

# Pinning Down Plato's Protagoras

John MacFarlane\*

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## 1 Introduction

Protagoras is frequently identified as the first relativist, on the strength of the thesis Plato attributes to him in the *Theaetetus*:<sup>1</sup>

as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you (152a6–8).

Plato's argument that this thesis is self-refuting is taken to be the first important argument against relativism. So it's a matter of some interest to settle what kind of relativist view, if any, Plato is attributing to Protagoras.

There is a large literature on this question. In an influential pair of papers, Myles Burnyeat argued that the position ascribed to Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus* was a relativist one (Burnyeat 1976b), despite the fact that later Greek philosophers did not take Protagoras to be a relativist, but rather an advocate of *infallibilism*, the view that whatever appears to someone is true, not relatively or perspectively, but absolutely (Burnyeat 1976a).<sup>2</sup> More recently, Gail Fine has argued that Plato, too, takes Protagoras to be advocating infallibilism (Fine 1994, 1996, 1998; all reprinted in Fine 2003).

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Swoyer (1982, 84); Wright (2008); Kölbel (2002, 126–28); Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, 4); Baghramian and Coliva (2020, 27); Baghramian and Carter (2022, sec. 3).

<sup>2</sup>Burnyeat used the term "subjectivism"; to avoid multiplying terminology, I use Fine's term "infallibilism."

But the infallibilist view Fine attributes to Plato's Protagoras is not quite the same as the one Burnyeat rejects. Like the later Greek philosophers, Burnyeat takes infallibilism to imply rejection of the Principle of Non-contradiction (PNC). It's easy to see why: If it appears to A that the wind is cold, and to B that the wind is not cold, then infallibilism implies that the wind is both cold and not cold. On Fine's view, by contrast, Protagoras takes our judgments to concern private, temporary objects. If A's appearance is about A's wind, and B's is about B's wind, then their judgments don't really conflict, and both can be true without contradiction. On this construal, infallibilism is consistent with the PNC.<sup>3</sup>

There is something odd about this way of framing the debate. Relativism is most naturally construed as an answer to a *semantic* question: whether the contents of perceptual appearances have their truth values relatively or absolutely. Its opposite is absolutism. Infallibilism, by contrast, is an answer to an *epistemological* question: whether we can be mistaken in believing that things are as they appear to us. Its opposite is fallibilism. Pretty much all interpreters agree that Plato depicts Protagoras as holding that appearances are infallible. After all, Protagoras' view is introduced as a way of making sense of Theaetetus' claim that perception is "always of what is, and *unerring* [ $\alpha\psi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\epsilon\acute{\epsilon}\varsigma$ ] – as befits knowledge" (152c).<sup>4</sup> So the real debate between Burnyeat and Fine is not about the epistemological issue of infallibilism. It is a semantic debate about the contents of appearances – a debate between relativism and absolutism.

However, the terms "relativism" and "absolutism" are not fully perspicuous either, because they can be used to characterize several distinct pairs of contrasting views, which differ in ways that are important for understanding the arguments of the *Theaetetus*. In what follows, I will attempt to clarify the interpretive options by outlining a spectrum of possible positions about the contents of appearances. I will then turn to the exegetical question of which of these positions best fits Plato's Protagoras.<sup>5</sup>

One might worry that it invites anachronism to ask how the positions Plato describes fit into our own map of conceptual space – a map that has

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<sup>3</sup>For a similar idea, see Waterlow (1977), who attributes to Protagoras a "relativism of fact."

<sup>4</sup>Here and elsewhere I use the Burnyeat/Levett translation (Burnyeat 1990) unless noted.

<sup>5</sup>Here we will not be concerned with the views of the historical Protagoras, but only with the views of the character Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

become increasingly fine-grained in recent discussions of truth-relativism.<sup>6</sup> But our responsibility as interpreters of ancient texts is to say, *in our terms*, what is going on in these texts. That is why we need to keep at this enterprise, despite centuries of prior work. What *would* be anachronistic would be to assume that the position Plato attributes to Protagoras fits cleanly into one of the squares in our own conceptual grid. I won't do that, and at the end I'll question whether Plato could have made all of the distinctions we think it's important to make.

## 2 A map of options

Plato explains Protagoras' position by discussing examples of conflicting appearances.<sup>7</sup> The examples have the following basic shape:

**Conflicting Appearances** It appears to A that the wind is cold. It appears to B that the wind is warm.

The basic Protagorean thought is that both of these appearances are, in some sense, true. Whether an appearance is true would seem to depend on two things: the content of the appearance and on how things are in the world. So, to understand Protagoras' position we need to answer two subquestions:

**Content Question** What is the content of each appearance? What is being represented, and what is it being represented as?

**Ontology Question** What objects are there in the world, and what properties do they have?

The most straightforward answer to the Content Question is

**Simple Contents** A is representing an object, the wind, as having the property of being cold (simpliciter), and B is representing the same object as having the (incompatible) property of being warm (simpliciter).

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<sup>6</sup>For example, Kölbel (2002); MacFarlane (2014); Recanati (2007).

<sup>7</sup>I will focus here on perceptual appearances and will not discuss whether Protagoras' view is meant to apply to non-perceptual appearances or judgments. I will assume, as Plato seems to, that perceptual appearances, like judgments, have contents, and that these contents admit of truth and falsity.

The most straightforward answer to the Ontology Question is

**Simple Ontology** There is a single object, the wind, that both A's and B's appearances concern. And there are properties of being cold (simpliciter) and warm (simpliciter) which this object is capable of having (though not both at the same time).

Combining these answers gives us our first position,

**Objectivism** A's and B's appearances attribute incompatible properties to the same object. At most one of these appearances can be correct.

It is pretty clear that Protagoras rejects Objectivism.<sup>8</sup> Objectivism implies that at least one of the conflicting appearances is mistaken, and that is incompatible with the thesis that perception is knowledge.

Moreover, Protagoras' denial that "the wind itself, by itself [αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ], is cold or not cold" (152b) looks like an explicit rejection of Simple Ontology. In rejecting Simple Ontology, Plato's Protagoras seems to be saying that the minimal facts that are relevant for the correctness of these appearances involve something else besides just the wind and coldness or warmth. The "Secret Doctrine" (introduced beginning at 152c) spells out an alternative picture. According to this picture, the relevant facts are facts about an interaction between the object perceived (the wind) and the perceiver. When these come together, something new is generated "between" them: a perceptual quality and a perception of this quality.

the active and passive factors, moving simultaneously, generate both sweetness and a perception; on the passive side, the perception makes the tongue percipient, while on the side of the wine, sweetness moving about it makes it both be and appear sweet to the healthy tongue. (159c14–d5)

Then this pair, Socrates ill and the draught of wine, generates, presumably, different things again: a perception of bitterness in the region of the tongue,

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<sup>8</sup>You might suppose that Objectivism is ruled out by Protagoras' claim that "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you" and that the wind "is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold" (152b). But Fine has suggested, in her defense of infallibilism, that the "for me" and "for you" here (and elsewhere in the dialogue) could be interpreted as datives of "person judging." So the datives alone cannot give us reason to reject the objectivist reading. At any rate, Objectivism is no worse off than Fine's infallibilism in this respect.

and bitterness coming to be and moving in the region of the wine. And then the wine becomes, not bitterness, but bitter; and I become, not perception, but percipient. (159e1–5)

According to this ontology, the wine cannot be said to have the property of being bitter “itself, by itself”; the bitterness only arises in relation to a specific perceiver, in the context of this interaction.

**Secret Doctrine Ontology** The wind does not have the properties of being cold or warm in its own right. Warmth and coldness only arise in the context of an interaction between the wind and a perceiver, and belong to neither the wind nor the perceiver in their own rights.

One might think that rejecting Simple Ontology requires rejecting Simple Contents. But it doesn't. We can combine Simple Contents with the Secret Doctrine Ontology if we accept a kind of relativism about truth:

**Truth Relativism** The simple content *the wind is cold* cannot be assigned a truth value simpliciter, but only relative to a perceiver on a particular occasion. The content is true, relative to a perceiver on an occasion, just in case coldness comes to be in the interaction between the wind and the perceiver on that occasion. Incompatible contents can be true relative to different perceiver/occasions.

Within Truth Relativism, we can distinguish two interestingly distinct views, depending on how we relate our relativized notion of truth to the correctness or accuracy of appearances. One approach is to say that although truth is relative, there are absolute facts about the correctness or accuracy of an appearances:

**Moderate Relativism** An appearance is *accurate* or *correct* (simpliciter) just in case its content is true relative to the person who has it.<sup>9</sup>

This is the kind of view I have elsewhere called “nonindexical contextualism” (MacFarlane 2014); “moderate relativism” is François Recanati's word for it (Recanati 2007). Evans (2015, 72), who attributes it to Protagoras, calls it “property relativism.”

A more radical approach is to deny that there are absolute facts about the correctness or accuracy of appearances:

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<sup>9</sup>I simplify here by omitting relativity to occasions.

**Radical Relativism** An appearance is *accurate* or *correct* (as assessed by X) just in case its content is true relative to X.

Unlike Moderate Relativism, this view makes accuracy *assessment-sensitive* (MacFarlane 2014, sec. 4.7).<sup>10</sup>

We can see how these views differ by considering again the wind that appears cold to A and warm to B. Suppose that A knows that the wind appears warm to B and acknowledges that it is true for B, but not for A, that the wind is warm. Then according to Moderate Relativism, A should regard B's appearance as accurate, while according to Radical Relativism, A should regard B's appearance as inaccurate.

Truth Relativism is not the only option, however, for those who reject Simple Ontology. Instead of holding that the contents of our appearances are simple, and thus can be said to fit the more complex reality only "relative" to a perceiver, we could hold that the contents are complex in a way that allows them to fit reality without slack and to have truth values absolutely. That is, we could reject Simple Contents.

In fact, there are two ways to do this. The first is to take the appearances to attribute relational properties to ordinary objects:

**Relational Properties** It is not *coldness simpliciter*, but *coldness-to-A*, that A's appearance attributes to the wind. Similarly, B's appearance attributes *warmness-to-B* to the wind. Since the wind can have both these properties simultaneously, both appearances can be correct.

Fine (1994) calls this position "perceptual relativism," and notes correctly that it is not a form of relativism about truth. Evans (2015) calls it "predicate relativism." In the terminology of MacFarlane (2014) it would count as "indexical contextualism."

The second option is to take the appearances to attribute simple properties to private, fleeting objects:

**Private Objects** It is not the wind, but a private and fleeting object (the-wind-for-A-now) to which A's appearance attributes the property of being cold (simpliciter). B's appearance attributes an incompatible property to a different private object. Since different objects can have incompatible properties, both appearances can be correct.

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<sup>10</sup>Note that in MacFarlane (2014), I reserve the label "truth relativism" for this view.

This is the semantic part of the view Fine calls “infallibilism.” Evans (2015) calls it “subject relativism.”

Summing up, then, we have four possible views of the content of conflicting appearances which are consistent with the Secret Doctrine Ontology and might be attributed to Plato’s Protagoras:

- Accept Simple Contents
  - Accuracy absolute  $\Rightarrow$  Moderate Relativism
  - Accuracy relative  $\Rightarrow$  Radical Relativism
- Reject Simple Contents
  - Context-relative property  $\Rightarrow$  Relative Properties
  - Context-relative object  $\Rightarrow$  Private Objects

Among defenders of a Moderate Relativist interpretation, I would count Burnyeat (1976b), Evans (2015), and Matthen (1985).<sup>11</sup> Lee (2005) defends Relational Properties. Fine (1994, 1996, 1998) and Waterlow (1977) defend Private Objects. I do not know of anyone who clearly defends a Radical Relativist interpretation – but with the exception of Evans (2015), commentators do not distinguish between Radical and Moderate Relativism.

### 3 Locating Protagoras on the map

Let us now see what can be said for and against these four interpretations.

#### 3.1 Supporting Protagorean epistemology

Protagoras’ semantic view is supposed to support a Protagorean epistemology: the view that perception is knowledge. Relational Properties and Private Objects are on solid ground here. They are both consistent with epistemological infallibilism, the view that every perception is true (absolutely).

Radical Relativism, by contrast, does not seem to support infallibilism. According to Radical Relativism, when A and B have conflicting appearances,

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<sup>11</sup>According to Burnyeat’s *principle of translation*, “a proposition of the form ‘ $x$  is  $F$ ’ is true (relatively) for person  $a$ , if and only if ‘ $x$  is  $F$ ’ for  $a$ ’ is true (absolutely)” Burnyeat (1976b, 193). This implies that there are simple contents with relative truth values, but also that correctness is absolute.

A must deny that the way things appear to B is accurate. Hence, A must deny that B's perception constitutes knowledge.

The only way I see to read Protagoras as a Radical Relativist is to understand "knowledge is perception" as saying, to each person, "what *you* perceive is always known by you, but you are unique in that respect; others' perceptions are frequently inaccurate." This does not strike me as a plausible interpretation. In the *peritropê* of 170–171, it is supposed to be an embarrassment to Protagoras that he is committed to saying that others are ignorant. But if he is a Radical Relativist, he should be happy to embrace this consequence.

Does Moderate Relativism do better? It allows A to say that B's appearance is accurate, even though an appearance with the same content wouldn't be accurate for A. But is that enough for A to concede that B knows? Knowledge attributions are thought to be *factive*, in the sense that

**Factivity** If S knows that p, then p.

If Plato's Protagoras accepts this constraint, then Moderate Relativism, like Radical Relativism, implies that each of us should regard our peers as not knowing many of the things that appear to them through perception. For if A were to concede that B knows that the wind is warm, by Factivity, A would have to accept that the wind is warm.

So if Protagoras is a Moderate Relativist, he is committed to rejecting Factivity. That seems to me a significant liability: Factivity is generally regarded as something like an analytic entailment. Rejecting it means accepting things like

(1) Although the wind is not warm, B knows that the wind is warm.

However, I am not aware of any texts that settle whether Protagoras is committed to Factivity. Protagoras (and Plato) certainly connect knowledge with truth, but perhaps Protagoras thought that a connection like

**Relativized Factivity** If S knows that p, then it is true for S that p would suffice.

### 3.2 Explicit relativizations of truth

Perhaps the strongest ground for adopting a Relativist interpretation is Protagoras' explicit use of "true for" (ἀληθείς + dative).

I'll tell you the kind of thing that might be said by those people who propose it as a rule that whatever a man thinks at any time is the truth for him [τῶ δοκοῦντι εἶναι ἀληθῆ]. (158e5–6)

Then my perception is true for me [Ἀληθείς ἄρα ἐμοὶ] – because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine [τῆς γὰρ ἐμῆς οὐσίας]; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for me [ἐμοὶ ὡς ἔσται]; and of things that are not, that they are not. (160c7–9)

If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him [ἐκάστῳ ἀληθές] (161d3)

let us assume with Protagoras that your judgement is true for *you* [σοὶ...ἀληθές] (170d5–6)

then this *Truth* which he wrote is true for no one [μηδενὶ δὲ εἶναι ταύτην τὴν ἀλήθειαν]? (170e9–171a1)

the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all [οὐδενὶ...ἀληθείς], not even for himself? (171c5–7)

he thinks what is true and what really is for him [ἀληθῆ τε οἶεται αὐτῷ καὶ ὄντα] (178b6–7)

If these passages do not commit Protagoras to relativism about truth, how are we to understand them?

Fine argues that the datives in these passages are just "datives of person judging" (cf. Smyth 1956, sec. 1496 on the "dative of reference," which "denotes the person in whose opinion a statement holds good."):

to say that p is true for A but false for others is only to say that p is true in A's view, but false in the view of others; that is, A thinks that p is true, whereas others think that it is false. (Fine 1998; 2003, 199)

But on this construal the apparently substantive claims Plato formulates with "true" plus the dative turn into tautologies (Burnyeat 1976b, 181). For example,

those people who propose it as a rule that whatever a man thinks at any time is the truth for him (158e)

must be understood as “those people who propose that whatever a man thinks at any time, he thinks.” That doesn’t *need* proposing – or arguing against. Again, when Socrates says

let us assume with Protagoras that your judgement is true for *you* (170d)

we would have to interpret him as asking Theodorus to assume that his judgment is...his judgment.

So I don’t think Fine’s construal of the relativized truth predicates is a plausible one. But that doesn’t mean we have to interpret Protagoras as committed to Truth Relativism. There is, I think, a more plausible interpretation.

If the Protagorean position were a form of Truth Relativism, one might have expected Plato to use the relativized truth predicates right away in formulating the view. One might also have expected some explanation: Relative truth is not an ordinary notion, but a technical one. But we get no such explanation. Plato just starts using “true” plus the dative as if it’s obvious what it means. What’s more, he doesn’t start doing it until six Stephanus pages after first introducing the measure doctrine. When he first introduces the measure doctrine, he uses the dative with adjectives like “cold”:

Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say that it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold [τῷ μὲν ὀψυχρόντι ψυχρόν, τῷ δὲ μὴ οὐ]? (152b)

Even after he has started using the “true for” language, he returns to using the dative with the perceptual adjectives:

sweetness moving about it makes it both be and appear sweet to the healthy tongue. (159d)

And it again, when it becomes sweet or bitter or anything of that kind, must become so for somebody, because it is impossible to become sweet and yet sweet for no one. (160b)

In light of this, it’s plausible to think that “true for” is being used as a device of generalization by semantic ascent (cf. Quine 1970, 11). When talking about a particular thing like the wine and a particular property like being cold, we can state the Protagorean position by saying

(2) the wine is cold for A just in case it appears cold to A.

But what if we want to generalize, and say:

- (3) for all  $F$ : the wine is  $F$  for  $A$  just in case it appears  $F$  to  $A$ ?

Since natural languages have limited resources for quantifying into predicate position, we must resort to a truth predicate to express these generalizations:

- (4) whatever appears to  $A$  is true for  $A$ .

Here we are generalizing on the  $F$  part of “ $F$  for  $A$ ,” so the “for  $A$ ” really doesn’t qualify *truth*; it is a recurring part of the contents we’re generalizing over.<sup>12</sup>

On this reading, the Protagorean is using “true for” to state Relativized Properties, not to endorse a form of Truth Relativism. On this point I agree with Lee.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3 Evidence for same subject

Private Objects denies that the two parties in cases of conflicting appearances are attributing properties to the same object. This is hard to square with

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<sup>12</sup>This kind of use of “true for” is commonplace in English. Here is an example from *The New York Times*: “The new sanctions, which prohibit him from entering the United States or doing business with American financial institutions, will have almost no impact on the ayatollah. The same appears to be true for most of the other individuals sanctioned on Monday” (Fassihi and Kirkpatrick 2019). The second sentence of this passage does not presuppose relativism about truth. It just means that the new sanctions will have almost no impact, not just on the ayatollah, but on most of the sanctioned individuals.

<sup>13</sup>Lee (2005, 43–44) writes: “it seems to me that Plato does not use ‘is true for  $A$ ’ in the *Theaetetus* to assign a property to sentences or propositions. Rather, he uses statements of the form ‘ $p$  is true for  $A$ ’ as a shorthand way of referring to how things (truly) are for a person. That is, such statements are redundant and could be eliminated by sentences of the form ‘It is the case that  $p$  for  $A$ ’. This is as we would expect, since ‘is true’ and the verb ‘to be’ are closely connected in Greek, as in English; saying that something is true is just another way of saying that it is the case. Thus when Plato represents Protagoras as saying, ‘Socrates’ belief that the wind is hot is true’, this means that Socrates’ belief is true *simpliciter* and that the property of being hot belongs to the wind relative to Socrates. One could put it by saying that ‘Socrates’ belief that the wind is hot is true for him’. But this doesn’t say anything more than ‘The wind is hot for Socrates’, and all occurrences of ‘“ $x$  is  $F$ ” is true for  $A$ ’ can be replaced by statements of the form ‘ $x$  is  $F$  for  $A$ ’. Thus, in the statement ‘ $p$  is true for  $A$ ’, it is not truth, viewed as a property of sentences, which is being relativized, but the state of affairs that the sentence  $p$  is about. The question Protagoras’ claim raises is not ‘What is it for the truth of a sentence or proposition to be relative to a person?’ but rather ‘What is it for properties and states of affairs to be relative to believers or perceivers?’”

the text. For example, at 152b, Socrates says that “when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels cold and the other not,” and then presents Protagoras as holding that “it” [presumably the wind] is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold [τῷ μὲν ῥιγῶντι ψυχρόν, τῷ δὲ μὴ οὐ].” The grammar forces the subject to be the same in this case.

Granted, this passage comes before the Secret Doctrine and its idea that between the active factor (presumably the wind) and the passive factor (the sense organ) something else is generated (coldness) which belongs to neither in its own right. This “something else” exists for a particular perceiver on a particular occasion. However, it is not the thing of which the perceptual property is predicated:

Then this pair, Socrates ill and the draught of wine, generates, presumably, different things again: a perception of bitterness in the region of the tongue, and bitterness coming to be and moving in the region of the wine. And then the wine becomes, not bitterness, but bitter; and I become, not perception, but percipient. (159e)

According to this passage, it is the *wine* – a public, not a private object – that comes to be qualified as bitter. The *bitterness* is private, but it is not the bitterness that is represented as bitter, but the wine – the “active factor.” The presence of bitterness makes it the case that the wine is bitter for the perceiver, but it is not the thing that is represented as bitter in the appearance. We must not confuse the ontological claim that the bitterness does not inhere in the wine *in itself*, with the semantic claim that the wine is not the object which is being represented as bitter.

The Private Objects interpretation is unfortunately encouraged by the Burnyeat/Levetz translation of 156e:

ὁ μὲν ὀφθαλμὸς ἄρα ὄψεως ἔμπλεως ἐγένετο καὶ ὄρα δὴ τότε καὶ ἐγένετο οὐ τι ὄψις ἀλλ’ ὀφθαλμὸς ὄρων, τὸ δὲ συγγενῆσαν τὸ χρῶμα λευκότητος περιεπλήσθη καὶ ἐγένετο οὐ λευκότης αὐτὸ ἀλλὰ λευκόν, εἴτε ξύλον εἴτε λίθος εἴτε ὄτωσὺν συνέβη χροῖμα χρωσθῆναι τῷ τοιούτῳ χρώματι. (156e)

The eye is filled with sight; at that moment it sees, and there comes into being, not indeed sight, but a seeing eye; while its partner in the process of producing colour is filled with whiteness, and there comes into being not whiteness, but white, a white stick or stone or whatever it is that happens to be coloured this sort of colour. (Burnyeat 1990)

This wording suggests that a private white stick or stone comes into being in the perceptual interaction. But the Greek is more naturally interpreted as saying that a stick or stone (a public, enduring object) comes to be white. The subject of “comes to be” [ἐγένετο] here is not the expletive “there” but “its partner” [τὸ δὲ συγγενήσαν]. McDowell’s translation gets this right:

And the thing which joined in generating the colour has been filled all round with whiteness; it has come to be, again, not whiteness, but white – a white piece of wood, or stone, or whatever it is that happens to have that sort of colour. (McDowell 1977)

The Private Objects view is also hard to reconcile with the Plato’s repeated insistence, on behalf of Protagoras, that properties like whiteness do not inhere in the objects themselves:

there is nothing, as we said at the outset [the reference is to 152d], which in itself is just one thing; all things are coming into being relatively to something (156a).

For if whiteness were being ascribed to a private object that exists only in the context of a single perceptual episode, and only for a single observer, it is not clear why we should deny that the private object is not “just one thing” (that is, white and not also non-white).<sup>14</sup>

I see only two passages that cast doubt on the idea that there are common objects which appear differently to different perceivers. The first comes early in the presentation of the Secret Doctrine:

According to this theory, black or white or any other colour will turn out to have come into being through the impact of the eye upon the appropriate motion; and what we naturally call a particular colour [καὶ ὁ δὴ ἕκαστον εἶναί φαμεν χροῶμα] is neither that which impinges nor that which is impinged upon, but something which has come into being between the two, and which is private to the individual percipient [ἐκάστῳ ἴδιον]. (153e5–154a2)

If we understand “what we naturally call a particular colour” to denote the *object* to which a color predicate is being ascribed, then this passage seems to commit Protagoras to Private Objects.

But I think it is possible to read “what we naturally call a particular colour” as referring to the *property* which is ascribed, and on that reading,

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<sup>14</sup>Matthen (1985) presses a similar line of thought.

the passage supports Relational Properties rather than Private Objects. For consider what comes immediately after the passage quoted above:

– Or would you be prepared to insist that every colour appears to a dog, or to any other animal, the same as it appears to you? (154a2–4)

The question here is clearly about what *properties* are being ascribed, not about what objects they are ascribed to. It implies that the alternative to the view that has just been described is the view that the very same property of being, say, red is attributed in dogs' appearances and in our own. That is the denial of Relational Properties, not the denial of Private Objects.

Indeed, Socrates' next question seems to presuppose that there are objects which can appear one way to one person and another way to another:

Well, and do you even feel sure that anything appears to another human being the same as it appears to you? (154a6–7)

The second passage that might seem to support Private Objects is 158e–160d, which Fine reads as arguing that “no two perceivers can perceive the same object, e.g. a stone, nor can the same perceiver do so twice” (Fine 1994; Fine 2003, 144 n. 28). We have already seen that part of this passage (159e) seems to require public objects. The only part of the passage that really speaks in favor of Fine's reading is this sentence:

Then since that which acts on me is for me, and not for anyone else, it is I who perceive it too, and nobody else [Οὐκοῦν ὅτε δὴ τὸ ἐμὲ ποιοῦν ἐμοί ἐστιν καὶ οὐκ ἄλλω, ἐγὼ καὶ αἰσθάνομαι αὐτοῦ, ἄλλος δ' οὔ]? (160c)

If we assume (as we did above) that “that which acts on me” is the object of which a perceptual property is predicated, then this passage seems to be saying that it is perceived only by one person – which would rule out the idea that it is a common object, like the wine.

But I think the passage can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with Relational Properties. When Plato says “that which acts on me is for me,” this is elliptical (as often with Greek “to be”). The point is that the object – for example, the wine – is *bitter*, or *sweet*, for me. And I am the one who perceives this relational property.

On the whole, then, I think the texts tell against Private Objects.

### 3.4 Evidence for incompatible properties

Relational Properties denies that the two parties in cases of conflicting appearances are attributing incompatible properties to the object. So if there were good evidence that Plato's Protagoras took these properties to be incompatible, this would tell against Relational Properties.

Evans (2015, 74) presents two passages in support of incompatibility. The first is

to the sick man the things he eats appear and are bitter, whereas to the healthy man they both appear and are the opposite [τὰναντία]. (166e)

The second is the *peritrope* at 170ff., where Socrates supposes that one person can "think the opposite" of another [ἀντιδοξάζειν] and regard the other's belief as false.

The second passage isn't directly relevant to the discussion of Protagoras' position about the contents of perceptual appearances, so we'll leave it for now. What about the first? In fact, I think there is a straightforward reading of the passage that is compatible with Relational Properties. What is being described as opposite here are not the properties attributed to the object – for example, *bitter-to-A* and *sweet-to-B* – but incomplete parts of these properties – *bitter-to* and *sweet-to*. As a point of comparison, note that *larger* is the opposite of *smaller*, even though nothing can be *larger* without being *larger than something*. If I say "Sam is a friend to Julie, but he's the opposite to Mary," I am attributing to Sam the properties of being a friend to Julie and of being an enemy to Mary. These are compatible properties. So I do not think the talk of opposites is a reason to reject Relational Properties.

### 3.5 Role of the Secret Doctrine

A core part of Fine's case for Private Objects is what she calls the "connection criterion" (Fine 1994; 1998, 142). Socrates evidently thinks that the Protagorean position needs to be supported by the Heracleitean Secret Doctrine, so any viable interpretation of the measure doctrine must explain why it requires an ontology of constant flux. Fine argues Truth Relativism does not satisfy this constraint:

if Protagoras denies that there are any absolute truths, either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere, then there is no need for him to appeal to an ontology

of change to resolve the problem of conflicting appearances. For denying that there are any absolute truths dissolves the problem all on its own: the seeming conflict disappears once it is explained that the seemingly conflicting utterances are merely relative truths. (Fine 1994; 2003, 142)

just as relativism about truth's resolution of the problem of conflicting appearances does not commit it to an ontology of change, so it does not commit it to an ontology of private objects. Relativizing truth solves the problem of conflicting appearances without commitment to *any* ontology. (Fine 1994; 2003, 145)

Fine thinks that Relational Properties also fails to satisfy the constraint, for it would resolve conflicting appearances by relativizing the predicate, removing the need to posit any real change in the object:

On this account, Plato would be explaining Protagoras' alleged view that, since perceptual properties are relational, objects can appear different without changing – just as six dice can appear more (in relation to four dice) and fewer (in relation to twelve dice) without really changing. (Fine 1996; 2003, 175)

Private Objects, by contrast, is only intelligible given a Heraclitean ontology, so (Fine thinks) it is the only interpretation that satisfies the connection criterion.

Against this line of thought, I want to make two points. First, the Protagorean's task goes beyond merely showing how both parties can be right in cases of conflicting appearances. Making perceptual properties (or truth) relative would be enough to do that. But Plato's Protagoras wants to vindicate a stronger claim. He is not just claiming that (apparently) conflicting appearances can be consistent; he is claiming that they are *infallible*, and that perception is knowledge. This requires a tight connection between the relational facts about, for example, coldness and bitterness, and the way things appear to perceivers – a connection that even holds in cases of illness and madness. One role of the Secret Doctrine is to explain how this tight connection is possible.

Second, not all of the Secret Doctrine's talk of constant movement and flux needs to be interpreted as a commitment to literal motion or change, as opposed to what Irwin (1977) calls *aspect-change*.<sup>15</sup> Aspect-change is the

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<sup>15</sup>Irwin's own view is that, although in the *Theaetetus* Plato "does not find it odd to talk of a-change as a kind of flux," and uses an example of a-change (the dice at 152d), he ultimately accepts constant s-change (genuine self-change), arguing that it is needed to explain the

kind of “change” that occurs when Socrates goes from being tall (in relation to one person) to being short (in relation to another), without changing in height. A Property Relationalist or Truth Relativist might well be committed to constant *aspect*-change – that is, to ubiquitous variation with perspective. Indeed, the view that nothing is “in itself just one thing” just *is* the view that everything is in constant aspect-flux: What is white (from one perspective) is also non-white (from another).

To be sure, the process of perception, as described by the Secret Doctrine, involves genuine change. But it is not clear that it involves any genuine change in the *active factor*, the thing to which perceptual properties are attributed.

### 3.6 The Peritropê

Fine (1998) argues that the *peritropê* or “self-refutation argument” at 170ff gives strong grounds for rejecting a Truth-Relativist interpretation of the Protagorean position. For Socrates seems to drop the relativizing datives in just the place where a Truth Relativist should want to insist on them to avoid refutation:

SOC. Secondly, it has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is.

THEOD. Undoubtedly.

SOC. And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion? (171a6–b2)

If Protagoras is a Truth Relativist, Fine argues, then he could parry this line of argument easily, by saying that he is only committed to the claim that what others judge is true *for them*, and hence that the negation of his measure doctrine is true *for them*. He need not accept that it is true *for himself*. We should avoid giving Socrates a cheap and easy victory, particularly right after his sermon about how unjust it would be to score an easy victory by tripping up

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cases of a-change (Irwin 1977, 5, interpreting 155b–c). But I do not think that is the most reasonable interpretation of the passage. Plato is rejecting the idea that, when Socrates goes from being smaller than Theaetetus to being bigger because Theaetetus has grown, Socrates has not *become*. But that need not be because he thinks some literal process of movement has occurred in Socrates; indeed, Plato elsewhere (e.g., *Republic V*) happily uses “becoming” to describe cases of mere a-change.

his opponent with verbal tricks, without helping his opponent give the best response possible (167e-168a). So, Fine concludes, we should not interpret Protagoras as a Truth Relativist. We should take him to be committed to the “infallibilist” view that whatever anyone judges is true *simpliciter* – a view which Fine spells out in terms of Private Objects.<sup>16</sup> For Socrates’ argument is a cogent one against that view, and really shows it to be contradictory.

I think this argument is a bit unfair. It is true that a Truth Relativist could have squirmed out of the argument by relativizing. But the situation is symmetrical. For a proponent of Private Objects could also have squirmed out of the argument by saying that the thesis which Protagoras takes to be true (the measure doctrine) is not the same as the thesis his opponents take to be false, even though it might be expressed in the same words. This would be exactly the same sort of move as saying that the wind A takes to be cold is different from the wind B takes to be warm, but applied to a case where the properties *truth* and *falsity* are being predicated of a claim.

Similarly, a proponent of Relational Properties could have squirmed out of the objection by relativizing the properties of truth and falsity as applied to the measure doctrine.<sup>17</sup>

So, no matter how we interpret Protagoras’ take on conflicting appearances, we are going to face a question about why Plato did not have his Protagoras apply the same strategy to people’s judgments about the measure doctrine itself. This question cuts against Private Objects just as much as Truth Relativism.

I’m not going to propose an answer to the question here, but I think there are some plausible lines of thought out there. For example, both Burnyeat (1976b, 190) and Lee (2005, 54–55) take Protagoras to be propounding the measure doctrine as true for everyone and discuss why he would do that. My point here is just that this question about the *peritropê* is orthogonal to the question of what Protagoras thinks about the contents of conflicting appearances in perceptual cases.

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<sup>16</sup>Of course, Relational Properties could also support an infallibilist position, but Fine rejects this for independent reasons.

<sup>17</sup>This seems to be how Lee (2005, 55) reads the dialogue, since she thinks truth relativism only comes in at this stage, when we are talking about second-order beliefs about others’ beliefs.

#### 4 Can Plato make these distinctions?

Where do we stand? As I see it, Relational Properties and Moderate Relativism are the two positions most consistent with the textual evidence, with neither ruled out decisively. The argument from Factivity would be telling against Moderate Relativism, but it is hard to tell from the text whether Protagoras accepts Factivity. So it's not entirely clear which of these positions Plato intended to attribute to Protagoras.

But how confident should we be that Plato distinguished these positions sufficiently to intend one of them as opposed to the other? In order to distinguish them, we need to help ourselves to a technical notion of *proposition* or *content* that we might balk at attributing to Plato.

Let's consider how Relational Properties differs from Moderate Relativism.

- According to Relational Properties, a perceptual judgment expresses a proposition in which a relation to an agent is attributed to an object. (The wind, for example, is said to be cold-for-A.) This proposition has a truth value absolutely (one that depends only on the state of the world).
- According to Moderate Relativism, a perceptual judgment expresses a proposition in which an unqualified sensory property is attributed to an object. (The wind, for example, is said to be cold.) This proposition has different truth values relative to different agents (for example, it is true for A but not for B).

These differences are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1: "The wind is cold"

	Relational Properties	Moderate Relativism
Content	that the wind is cold-for-A	that the wind is cold
Truth	true absolutely	true for A, not for B

If we help ourselves to an unequivocal notion of *content* or *proposition*, we can easily distinguish between these positions. But we will be hard-pressed to distinguish between them in other terms. The two views are going to agree about when an agent may correctly assert “the wind is cold.” They will also agree about when an earlier assertion of this sort must be retracted. They can even agree about when ordinary attributions of truth are warranted. If we say

(5) It appears to A that the wind is cold, and that is true for him,

the Moderate Relativist will interpret this as attributing a relative truth value to the proposition that the wind is cold. But as noted in §3.2, above, the Property Relationalist can interpret this as attributing an absolute truth value to the proposition that the wind is cold-for-A. Nor does it help, in distinguishing these positions, to talk of contradiction. As noted in §3.4, talk of “saying the opposite” can sometimes refer to just part of a proposition.

We can distinguish the positions by talking about the content expressed. But Plato doesn’t have a *technical* term for the propositional content of a judgment, of the sort whose meaning is fixed by clear stipulations or a well-defined theoretical role. The only resources he has for talking about content are the ordinary ones implicit in natural languages: phrases like “what he said,” “what you judge,” or “what a man thinks.” And, as Lewis (1980, sec. 11) pointed out, our ordinary talk of “what is said” is quite flexible. Suppose that

- On Monday, David says, “It’s a beautiful day.”
- On Tuesday, Sarah says, “Yesterday was a beautiful day.”
- On Tuesday, Manuel says, “It’s a beautiful day.”

Depending on our interests and purposes, we might say that Sarah said the same thing as David, or that Manuel said the same thing as David (though we wouldn’t say both things at the same time, because that would imply that Sarah says the same thing as Manuel). I think similar points could be made for “what is judged” or “what appears to be the case.”

Pinning down a more determinate notion of proposition, then, requires going beyond these ordinary things – and probably constructing some substantive theory in the philosophy of mind or language in which this notion

of content plays a theoretical role. Absent this kind of theory, it's not clear we can make a meaningful distinction between temporalism (the view that propositions are time-relative) and eternalism (the view that they aren't), or between Property Relationalism and Moderate Relativism.

I think that these considerations are relevant to assessing a reason Matthew Evans gives for favoring Moderate Relativism over Relational Properties:

Here [at 152a] Socrates tells us that, according to Protagoras, there is some sort of equivalence relation between the way things *appear* to the believer, or the way the believer *believes* things *to be*, and the way things *are* to the believer. So if we want to know how Mark believes the wind to be – that is, what the content of Mark's belief is – all Protagoras thinks we have to do is find out how the wind is to Mark. How, then, is the wind to Mark? According to Protagoras, it is *cold* to Mark; it is not *cold to Mark* to Mark. But then, according to Protagoras, the way Mark believes the wind to be is *cold*, not *cold to Mark*. Therefore Protagoras is not a predicate relativist. (Evans 2015, 73)

Yes, Protagoras thinks that Mark believes the wind to be cold. But given the flexibility of ordinary "believes that" and "says that" reports, this does not decide the question whether the propositional content of Mark's belief is that the wind is cold, or that the wind is cold-to-Mark, any more than my saying that David believes it's a beautiful day decides the question of temporalism versus eternalism. If we read Protagoras as a Property Relationalist, we can understand his claim that "each thing is to me as it appears to me" as meaning: Each thing is *F-to-me* iff it appears to me to be *F*.

## 5 Conclusion: Plato and Protagoras

In closing, I want to return to the question Socrates poses at the outset:

Well then, in that case are we going to say that the wind itself, by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say that it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold? (152b)

What is Plato's *own* answer to this question? Is it different from Protagoras'?

It seems to me that Plato is clearly not going to say that the wind is cold in its own right, "itself, by itself." That is the language he reserves for Forms. And in several places in the middle dialogues (especially the *Phaedo* and

*Republic*), Plato talks of the sensible world as a realm that is characterized by the compresence of opposites, in which nothing is (as he would say in the *Theaetetus*) “just one thing.” He characterizes this in terms strikingly similar to those used in the Secret Doctrine, as a domain of constant flux, where things are “becoming,” not “being.”<sup>18</sup>

So I want to suggest that Plato’s own answer to the semantic question about the content of perceptual appearances is essentially the same as Protagoras’. Thus, *to whatever extent it is right to consider Protagoras a relativist about truth, Plato is one too, at least as far as the sensible world goes.*

Plato clearly rejects the Protagorean *epistemology*, even restricted to the sensible world. Recall that the portion of the Divided Line corresponding to the sensible world has two segments. The first segment represents a mode of thought that does not draw a distinction between how things are and how they appear, while the second introduces this distinction for the sensible world. I take it that the main point of the first part of the *Theaetetus* is to reject the Protagorean epistemology, which refuses to make this distinction. But the Protagorean semantics is not part of what is rejected here; I believe that Plato shares it.<sup>19</sup>

The potted history that sees Plato as staunchly defending objectivism against Protagorean relativism is wrong, then, no matter how one defines “relativism,” and no matter how one interprets the Protagorean position. Either the Protagorean position is not relativist, or Plato’s position is relativist in the same sense.

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<sup>18</sup>These parallels have been noted by many commentators, including Cornford (1935) and McDowell (1977, 123–28).

<sup>19</sup>Here I am in broad agreement with the view found in Cornford (1935) and represented in Burnyeat (1990, 8) as “Reading A.” See also Matthen (1985, 47).

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