expertise, specifically in matters of judgment or wisdom. Such an admission obviously contradicts a thoroughgoing theory of relative truth. But Protagoras can easily counter this argument if he simply admits that, according to his theory, there is no expertise and it is *not* true for everyone that some people think truly and others falsely. Even if Protagoras alone denies this, his theory is saved. Plato does not explicitly consider this possibility in the text, but he does introduce another, more sophisticated argument that does not allow Protagoras an easy way out.

Plato's argument runs like this: (1) If  $R$  is true, then if a Protagorean holds  $x$  to be true,  $x$  is true for the Protagorean. (2) Tens of thousands of people disagree with the Protagorean. (3) Thus, according to  $R$ , the Protagorean's opinion is true for him and false for tens of thousands. (Thus far,  $R$  itself is unchallenged, even if it is unpopular.) (4) If Protagoras does not believe  $R$  and no one else does either, it is not true for anyone.

Here Socrates makes a curious statement: (5) If Protagoras believes  $R$  but no one else does, "it is more false than true by just so much as the unbelievers outnumber the believers . . . if its truth or falsity varies with each individual opinion" (171a). Socrates here seems to omit the relativizing qualifier 'true for  $P$ ', but this point will be discussed later. The argument, at least the interesting part of the argument, does not depend on (5).<sup>1</sup> "Besides that," says Socrates at this point in the discussion, "it involves a really exquisite conclusion" (171a).

When the thing about which Protagoras and his opponents disagree ( $x$  in  $R$ , above) is the relativist principle  $R$  itself, then (6) Protagoras "must acknowledge the truth of his opponents' belief" about  $R$  (i.e., that they think  $R$  is false) (171a). (7) "That is to say, he would acknowledge his own belief to be false, if he admits that the belief of those who think him wrong is true" (171b). Yet, (8) Protagoras's opponents do not admit that they are wrong. (9) Protagoras must admit, by  $R$ , that "this opinion of theirs is as true as any other" (171b). Therefore, (10) Protagoras agrees that his opinion is false.

In the paraphrases and quotations used to outline this second argument, the relativizing qualifier 'true for  $P$ ' is conspicuously absent beginning at step (5). Many commentators have pointed out this absence, and the omission is troubling (see Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation" 174–75). Is Plato guilty of a straw-man argument, dropping an essential part of Protagoras's theory when it becomes convenient? This is a strong and ultimately unnecessary accusation to bring against

<sup>1</sup>This statement of Socrates suggests a theory of varying degrees of truth: what is true for one and false for ten thousand is less true than what is true for five thousand and false for five thousand and one, etc. While this interpretation of Protagoras may fit with the Sophists' emphasis on persuasion as a criterion of truth, it is not necessary in order to show that  $R$  is self-refuting.

Plato. The argument stands even *with* the relativizing 'true for *P*' and is more interesting than when the 'true for *P*' is omitted. With 'true for *P*' added, step (8) becomes "Protagoras must acknowledge that his opponents' denial of *R* is *true for them*." In other words, it is true for the opponents that it is not the case that if *x* seems *F* for *P*, *x* is *F* for *P*. At first glance, this claim seems rather trivial: it seems that, even if his opponents deny *R*, Protagoras can still hold it to be true. Step (7) of the argument, however, states that Protagoras must "acknowledge his own belief to be false." What does this step look like with the relativizing qualifier added? To whom is the statement relativized? Since Protagoras does the admitting, we must be dealing with his beliefs, specifically his belief in *R*. Thus, (7) can be restated as follows: Protagoras must acknowledge that it is true for Protagoras that *R* is false for his opponents. Yet Protagoras's relativism is supposed to hold for everyone. "Man is the measure of all things," he says, not "that man who believes that man is the measure of all things is the measure of all things." So Protagoras believes that *R* is *true* for his opponents and indeed for everyone, yet according to (7), he must also believe that *R* is false for his opponents. Protagoras's beliefs are inconsistent, which is shown "in the one special case where [*x*] is the Measure doctrine itself [*R*]" (Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation" 188).

Such is the argument, or such would be the argument if Plato had not dropped the 'true for *P*' from steps (5) through (10). But what does Plato mean to say? He is very careful to use 'true for *P*' in the early parts of the argument. Yet the argument is very different depending on whether 'true for *P*' is or is not used. Which argument was Plato making? At 171b–c, Socrates gives the conclusion of the argument:

On all hands, then, Protagoras included, his opinion will be disputed, or rather Protagoras will join in the general consent—when he admits to an opponent the truth of his contrary opinion, from that moment Protagoras himself will be admitting that a dog or the man in the street is not a measure of anything whatever that he does not understand.

When Protagoras admits that his opponent's opinion is true (for the opponent), he is disputing his own opinion. When he disputes his own opinion, he admits that no one is the measure of things that she does not

understand. Why? Perhaps because Protagoras cannot admit that someone else is the measure of *R*. The stronger interpretation is that Protagoras admits that, for him, his opponents are both right (for themselves) and wrong (for themselves) about the truth of *R*. Caught in the contradiction, Protagoras must admit that *R* is false and that a person can measure only what she understands. Either way, this concluding paragraph of the argument supports the more sophisticated reading using 'true for *P*', even though the phrase is not specifically stated at times in the argument.

Burnyeat notes that the paragraph quoted above would not be necessary if 'true' in steps (5) through (10) were not interpreted as 'true for *P*'. On his interpretation, saying that someone is not the measure of all things (171c) means admitting that that person's judgment of a thing is not sufficient to make that judgment true for that person ("Protagoras and Self-Refutation" 188). Since Protagoras is committed to *R*, he must dispute the judgment of anyone who rejects *R*; in disputing that judgment, Protagoras shows that he does not take *R* seriously.

Plato has shown, then, that Protagorean relativism is, in words common to the current debate, inconsistent or self-refuting. But does that mean that *any* relativism is inconsistent? A possible move would be to assert *R* only for oneself. Since *R* would then no longer be a universal assertion, it would not be inconsistent with itself. Asserting relativism only for oneself seems extremely trivial, however, and does not contribute much to a general discussion of epistemology or ethics. For instance, Miriam Solomon argues as follows:

A relativist is free to state her position so that it is a doctrine about the concept of truth in the culture from which the doctrine is propounded, not a doctrine about the concept of truth in all cultures. (218)

This seems to be just a grander example of the same philosophical move, however. If I say that for Americans truth is relative, my statement is pretty meaningless in a discussion with a Norwegian.

Furthermore, Solomon's meaning is not entirely clear. Does she mean that it can be true that everyone within a culture believes in relativism? This would be an empirical claim, not a philosophical one, and would not make relativism any more or less *true* for the people within

that culture. Just because I believe that *R* is true for me does not mean that it is, unless *R* has already been shown to be true and my beliefs determine my own truth. Or does Solomon want to say that relativism can be true in a meaningful sense for one culture, regardless of its truthfulness for other cultures? Such a statement would have to be made from without a culture in order to avoid the paradox of self-refutation; if stated within a culture for that culture, it could not avoid the paradox.

The above discussion suggests one criterion any relativist doctrine would have to meet in order to avoid self-refutation. The relativist must admit at least that there is some method of determining the absolute truth or falsity of her relativist doctrine. That is, the doctrine cannot be allowed to apply to itself; it must be established with reference to some absolutist framework.<sup>2</sup> If a relativist system were formulated in this way, it could not generate the contradiction that Plato derives from Protagoras's statement. Harré and Krausz have suggested that wide-ranging relativisms inevitably fall into "philosophical anarchy" because they lack some kind of stabilizing constant (190).

Another possible criterion emerges from the empirical demonstration behind Plato's first argument. Socrates notes that Protagoras himself "conceded that some people were superior in the matter of what is better or worse, and these, he said, were wise" (169d). Indeed, it seems reasonable to concede that everyone believes in degrees of expertise in such fields as medicine and piloting passenger planes. A viable theory of relativism would do well to include a method of relating knowledge to some notions of the physical world, such as the germ theory of disease, that have proven useful, if not essential, throughout the course of history. This criterion is not as absolutely

<sup>2</sup>This may be just a comment about the grammar (as Wittgenstein would put it) of the word 'true'. When 'true' appears in everyday contexts it has some connotation of absoluteness. Indeed, as Professor K. Codell Carter has pointed out to me, the phrase 'true for *x*' seems nonsensical in everyday conversation. "What do you mean, true for Socrates but not for anyone else?" we might ask, and both Plato and Protagoras would be hard pressed to give an answer. Given that 'true' is so closely tied to such words as 'believe', 'assert', 'say', etc., in ordinary language, it is no wonder that Protagoras's relativism leads to linguistic problems.

necessary as the first, however, because violating it does not lead to a logical contradiction.

Harré and Krausz distinguish several types of relativism: semantic, epistemic, ontological, moral, and aesthetic (32–33). Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between cognitive relativism, which includes the first three types, and valuational relativism, which includes the final two (see Harré and Krausz 33 and Meiland and Krausz vii). Cognitive relativism deals with perception and truth in various aspects, whether linguistic, epistemological, or ontological. It seems to imply some kind of valuational relativism, while valuational relativism does not imply cognitive relativism. While Plato deals with the extreme cognitive relativism of Protagoras, much of the current debate on relativism centers on moral relativism. Moral relativism might be roughly represented by inserting the predicate 'right' into  $R$ :

$R_m$ : For all  $x$ , if  $x$  seems right to  $P$ ,  $x$  is right for  $P$ .

Does this formulation produce the same contradiction that  $R$  does? Suppose that Protagoras believes  $R_m$  and Socrates does not. To follow Plato's strategy, one would like to derive propositions like "it is true for Protagoras that  $R_m$  is true for Socrates" and "it is true for Protagoras that  $R_m$  is false for Socrates." These propositions do not follow from  $R_m$ , however, since  $R_m$  relates only to moral judgments, not judgments about the truth or falsity of beliefs.

But what if Socrates further holds that  $R_m$  is wrong morally, not just from a cognitive standpoint? Must Protagoras not then acknowledge that  $R_m$  is both right for Socrates (because of Protagoras's assertion) and wrong for Socrates (because of Socrates' own moral beliefs)? Significantly, Protagoras has asserted that  $R_m$  is *true*, not that it is morally *right*. Thus, Socrates' nonbelief in  $R_m$  does not matter to Protagoras's moral judgments of Socrates, only to his cognitive judgments. Protagoras may think Socrates a fool for not believing  $R_m$ , but not morally wrong in that belief.  $R_m$  can be asserted by a cognitive absolutist who can justify her belief in  $R_m$  by reference to fixed truths outside the moral sphere.

Moral relativism, then, does not produce a contradiction in the way that Protagorean cognitive relativism does and is therefore not vulnerable to Plato's second argument in the *Theaetetus*. The first

argument, however, might be a more fruitful line of inquiry in arguing against moral relativism. Harré and Krausz suggest a strategy of attacking moral relativism using induction from the widespread agreement on ethical matters among different cultures and from the existence of "normative institutions" (167). The empirical demonstration of moral norms might lead to the admission that no one really believes in moral relativism, just as universal belief in the existence of expertise means that no one believes Protagorean relativism.

Philippa Foot compares moral relativism to a more commonly accepted relativism, relativism of taste. Foot observes that wide variations exist in judgments of taste among different cultures and at different times. Furthermore, we call judgments of taste relative because "no one set of these opinions appears to have any more claim to truth than any other" (154). It makes perfect sense for us to make judgments of taste by our own cultural standards; when we talk about the standards of another culture, we do so without asserting the absolute correctness of our own standards (155). This view seems entirely compatible with modern, scientific cognitive absolutism. A materialist can be very absolute about knowledge of the physical world but simply claim that aesthetic and even moral judgments are illusory; such judgments result from causal interactions between neurons and have no independent ontological status. Thus, any framework of judgment will serve a person equally well in the aesthetic and moral spheres.

Foot's comparison demonstrates one problem with applying Plato's first argument to moral relativism. Foot holds that moral relativism need not imply that the relativist cannot make any moral judgments at all. As in judgments of taste, the relativist may make moral judgments according to her own system while recognizing that her own system has no special claim to correctness compared to other systems (161). This argument lessens the impact of the empirical assertion that all people make moral judgments, since making moral judgments is not incompatible with relativism.

A moral relativist might also discount empirical claims about the universality of certain moral laws; many factors, whether historical, evolutionary, or accidental, can help explain away similarities in the moral codes of different cultures. I have already admitted that Plato's first argument against relativism is not as neat and certain as his second, resting as it does on an empirical claim that can be denied or interpreted



in different ways. Still, as Harré and Krausz note, moral relativism does not seem to have the explanatory strength that moral realism does in dealing with certain facts of human experience (167). The strategy suggested by Plato's first argument might need to be coupled with other argumentative strategies in building a case against moral relativism. The actual truth or falsity of moral relativism is a topic far beyond the scope of this essay.

Plato's two arguments against Protagorean relativism in *Theaetetus* 170a–171c show two different strategies for attacking relativism. The second argument shows that Protagorean relativism results in a logical contradiction, a contradiction inherent in asserting the absolute truth of a relativistic theory of truth. The first strategy, which builds on the empirical demonstration that everyone admits degrees of expertise in judgments, is not as “exquisite” as the second, to use Plato's term, but works just as well within Socrates' discussion. This first argument is more effective against moral relativism than the second, because moral relativism does not lead to the same contradiction as Protagorean relativism.

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