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Overcoming the 5th-Century BCE Epistemological Tragedy: A Productive Reading of Protagoras of Abdera

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Overcoming the 5th-Century BCE Epistemological Tragedy:

A Productive Reading of Protagoras of Abdera

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis argues that the most prominent account of Protagoras in contemporary rhetorical scholarship, Edward Schiappa's *Protagoras and Logos*, loses critical historiographical objectivity in Platonic overdetermination of surviving historical artifacts. In the first chapter, I examine scholarship from the past thirty years to set a baseline for historiographical thought and argue that John Muckelbauer's conception of productive reading offers the best solution to the intellectual and discursive impasse in which contemporary Protagorean rhetorical theory currently resides. The second chapter explains the pitfalls of Platonic overdetermination and the ways in which Plato himself was inextricably situated within an ideological blinder, from which *fair* treatment of competing philosophical ideology becomes impossible. Finally, I argue for a historical Protagoras free of Platonic overdetermination by looking to Mario Untersteiner's 1954 *Sophists*. Untersteiner looks to Plato not for an accurate historical account, but for insight into why the great philosopher found the sophists to be such great perturbations. Rediscovering Protagoras through a Sophistic paradigm, I hope to open space for new, productive discourse on the first Sophist.

Introduction

Protagoras, the putative progenitor of sophistry, appropriately stands out among the Presocratics; his intellectual acuity and antagonism towards Parmenides and the Eleatics was essential in advancing the fifth century intellectual movement in Greece that “intellectual historians often characterize [...] as turning the point in the development of human consciousness” (Jarratt, *Role*, p. 85; Untersteiner, p. 20). It also haunted Plato for decades after Protagoras’ death.¹ As his career was at its peak during mid and late-fifth century Greece, the extant fragments and doxographies concerning Protagoras are often viewed as among the earliest indicators of agnosticism, skepticism, subjectivity, and relativity in the classical world. But he is also seen as one of the first orators and educators to negotiate the changing role of orality and literacy, of humanism and theocracy, and for these things, Protagoras has earned his place amongst the sages of antiquity².

The great thinkers of Ancient Greece, Protagoras thus among them, have recently been caught in titanic historiographical contests. A spectacular analog exists in the story of Helen of Troy: it was regaled by Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Euripides, Gorgias, Isocrates, and a great deal of others; each rhapsode, historian, playwright, and orator projected his or her own unique perspective onto Helen and her story. And so too have 20th and 21st century scholars been contesting the truth of the lives of our intellectual predecessors. In the 1980s and 90s the

¹ I think of 172d in *Theaetetus*, wherein the head of Protagoras erupts from the ground (and Hades) to offer an ephemeral rejoinder to Socrates before vanishing. Of course, Plato would indeed have Protagoras in perpetual motion. I describe below how Plato conflated Protagorean and Heraclitean thought to create a spurious and easily-critiqued theory.

² A statue memorializing Protagoras was recovered in Egypt in 1950. He stands in a circle among three other philosophers and four poets; they had been bifurcated into equal semicircles. Protagoras is situated in the eastern semicircle with Plato, Thales, and Heraclitus (Kerferd, 1981, p. 44).

conversation surrounding the Sophists largely included a focus on historiography: what is the best way to look at these ancient thinkers? How do we account for a paucity of artefactual evidence, i.e., surviving primary sources and ancient secondary accounts? Recent scholarship has looked to the past to uncover the lives of the ancients, and each publication imbues a personalized account of distant history. In doing so, Edward Schiappa, proponent of historical reconstruction, argued that fidelity to history—and by extension, history’s greatest historians and dramatists—is the paramount concern. These claims operates on some presuppositions that require analysis. Schiappa spent a fair amount of time in scholarly forums defending his historiographical methodology from John Poulakos (1990), Victor Vitanza (1996), and Scott Consigny (1996). The crux of Schiappa’s argument is that the clearest picture available of the Sophists and rhetoric, both terms he repudiates in the context of 5th-century Sophistic rhetoric, comes from the wealth of artefactual evidence bequeathed by Plato.

Enduring accounts such as Schiappa’s create a markedly Platonic and suspiciously facile interpretation of Protagorean relativity, thus creating an impasse from which present historiographical methods prevent us from escaping.³ I argue that Muckelbauer’s *productive* reading is paramount to a *programmatic* treatment of Protagoras, wherein the programmatic determines a Protagorean relativity that is inherently self-refuting, stultifyingly skeptical, and philosophically inadequate, as it takes for its foundations sensory perception, opinion, and utterance-as-assertion-of-truth. This historiographical approach helps reconcile some of the insufficiencies of previous methods, which I discuss below.

³ McComiskey (2002) argues for a neosophistic historiography that eschews Plato’s misrepresentation and so finds alternative means of recovering sophistic rhetoric (p. 11-13). I argue that Plato *did* misrepresent the sophists, but in that misrepresentation are vestiges of truth that should be examined and applied to existing rhetorical artifacts in order to triangulate the most probable thought of the ancient orators.

Mario Untersteiner (1954) created one of the earliest accounts of Protagoras as a radically non-essentialist philosopher, and so has been largely discounted from current scholarship. Because his reading was far from programmatic, his work reached a level of obscurity not unlike Protagoras' in Ancient and Classical Greece. I argue that Untersteiner's erudite and unorthodox take on the first Sophist illuminates the ancient thinker's work in such a way as to achieve historical accuracy and to contribute to a rhetorical theory relevant to modern discourse.

My purpose is to suggest an alternative to Schiappa's reading of Protagoras, as he places too much credibility in Plato as a historical reconstructionist and therefore one of the most authoritative sources. For Protagoras had observed that a person's *being-in-the-world* was the point-of-departure for determining what *is* and *can be* in the external world and how people are able to generate knowledge and "truths" based on those experiences; the Sophist's disregard of essentialist philosophical tenets made his dicta incompatible with Plato's.⁴ I extend Untersteiner's analysis of Protagoras to explain Plato's portrayal and offer a more sophisticated portrayal of the Sophist. By centering humans in the ontological construction of reality, Protagoras created a rhetorico-centric epistemology that operated on Protagorean relativity, *not* a now-hackneyed Platonic relativity. By viewing Protagoras in this light, I hope to open space for continued discourse on the possibility of Protagorean thought.

⁴ See van Ophuijsen (2013) p. 1-5 on Plato's intentional manipulation of Protagoras' doctrine. See also J. Poulakos (1995) p. 75-83 on Plato's perception of the Sophists.

Chapter One: Historiographical Problems

I. Protagoras

It is no small part due to Protagoras' conceptions of rhetorical education and anthropocentrism that recent scholarship focuses on interpreting and reinterpreting his legacy. Several studies have aptly—if somewhat contradictorily, which is appropriately Protagorean⁵—demonstrated the ways in which Protagoras had given humans a privileged role in the construction and organization of the external world (Poulakos; Jarratt; Hawhee; Untersteiner; Kerferd); it is in the varying accounts of Protagoras' epistemology that continued analysis of his work and thought is necessary.

But what survives of Protagoras' work is scarce and fragmented. As discussion of his intellectual legacy is often reduced to his 'man is the measure' (MM) fragment, I orient my work on elucidating Protagoras' epistemology through this dictum. The fragment reads: “πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν” (DK 80 B1), or “literally” translated ‘of all things man is the measure, of those (things) that are that they are, and of those (things) that are not that they are not’. This fragment has received much attention in the past few decades alone. Schiappa (1991) devoted a chapter to it in his treatment of Protagoras; Guthrie (1971), Untersteiner (1954), and Kerferd (1981) addressed it in their assessments of sophistic rhetoric and philosophy; and more recently it was featured in volume 134 of *Philosophia Antiqua*, *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure* (2013). Kahn

⁵ Protagoras, as I will show, developed a critical non-essentialist onto-epistemology oriented upon the contradictions inherent in all things.

(1966) has given the Ancient Greek ‘to be’ verb, *estin*, considerable analysis in his article⁶. Fredal (2008) challenged the popular translation of ‘*chremata*’, the word often taken as ‘things’ or ‘possessions.’⁷ Finally, van Berkel’s (2013) *Made to Measure: Protagoras’ μέτρον* discusses the complications associated with translating ‘*metron*,’ offering perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of metaphor and measurement in the fragment.

Over the past thirty years, scholars of rhetoric have been studying the sophists. Protagoras and his contemporary Gorgias have been the objects of many such studies in the origins and development of rhetoric (oratory), democracy, systemized education, and consciousness. Through her treatment of the Presocratics, Jarratt (1991) seeks a relatively historically factual (though alternative) area in which to argue her feminist rhetoric; by opening space between *mythos* and *logos*, Jarratt creates the liminal space of *nomos*. Using Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, she demonstrates that modern rhetoricians are able to generate and reclaim feminist histories through sophistic rhetorical strategy. Jarratt (1991) seeks “to locate legally and historically the falsely naturalized logic of patriarchy [...] in contrast to an alternative experienced historically by women and creating necessarily different discursive products” (p. 76). She contends that we should alternatively determine a history of the sophists—one liberated from the taint of Plato—and, through negative space, align the sophist with the historical woman in their shared Otherness.

Sharing with Jarratt the desire to reclaim a valuable sophistic perspective, McComiskey (2002) bases his study on Gorgias’ extant texts. However, he deviates from Jarratt and her textually adduced ‘facts’ of history, operating instead as a proponent of the Neosophistic Rhetorical movement, wherein historical exploration becomes possible without necessarily

⁶ The Greek Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being, 1966

⁷ Fredal argued that *chremata* should be translated as “money” and that the phrase validated the sophists’ instructional fees. “Man as measure” then attributes value to intangible goods and services.

jettisoning 20th and 21st century biases. He applies Gorgian ontology and epistemology in a markedly meta-Neosophistic⁸ way: “historical reality does not exist in any *essential* form; even if historical reality exists, historians cannot know it except through the process of interpretation [...]”(p. 56). He ultimately concluded that even if this historical knowledge was apprehensible to man, it could not be adequately conveyed due to the inhering complications of interpretation. Using this as a departure for historiography, Neosophists then appropriate historical fragments for their relevancy to contemporary issues.

Whereas Jarratt’s and McComiskey’s works indicate a departure from previous intellectual and theoretical work regarding the Presocratics, the most radical perspective on historiography and the sophists is Vitanza’s. The first to conceive of the Third Sophistic movement, he has little interest in chronological history and openly shrugs the burden of arranging historical texts-as-fact into specious narratives. For Vitanza (1997), histories themselves become dubious, as their logics are subsumed under and therefore obscured by a systematically binary grand-logic. This Third Sophistic eschews grand narrative, which can be viewed through the various magnifications of *microscopic* lenses, preferring instead the *kaleidoscopic* beauty afforded by possibility; Vitanza insists that historiography is limited to the finitude in search of Truth, and in doing so the infinitude of possibility, something the sophists sought, becomes impossible (p. 239).

To date, the most extensive treatment of Protagoras of Abdera belongs to Edward Schiappa, while Scott Consigny and Bruce McComiskey have extended this project of individuating the sophist Gorgias. Various other scholars have touched on the individual sophists, but typically as a means of advancing a thesis on ancient sophistic (collective) thinking, historiography, and pedagogy (see J. Poulakos 1983, 1995; Hawhee 2004; Jarratt 1991).

⁸ Through both articulation and performance regarding Gorgias’ *On the Nonexistent* (DK 82 B3).

Schiappa's (1991) work on Protagoras is notable for several reasons, but perhaps most significantly for its contribution to contemporary thought about "the sophists" (p. 12-5, 77). He argued that "the sophists" should not be thought of as a collective and like-minded group, but rather as individual thinkers and that for the notion of sophistic rhetoric we are beholden to Plato (*Oasis*, p. 15-6). He was also important in bridging recent work in the development of orality (through Havelock and Ong) to the sophists (*Protagoras*, p. 15, 21-30). Schiappa saw the perpetuation of "the sophists" as like-minded to be a crippling burden for 20th and 21st century rhetoric and so retrieved a narrative that distinguished Protagoras from the others.

In identifying Protagoras as an individual separate from Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, and the others, Schiappa offers rhetoric studies a way to view each sophist as an individual. He created something of a template that can be used to examine "the sophists." Schiappa, in response to Poulakos' 'generalization' of the Ancient Greek *rhetorikē*, refined a methodological approach that favors hermeneutics, semiotics, and etymology. For instance, this includes examining the words present in surviving texts, i.e., *logoi* instead of 'rhetoric' in Protagoras, where *logoi* stands for "speech," "argument," "sides" (p. 90), "ways" (p. 92), "reports" (p. 100); a "*logos of logos*" is "a rational account of discourse" (p. 162); and, finally, *logos* "refers to discourse and reality" (p. 163).⁹ Essentially, for Schiappa, *logos* was not equivalent to an Aristotelian *rhetoric*, and the plenitude of contextual meanings that it had further complicated the *potential* uniformity and neatness of a word like *rhetoric*. This semiotic and etymological analysis appears notably in the works of Jarratt (1991), Hawhee (2004), and McComiskey (2002), among others. As a result, each "sophist" is viewed as a philosopher, an individual thinker, an educator, and a political figure (where applicable).

⁹ I discuss *logos* in greater depth below.

Through *Protagoras and Logos*,¹⁰ Schiappa's book first published in 1991, Schiappa surveys some texts from the Greek polymaths—Aristotle and Plato—and Parmenides. He uses Havelock and Kahn, both classicists that dealt largely with the early Greek philosophers and the Ancient Greek language, to explain the complexities of early language and philosophy.¹¹ Kahn's book *The Verb Be in Ancient Greek* is used to establish a strong link between Protagoras and Parmenides through *estin*, the 'be' verb (p. 119-25). Due to the proto-skeptical and nihilist views of both Protagoras and Gorgias¹², this linguistic link seems tenuous as grounds for this argumentation (Guthrie, *Sophist*, p. 6-10; Untersteiner, 1954, p. 41-9). He finally asserts that the Platonic treatment of Protagoras is the most accurate: "the objectivist reading makes the most sense of Plato's treatment of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle's treatment in the *Metaphysics*, and Sextus' summary in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*" (p. 130).

Schiappa's reframing is provocative for studies in rhetoric and philosophy; however, there are two apparent shortcomings that call for further research: Schiappa's Platonic overdetermination through his dogmatic application of historical reconstruction; and an abundance of evidence that suggests a broader range of possibility for the Protagorean doctrine. While Schiappa's work has been instructive and controversial among scholars of rhetoric and philosophy, I argue that he has captured but one perspective on Protagoras. This is problematic because Schiappa asserts that some interpretations of historical accounts become "facts," or "temporarily reified interpretations" (*Oasis*, p. 12). "Facts" should construct and support the

¹⁰ A text invalidated by the philosophical community for his "debatable presuppositions about fifth century rhetoric (Corradi, 2013, p. 69).

¹¹ Poulakos (1990) rightly impugns Schiappa's work based on the latter's dearth of knowledge regarding Ancient Greek language and subsequent reliance upon what I term Platonic-Paradigmatic accounts (p. 218).

¹² I mention Gorgias to show that Protagoras wasn't a lone, isolated thinker when it came to the condition of the physical world. Both thinkers stood in radical opposition to the preponderant philosophies of the 5th century BCE.

most tenable and enduring arguments. Schiappa goes so far as to consider them comparable to scientific facts (*Oasis*, p. 12-3).

II. Historiography

Schiappa is firmly committed to “historical reconstruction,” a methodology that favors using historical texts to reconstruct what transpired. Historical reconstruction is often compared to rational reconstruction, but with one key difference. Citing Stephen Makin, McComiskey (2002) captures the difference between historical and rational reconstruction:

historical reconstruction of some philosopher’s thought gives an account of what some past thinker said, or would have said, to his *contemporaries* [...] a *rational reconstruction* treats a thinker (in many cases, dead) as within our own philosophical framework. (p. 7)

Historical reconstruction, then, values accuracy and eschews creativity—it denies artistry, which is an ironic move when working in the art of rhetoric and contemporary frameworks. Schiappa thus looks to the past as a puzzle to be resolved at varying points *after* all witnesses to an event or person have perished. A great historiographical debate ensues, but the importance for Schiappa is that we have *written* testimonies and artifacts that beckon to be pieced together and interpreted; to him, these alone should suffice. There is emphasis on the positive hermeneutical aspect of historical reconstruction that encourages a look at recent secondary sources and then “fact” checking varying accounts with ancient record (*Mirage*, p. 12; *Protagoras*, p. 67-8).

While both historiographies have their boons and burdens, I suggest a *productive* engagement with the extant Protagorean fragment, which necessitates an eye to the culture that cultivated sophistic thought. In his seminal article, John Muckelbauer (2000) first saw “Foucault’s apparent dismissal of ‘resistance’ [as] a common and recurring source of

frustration,” and therefore, according to commentators today, lacking “the necessary ingredients for *progressive social thought*” (p. 71, emphasis mine). Muckelbauer was responding to the claims that, while it was apparent that Foucault’s intellectual work extended into the realm of resistance, resistance was not explicitly addressed in his work and so created an “impasse between Foucault...and much critical thought” (p. 71). Preexisting notions lead thinkers to agree that resistance is “inexorably one thing that comprises a list of determinate criteria” (p. 73) that was predetermined by a *programmatic* engagement with Foucault. This renders static and implacable any *possibility* there may be to discuss Foucauldian resistance. In order to dissipate the imposing impasse, Muckelbauer suggests a *productive* engagement with his subject matter. This reading eschews a methodology that seeks to fulfill a determinate agenda—the programmatic reading—and

reads to produce different ideas, to develop possible solutions to contemporary problems, or...to move through contemporary problems in an attempt to develop new questions...in other words, in an encounter with a particular text, productive reading demonstrates a greater concern for producing different concepts than for *reproducing a preexisting program*. (p. 74, emphasis mine)

These modes of reading necessarily disturb the diametric opposition of existing historiographies. It achieves its ends by blending them and testing them through “different methodologies, theories, interests, or ideologies” (Muckelbauer, 2000, p. 74). This productive engagement is *essential* for reconstructing texts and figures from antiquity that survive through mangled, partial documents and competing accounts.¹³

Thinkers today find themselves in a similar situation regarding the surviving intellectual legacy of Protagoras: due to the fragmented smattering of extant accounts, Plato has been the

¹³ See Clayman’s (2009) *Timon of Phlius*, which offers a compelling reconstruction of his *Silloi*.

premiere authority on Protagoras, thus leading to an impasse from which further advancement is impossible. Even though Plato portrayed Protagoras “fairly,” he was unable to assess the Sophist’s work outside of his own ideological blinders; or, if he could, he chose not to portray him that way. If we hope to recover the rhetor-philosopher and restore some semblance of good reputation (Plato, *Meno*, 91e) as the eristic thinker that assisted in the precipitation of Western philosophy and culture, we must explore Protagoras’ legacy by avoiding “the trajectories of representation, completeness, and correctness” (Muckelbauer, 2000, p. 77) that is nothing if not necessary in shifting our present paradigmatic impasse. Henceforth I shall refer to the programmatic reading as belonging to the *Platonic paradigm*, wherein Schiappa becomes an exemplar or guardian of Plato,¹⁴ and the productive reading as belonging to the *Sophistic paradigm*, both in regards to historiography and the ensuing caricature of Protagoras.

Finally, Collins (1998) sociology of philosophy suggests Protagoras’ influence to be much more far-reaching and complex than present readings account for (p. 82-97). It is therefore pernicious to studies in rhetoric, philosophy, and composition to identify Protagoras as a programmatic phenomenalist thinking through an objectivist ontology without giving the father of sophistry a chance at a more temporally and culturally appropriate phenomenism and subjectivity. As Guthrie says, “to write a history of Greek philosophy is to write a history of our own thought,” thus making this task of weighing competing perspectives more important (*Presocratics*, p. 1).

This calls for a re-examination of Schiappa’s treatment of Protagoras’ man-measure doctrine. In the next chapter I critically examine the Platonic paradigm and its merits as a fact-generating enterprise. My intents are to expose structural weaknesses and oversights that *necessitate* a broader reading of sophistic history. In the final chapter I offer several examples of

¹⁴ In book III of Plato’s *Republic*, Plato explains the roles of *guardians* in his idealized society.

how Protagoras can be understood through the Sophistic paradigm, ultimately arguing that this approach recreates the Sophist as the intellectually innovative thinker that he was. In this section I translate a lesser-known fragment to support *Protagorean phenomenalism*, while addressing the Platonic-paradigmatic concerns previously raised by Schiappa. This engagement will create an alternative, provocative, and well-researched account of Protagoras, and in doing so will challenge the credence of “historical reconstruction.”

Chapter Two: The Platonic Paradigm

I. The Platonic Paradigm

In order to understand my designation of *Platonic paradigm*, it is essential to contextualize Plato and the sophists in Classical Greece. Plato's influence on the history of rhetoric was unquestionably immense; for this reason it is necessary to understand that the history of evolving consciousness and intellect did not start with those of whom *we*, as descendants of Plato, disparagingly designate "the first sophists." It is well documented that the term "sophist" initially referred to any man deemed sage (Schiappa, 1991, p. 3-12; Guthrie, 1971, p. 27). The elder sages, for instance, are mentioned by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras* (343a), Timon's *Silloi*, and by Diogenes Laertius (DK 11A1), who cites Thales as one of the seven sages, *sophōn* (ἦν δὲ τῶν ἐπὶ σοφῶν)¹⁵. *Sophōn*, the genitive plural of *sophos*, is a word denoting wisdom and sagacity and was once synonymous with *sophistes*, the agentive Greek word for sophist (Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 28). However, our modern sense of the word, and in fact any sense from the late fifth century BCE onward, has been adulterated by Platonic pejoration.

Similarly, the term "philosopher" has a history of unstable and relative semantics. There is a scene in Plato's *Protagoras* wherein Socrates is preparing to depart from the company of the sophists, as Protagoras had displayed disdain towards the dialectical question-and-answer. Callias grasps Socrates' cloak, *tou tribōnos*,¹⁶ and beseeches him to stay, as his absence would

¹⁵ "he was (one) of the seven sophists"

¹⁶ *Tou tribōnos* was a cloak signifying the impecunious Athenians, "and was therefore capable of being construed as a mark of integrity...of philosophic asceticism...and of Spartan sympathies" (Denyer, 2008, p. 138).

certainly result in ennui for the assembled crowd. Socrates then said, “I always admire your love of knowledge (ἀεὶ μὲν ἔγωγέ σου τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἄγαμαι),” where *philosophian* means love of wisdom or knowledge (Plato, *Prot.*, 335e). During the fourth century, long after the dramatic date and Socrates’ death, Socrates’ “admirers...liked to distinguish philosophers from sophists as good from bad” (Denyer, 2008, p. 138). Callias, however, would not have recognized a difference during the dramatic date:

He would have heard Socrates’ praise for his *philosophia* as praise for his intellectual inquisitiveness about matters transcending everyday practicalities, an inquisitiveness shown by his eagerness to entertain sophists. *For in the fifth century, philosophia meant nothing more specialized than that.* (Denyer, 2008, p. 138, emphasis mine)

Accounts from Prodicus, Pericles, and Herodotus suggest that the word meant literally a love of wisdom before Plato.

The crux of Schiappa’s argument, however, is that Plato’s treatment of Protagoras is the most accurate, thereby resulting in the sensible conclusion that Protagorean thought is as Plato depicted (2001, p. 126-130), a perspective that I challenge below. As it is, the best-preserved *interpretations* of Protagoras are found in Plato’s *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*. Schiappa even claims that “[the] most thorough exposition of Protagoras’ conception of frame of reference is found in Plato’s dialogues” (p. 126). This is problematic for several reasons, chief among them that Plato made clear his low opinion of the sophists. In *Theaetetus*, for instance, Socrates responds to Theaetetus: “First-rate, Theaetetus! and it is a pity to dispute [your claim], for I want you to grow” (163C). The agreement here is that disputation stunts intellectual development.

Protagoras was a renowned master of eristics,¹⁷ and this excerpt occurs in the midst of dialectic regarding Protagoras' MM doctrine.

Guthrie (1971) likens the matter of reconstructing the ideas of sophists to those of the Presocratics: “[their] writings are for the most part no longer available, and our richest source is Plato himself, their philosophical opponent” (*Soph*, p. 9). And indeed, the sophists, adhering to and promulgating their perceived skeptical, relativist, and nihilist views, served as fodder for Plato's dialogues concerning his foundational, ideological, and transcendental order of the world.¹⁸ Plato's *Gorgias* exemplifies his treatment of sophistry, as he reduces rhetoric to a knack designed to flatter and please. This knack inculcates conviction and pleasure, but lacks the dialectical pursuit of wisdom necessary to reveal True knowledge (Plato, *Gorgias*, 462-466b). Jaeger (1944), in his illuminating exposition on Plato's *Phaedrus*, described Plato's early feelings about sophistry and rhetoric: “In *Gorgias* he hates the whole thing: it is the typical education which is based not on truth but on sheer appearance” (*III*, p. 185).

Plato's views appear again in the first line of the *Apology of Socrates*: “whatever you, Athenians, have experienced by the words of my accusers, I do not know; I almost forgot who I was, so persuasively they were speaking (πιθανῶς ἔλεγον; *pithanōs elegon*)” (translation mine, 17a1). Socrates begins his defense (ἀπολογία; *apologia*) by responding to his jurors' accusation that he, Socrates, should not be trusted because he “is a clever speaker (ὡς δεινοῦ ὄντος λέγειν; *hos deinou ontos legein*)” (17b1). Through Plato, Socrates frequently reproached the sophists and their rhetorical education, and this excerpt clearly expresses his contempt towards the sophists and his accusing jurors. Evidence suggests that this was fueled by Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates the Sophist in *Clouds* (Fowler, *Apology*, p. 66; *Clouds* 645-680). Socrates continues,

¹⁷ Protagoras authored a book on debate titled ΤΕΧΝΗ ΕΠΙΣΤΙΚΩΝ, *technē eristikōn*, which, according to Aristotle, contained arguments for making the weaker arguments appear stronger (DK 80B6).

¹⁸ Isocrates earned the praise of Socrates in *Phaedrus* 278e-279c. See Jaeger, *Vol III*, p. 182-96

“You shall hear from me only the truth. By Zeus¹⁹ Athenians, (truth) not adorned (κεκοσμημένους) with ornamented phrases and words (κεκαλλιεπημένους γε λόγους) as are [the sophists’] (17b1). Plato’s attitude towards the sophists appears clear and straightforward given modern Anglicized renderings of his dialogues, i.e., “fair,” but that lucidity dissipates under scrutiny available only through Ancient Greek.²⁰

And while Plato had no reservations about concealing his contempt for the sophistic movement, it is generally accepted that his treatment of Protagoras is fair. Fair, despite any positive connotation that may typically accompany it, is meant quite literally here. Guthrie (1971) and Kerferd (1981) both reference a passage from Plato’s *Meno* wherein Socrates says that Protagoras is still held in the highest esteem (p. 43). However, the context of that claim is as follows: “while for more than 40 years all Greece failed to notice that *Protagoras was corrupting his classes and sending his pupils away in a worse state*...and he retains undiminished to this day the high reputation he enjoyed” (Plato, *Meno*, 91e, emphasis mine). Guthrie (1971) and Untersteiner (1954) believe that while Plato’s intentions with Protagoras were indubitably to besmirch Protagoras’ reputation, he was treated ‘fairly’ (*Sophists*, p. 265; p. 11-2). It is then important to not misconstrue *fair* treatment for *philosophically* or *intellectually accurate* treatment in Plato’s dialogues. Because Plato is responsible for the preponderance of relatively complete, relatively unfragmented writings concerning Protagoras, we cannot—nor should we due to his *fair* treatment—consider a study in which the dialogues are entirely disregarded. I mention that the texts are *relatively* unfragmented because, as Denyer (2008) explains evidence

¹⁹ This exclamation is omitted in Fowler’s 1914 translation, though it bears relevance to Socrates’ repeated return to faith and religious appeals: it is an emphatic negation μὴ Δία.

²⁰ Curious here is Plato’s attention to rhetorical style just as he so denounces it. He employs *homoiooteleuton*, a device commonly employed by Gorgias, which emphasizes the same or similar endings on adjacent or parallel words: *kekalliepepenous ge logous* and *kekosemenous*. (silva rhetoricae; Miller and Platter, 2010, p. 21). Cicero later remarked “what impressed me most deeply about Plato in [*Gorgias*] was, that it was when making fun of orators he himself seemed to be the consummate orator” (de Oratore, 1.11).

for the Ancient Greek version of Plato's *Protagoras*:

The text...depends, for the most part, on printed reports of what survives of four manuscript copies of the entire *Protagoras*...the manuscripts were *copied* at various times from *the third century to the eleventh century AD*. *Occasionally the direct evidence supplied by these manuscripts is supplemented by indirect evidence*: quotations in other ancient works of passages from the *Protagoras*. In many passages, the evidence presents variant readings. In some passages, the variations are serious: that is, it makes a difference *which we choose, and the choice is not obvious*. In some passages—and this includes some passages where evidence attests to only one reading—*there is reason to think that what Plato actually wrote differs from any reading to which the evidence attests*. (p. 10, emphasis mine)

To reiterate, the surviving Platonic dialogues themselves undermine the authority invested in them by dogmatic historical reconstructionists. Due to this, it is necessary to *proceed with skepticism* (another strategy Protagoras might endorse) towards Plato's portrayal of Protagoras, especially in regards to the Sophist's man-measure aphorism.

II. Relativity and Subjectivity

What is and has historically been agreed upon is that Protagoras' Man-Measure statement refers to a radically relativistic view of the world, a view to which Schiappa loosely agrees.²¹

Sextus Empiricus wrote:

Protagoras, too, will have it that of all things the measure is man...meaning by

²¹ Schiappa, 2003, p. 26: in essence, he is historiographically forbidden from giving Protagoras a modicum of relativism as viewed outside of programmatic Platonic readings.

“measure” the standard of judgement, and using the word *chremata* rather than *pragmata* for “things.” So he says, in effect, that man is the standard of judgement of all things...and for this reason he posits only what appears to the individual, thus introducing relativity. (DK 80A14)

Taking this most literal interpretation, as many since Plato have done, Sextus and those like him during the intervening two millennia between his time and ours have taken *metron* to be the literal measure or evaluator of all *chremata* (things or experiences).

Burnyeat (1976) explored the issue of relativity, subjectivity, and self-refutation, *peritropē*, in Protagoras’ MM statement.²² For him, *relativity* holds that things are true for an individual and not for another, thus relieving the burden of contradiction that may occur between the two: because both accounts are true and in reference to unique worlds of existence, there can be no conflict in the accounts thereof (1976a, p. 46). Relativity as such leads circuitously to and from an Heraclitean ontology,²³ in which the

notion of flux [is used] to describe an ontological setting which satisfies Protagoras' contention that genuine disagreement is impossible and no one's judgment can be corrected either by another person or by the judgment-maker himself at another time. (Burnyeat, *Plato*, p. 181-2)

Burnyeat takes *subjectivity* to be “in violation of the law of contradiction,” because an individual may perceive something in objective reality to be one way while another perceives the same thing to be differently (p. 46). This subjectivity presupposes transcendental, universal truths about the world and being within it, which corresponds with Plato’s definition of Being in *The Sophist*: “We set up as a satisfactory sort of definition of being, the presence of the power to act

²² Notomi, 2013; van Berkel, 2013; Long, 2004, generally accept Burnyeat’s distinction between relativity and subjectivity, though each treats his subsequent discourse to different conclusions.

²³ The Heraclitean-Protagorean relativity begins in *Theaetetus* at 153a.

or be acted upon in even the slightest degree” (248c; 247e).

To see these views in Plato’s context, I briefly look to *Theaetetus*, where Socrates manipulates Protagoras’ MM to further his philosophical agenda, which includes certain truths and realities about the external world. Of the MM, Socrates inquires to Theaetetus: “Is it not true that sometimes, when the same wind blows, one of us feels cold, and the other does not?” (152b). He extends this ratiocination first to include individual perceptions of an objective reality, and then to paradoxically lead to the conclusion that Perception is knowledge and if each man has his own truth, no one can correct anyone else (170d). Kerferd (1981), using a modified rubric of subjectivity and objectivity, where relativity is subsumed by subjectivity, explains:

(1) There is no wind at all, but two private winds, my wind which is cold and your wind which is not. (2) There is a (public) wind, but it is neither cold nor warm. The cold wind only exists privately for me when I have the feeling of the cold. The wind exists independently of my perceiving it but its coldness does not. (3) The wind in itself is both cold and warm—warm and cold are two qualities which can co-exist in the same physical object. I perceive the one, you...the other. (p. 86)

Views (1) and (2) are subjective, while view (3), Plato’s, is objective. Kerferd suggests that Protagoras advocated the second position: there is an objective, external world, but each person in it shaped his own experiences based on causal factors. View (3), however, corresponds with the objective, external world as explained by Plato²⁴; but this cannot be the case since MM is not saying *that* things exist, but rather *what qualities* or in *what state* they are (p. 87). While offering a provocative model of interpretation, Kerferd remains bound to the Platonic paradigm. Again

²⁴ See Plato’s discussion of sensible objects, equality, and immortality of the soul in *Phaedo* 74a-75b; Untersteiner refers to the “*Apology of Protagoras*” in *Theaetetus* 167a, that “subjective states...are alone capable of being the object of representation” (p. 48).

the MM statement is taken as a summative treatise on Protagorean thought, thus ignoring other works attributed to him and the notion that this singular opening statement *could be* the premise to an argument and *not* the argument itself.

Much scholarship is founded on this determinate reading of subjectivity and relativity, to the point where this serves as a theoretical baseline from which Protagoras is measured, i.e., the criteria of a programmatic engagement. There are several components or determinate criteria to this analysis that lend themselves to a Platonic paradigm: a limited and limiting reliance upon Plato's discussion of MM in *Theaetetus*; a tacit agreement to prevailing logical forms;²⁵ and an ideological framework²⁶ that prevents (a) Plato from accurately representing Protagoras, and (b) historians from detaching themselves from the Platonic paradigm *in addition to* detaching Protagoras from Plato. The Platonic paradigm often disregards any other Protagorean dicta or books aside from *Truth*; but even if it allows for such inclusion, the additional resource is still bound to Platonic objectivity due to an inability or lack of motive to separate ideologies; but even if a Protagorean philosophy could then be apprehended, we would be unable to communicate it due to a lack of proof requisite of historiographical grand narratives.²⁷ Furthermore, while the passage in *Theaetetus* is often the basis of discussion on Protagoras, it can only provide a philosophically tendentious perspective. This is an event horizon from which, due to their very nature, escape becomes impossible for historical reconstructionists

Schiappa writes that "Plato made it clear in his text that the human-measure statement was a direct quotation from the opening of Protagoras' book" (2003, p. 126). Extending his trust

²⁵ I argue below that in order to understand Protagoras the Sophist, we must understand how logic and reason alone tragically failed him.

²⁶ Ironically, Bett (1989) considers *framework* to be an essential feature of relativity (p. 141). This is an extension of Burnyeat that allows for differences in perspective, thus making assessments relative to some *framework*. These are categorized as "cognitive" and "ontological" relativisms (p. 142).

²⁷ See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* regarding grand narratives and paralogy.

past both Plato's and history's ability to preserve the Platonic texts, Schiappa continues:

Beyond the statement Plato indicated through various qualifications made by Socrates in the dialogue that the explanation and defense of Protagoras' doctrines were not directly from Protagoras' own writings, but were what *Plato imagined Protagoras would have said*...Plato's example (152b) of differing perceptions of the wind's coldness *appears to be authentically Protagorean*. (2003, p. 127, emphasis mine)

To assent to Schiappa's conclusions, an audience must invest as much faith in historical reconstruction and the programmatic Platonic paradigm as he does. This reasoning appears also in the work of Holland (1956), Burnyeat (1976), Bett (1989), and many others. Interpretations of Plato's work yield a Protagorean theory of relativity that could not be refuted by others because each individual lives within a fluctuating world. Conversely, "subjectivism denies a presupposition of debate, the possibility of genuine disagreement. That is why it is self-refuting in a dialectical context" (Burnyeat, 1976a, p. 59-60). Protagoras' theory, in accord with Schiappa's interpretation, deals with an epistemology and ontology that *cannot* dialectically hold its own ground.

The Peritropic Statement

Burnyeat (1976) treats Protagoras' statement in terms of the later Greek skeptics and Plato in the *Theaetetus*. He follows in the Platonic paradigm, demonstrating the ways in which Protagoras' argument is inherently self-refuting. From Sextus Empiricus we he shows that:

One cannot say that every appearance is true, because of its self-refutation (*peritrope*), as Democritus and Plato argued against Protagoras; for if every appearance is true, it will be true also, being in accordance with appearance, that

not every appearance is true, and thus it will become a falsehood that every appearance is true. (1976a, p. 47)

Laid out logically, *rationaly*, we can see that (a) every appearance is true, and (b) if it appears that not every appearance is true, then (c) not every appearance is true (1976a, p. 47). From this reading, this *engagement*, Protagoras is stuck in a relativism wherein every utterance, every opinion or interpretation of the world, is considered true, *or* he's stuck with a subjectivism that refutes itself. Of course, these conclusions are reached only by assenting to the premise that Protagoras thought there was a singular Truth to behold in regard to existence within the world. To Burnyeat, the Protagorean argument is destined to fail due to formal invalidity (as cited in Long, 2003, p. 24).

And yet Protagoras was one of the most successful orators of the 5th century BCE, renowned across the Mediterranean for his mental adroitness and brilliance. How is it that such a rudimentary argument undermines his other extant fragments? And how is it that thinkers over the past 2500 years agreed that the most antagonistic sophist left a legacy that could summarized (and self-refuted) in a single statement?

III. A Protagoras Set to Fail

Alex Long (2004) responds to the way Plato and the thinkers and commentators since 4th BCE century Athens have treated Protagoras. He begins by looking past the oft-cited passage in *Theaetetus* (152) to the speeches given by Socrates between 161-171. Long argues that the speeches are replete with “material that is deeply Socratic” and “that this feature of the speeches should be interpreted as part of Plato’s philosophical case against relativism, reflecting the

relativist's own inability to defend his theory from attempts to refute it" (p. 24). Van Berkel (2013) corroborates:

It was Plato who investigated the implications of MM, by turning an aphorism on the human condition ('being caught in a human perspective'), *both* into perceptual relativism *and* into a position favoring majority opinion. Both interpretations of MM are far more likely to be part of a Socratic/Platonic program than of Protagorean thought. (p. 62)

Additionally, Bett (1989) argues that,

for the Sophists and Plato, it is clear that Plato was opposed to much of what the Sophists stood for, and that his mature philosophy includes a view of truth, including moral truth, as robustly objective, rather than relative. (p. 140)

In *Theaetetus*, one of the most authoritative and correct accounts according to Schiappa, Plato challenges the Socratic method against a Platonic rendition of relativism.

One feature of these exchanges with or regarding Protagoras is the non-Protagorean philosophical approach attributed to him. For instance, in *Theaetetus*, Protagoras, through *historical reconstruction*,²⁸ says "Excellent boys and old men, there you are together declaiming (*demegoreite*) to the people..." (162d). In Fowler's translation, *demegoreite* is translated as *declaiming*, but can and perhaps should be translated to the "demagoguery" that Socrates and the others are using. Long notes a "fascinating parallel with this passage" in Plato's *Protagoras* (p. 26). Socrates and Protagoras are intercouring when Socrates threatens to leave due to Protagoras' longwinded speeches: "For I thought that it was one thing to meet and hold discussions with each other, another to practice demagoguery" (*Prot.*, 336b, as cited in Long, p. 26). Long concludes that:

²⁸ Socrates speaks on behalf of Protagoras, attempting to show how Protagoras would have responded to his peers.

In the *Theaetetus* Socrates makes Protagoras use the very objection Socrates employed in the earlier dialogue against *him*. What is more, the *Theaetetus* itself provides further Socratic parallels for this complaint of ‘Protagoras,’ for earlier in this dialogue Socrates describes Protagoras as ‘*demoumenos*’ (161e) and just before delivering his first speech in defense of Protagoras Socrates calls the way he himself has argued ‘*demegoria*’ (162d). (p. 26-7)

The charges of demagoguery manifest again and flourish in their contradiction concerning the ‘authentic’ character of Protagoras.

Referring back to Socrates’ approximation of how Protagoras would respond to his peers, Protagoras rejects ‘*pithanologia*,’ translated by Fowler as ‘plausibility,’ but which carries stronger connotations of ‘persuasion’ or ‘persuasive speech’ (162e). Long aptly notes that “the rejection of ‘*pithanologia*’ is most out of place in the mouth of an *intellectual who took pride in his mastery of persuasion*” (p. 27, emphasis mine). Compounding his case about the Socratic-Protagorean speech, Long draws attention to the use of ‘*anangke*,’ a word for ‘necessity’ that Plato uses repeatedly in the discourse between Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus. It is a curious thing indeed that the historical reconstruction of Protagoras is so replete with Platonic philosophical terms and ideas.

But, as mentioned above, perhaps Plato was indeed testing Socrates’ intellectual mettle against the sophistic agenda.²⁹ The 5th-century BCE playwright Aristophanes satirized Socrates by naming his protagonist Socrates but attributing to him many of the traits that Protagoras was known for. At 645, Socrates begins teaching Strepsiades about the correctness of names, or *orthotēs onamatōn*:

²⁹ Bett (1989), Burnyeat (1976a), and Long (2003) agree that relativism was a binding characteristic of the sophist movement. Jaeger (1945) used the burgeoning individuality of 5th-century Athens as a reflection of relativism; the sophists were paragons of that movement.

Socr: But you must learn some other matters first: As, what are males among the quadrupeds?

Streps: I should be mad indeed to not know that! The ram, the bull, the goat, the dog, the fowl.

Socr: Ah! There you are! There's a mistake at once! You called the male and female fowl the same.

Streps: How! Tell me how!

Socr: Why, fowl and fowl of course!...[instead] call this a fowl and this a fowless.

(645-655, translated by Rogers)

The directness of this pedagogy makes assumptions about Socrates' understanding of knowledge and teaching that the historical Socrates did not actually have. These were more likely features of the sophists, with a focus on Protagoras. Aristotle attributes this grammatical correctness to Protagoras in *Rhetoric*, *On Sophistical Refutations*, and *Poetics*, while Ammonius makes some mention of this as well (DK 80A27; DK 80A28; DK 80A29; DK 80A30).

Finally, Aristophanes concludes his *Clouds* with an exchange between *Kreitton* and *Hetton*, the stronger and weaker arguments respectively. They supposedly represented old and new schools in Athens during the 5th century (Hawhee, 2004, p. 39). The exchange concludes with no clear winner. Some commentators believe that *Hetton*, the weaker argument, prevailed. If that is the case, we see a clear parallel to Protagoras' stronger and weaker fragment:

καὶ τὸ τὸν ἥττω δὲ λόγον κρείττω ποιεῖν τοῦτ' ἔστιν

Making the weaker argument the stronger (DK 80A21; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II 24, 1402a23)

In *Protagoras*, Plato makes a reference to *Clouds* when introducing and discussing Protagoras' method of teaching and declaiming: "And, on seeing us, 'Hello, he said, sophists there! Master

(αὐτῷ, ‘autō’) is engaged,” (314d) and again: “[but] whenever the master (αὐτὸς, ‘autōs’) turned about and those with him...” (315b). Denyer (2008) commented on these excerpts, stating that “autōs here almost means ‘the Boss’ on the use of this word for the master of a house, [cf.] Ar. *Clouds* 219...where it is used of Socrates, by one of the pupils in his school” (p. 82).

Given these overt allusions to Protagoras, it is likely the case that Plato, even well into the 4th century BCE, had to redeem his mentor from the grips of sophistic determination. Plato further expounds his opinion of the sophists in *The Sophist* and *Gorgias*. The *Gorgias* begins with Socrates, Callicles, and Chaerephon conversing. Another prominent historical text featuring Chaerephon is Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (503). In the dialogue, rhetoric is depicted as a thing of power-without-virtue, something acquired by Plato’s philosophy, and finally as a mere knack and imparter of flattery.

Considering Plato’s history with the sophists, it seems unlikely that he would treat them with the utmost respect and accuracy. Lamb (1925) notes in his translation of *Gorgias* that “Socrates hints (458e) that he may not be treating Gorgias fairly” (p. 251). Even less ostensibly, Plato makes several underhanded comments regarding Protagoras. These are apparent in Greek iterations of his dialogues, and would have been even more evident to the 4th century BCE audience to which he wrote. In *Protagoras*, Plato described Protagoras as “enchanted [his audience] with his voice like Orpheus, while they follow where the voice sounds, enchanted” (315b). Denyer (2008) again contextualizes this for the modern reader: “This is somewhat derogatory of Protagoras’ followers: the song of Orpheus was renowned for being able to charm not only rational beings, but also birds, fish, wild beasts, trees, and rocks” (p. 81). Considering Plato’s stance on students of philosophy and rhetoric, it is safe to extend the criticism to Protagoras and his education as well. In fact, Plato resurrects this criticism again in *Theaetetus*:

I do not see why he does not say in the beginning of his *Truth* that a pig or a dog-faced baboon or some still stranger creature of those that have sensations is the measure of all things. Then he might have begun to speak to us very imposingly and condescendingly, showing that while we were honoring him like a god for his wisdom, he was after all no better in intellect than any other man, or, for that matter, than a tadpole. (161c)

The reference to the beasts again demonstrates the way Plato perceives Protagoras' view of the world and the audience whom he enchants. A final reference to Orpheus is found in the opening statement of Protagoras' Myth in *Protagoras*:

ἦν γὰρ ποτε χρόνος ὅτε (320d)

“once upon a time” (Denyer, p. 100)

Denyer (2008) describes that statements like that introduce stories, particularly about the inception and development of human society, about times past that have are now over (p. 100). A popular reference to Orpheus is made by Sextus Empiricus beginning: ἦν χρόνος ἡνίκα (p. 100).

If Plato is so threatened by Protagoras and the sophists, it is immensely unlikely that the sophist would receive a fair intellectual treatment by the philosopher. If his MM was so threatening, it couldn't have been as perspicuous or peritropic as depicted in *Theaetetus*, nor could it have been adequately represented with so many Platonic and Socratic undertones. In John Poulakos' (1995) *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*, Plato's perception of the sophists is treated in detail. Poulakos, citing Havelock, explains the philosophical bias:

No philosopher in his sense will take the trouble to report with historical fidelity views which intellectually he cannot accept. What he [Plato] is committed to is a critical examination of them [the sophists], *which passes judgment by the light of*

his own system and the judgment becomes part of the report. (p. 78, emphasis mine)

This extends beyond Plato to any philosopher dealing philosophically with a rival. In dealing with the Protagorean problem *and* the problem of Protagoras, he managed—whether intentionally or unintentionally I cannot say—to conflate Protagorean relativity with Heraclitean flux theory. Notomi (2013) finds this amalgamation of theory at *Theaetetus* 153a: “For the doctrine is amply proved by this, namely, that motion is the cause of that which passes for existence, that is, of becoming, whereas rest is the cause of non-existence and destruction.” Then, once Socrates has lured Theaetetus into assenting to the theory of flux, he continues:

Then, my friend, you must apply the doctrine in this way: first as concerns vision, the color that you call white is not to be taken as something separate outside of your eyes, nor yet as something inside of them; and you must not assign any place to it, for then it would be at once in a definite position and stationary and would have no part in the process of becoming. (153d-e)

And so Protagoras’ ‘relativism’ has been successfully constructed from a fluctuating foundation. Notomi (2013) notes that this relationship between percipient and object

is in danger of reducing [Protagorean relativism] to a specific kind of physical perception theory. Plato seems to pave the way for this explanation when he connects the Protagorean relativism with the Heraclitean flux theory. This commits Protagoras to a certain ontology, since the interaction between the percipient and the object is *objectively determinable*, and thus *expresses a certain objective truth about the external reality.* (p. 33, emphasis mine)

The Platonic paradigm, the programmatic reading of Protagoras' relativity through Plato, leads inevitably to some relatively simple ontology, one that most commonly dresses itself in an objectively determinable reality.

Furthermore, during the late and mid 4th century BCE, Plato established his school of philosophy after an extended sabbatical following the death of Socrates in 399 BCE (Lamb, 1925, p. 249). To promote his school, he produced dialogues spanning various vogue topics—*Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* that dealt with rhetoric, *Sophist* and *Theaetetus* that dealt with arguments *ad absurdum* regarding the sophists, and many others—and the issue of Socrates, philosophy, and the sophists was one that could not be avoided. His was a critique of the deceptive, manipulative 'rhetorical art.' Poulakos (1995) expounds on Plato's method of undermining the sophists:

...it soon becomes apparent that part of the game includes accepting his procedural rules, answering his questions, observing the laconic norm of brevity (*Protagoras*, 334d, 343b; *Gorgias*, 449b-c), and being led to his conclusions...By the end of their discussions, the sophists are either found wanting in dialectical skill or caught committing the cardinal sin against philosophy—contradiction. (p. 77)

Returning to Long, we see a Platonic overdetermination imposed upon Protagoras. This Platonic overdetermination antedates Schiappa by 2400 years.

Having seen some of the subtle ways in which Plato censured Protagoras and the ways in which he dealt with Aristophanes' satire of Socrates-qua-Protagoras, it becomes harder to see his facile, peritropic account of Protagoras' MM as the most authentic, contrary to Schiappa's claims. Plato's story-telling has given history a Sophist that cannot defend himself. The Platonic

paradigm is thus so deeply entrenched in our understanding of the sophists that one thing becomes clear: Plato successfully created an effigy, a Protagoras set to fail.

In order to engage Protagoras as the anti-philosopher that he was reputed to be, work must be done outside of the positive accounts of Plato; provocative modes of inquiry begin in the negative. A productive reading through the Sophistic paradigm is necessary to find critical logics and counter-narratives³⁰ that raise new questions and allow for new modes of engagement and thinking.

³⁰ Lyotard's *parology*.

Chapter Three: The Sophistic Paradigm

I. New Modes of Engagement

Tazuko van Berkel (2013) postulated that Protagoras' MM was "intended as an underdetermined statement, at least in the eyes of Plato" (p. 61). This could explain why Socrates and Theaetetus so fastidiously examined the words used by Protagoras; as he was known for his *orthotēs onamatōn*, or correct naming, this was rather unnerving to the philosopher. This becomes *another* critique of the sophist, this time for not adhering to his own critical stance on *orthoepoeia* (van Berkle, 2013, p. 61). The importance here is the possibility that "Protagorean relativism as we know it may be an invention of Plato's" (p. 62). This opens a critical line of inquiry into our engagement with Protagoras, and one with such possibility "that it threatens to erase the self-evident truths inscribed in the canonized textual materials we attribute to the Sophists" (Poulakos, 1990, p. 219).

While I am less interested in the previous possibility for MM, I am interested in pursuing another line of inquiry: What if MM is not a logical form waiting to be scrutinized and parsed beyond anything Protagoras might have recognized? What if, instead of serving as a summative and definitive statement on relativism,³¹ this served as a point of departure from which Protagoras discoursed? What if, then, his MM was a metaphor, a vehicle leading to theretofore-unprecedented intellectual abstraction? Given the limited outcomes of a binding, objective

³¹ See Burnyeat 1976a, b; Bett 1989

engagement with Plato and the sophists, this becomes necessary to further the *possibility*³² of rhetoric's roots.

Van Berkel (2013) argues that the MM statement is indeed a metaphor, and that metaphors constitute realities. They assist people in “comprehending abstract concepts and performing abstract reasoning” (p. 37). New metaphors, she says,

shape abstract concepts and make us capable of dealing with them, incorporating them in our world view and draw inferences from them. *A good new metaphor changes the way we see the world; it defines reality by highlighting some features of reality* at the expense of others and, by this token, forcing us to accept its entailments as true. (p. 37, emphasis mine)

If, as I've shown, Plato's account of Protagoras begins from ideology *outside* of the sophist's metaphor, anyone from the Platonic paradigm will be inherently, conditionally, *categorically* unable to accept the new metaphor. But perhaps it did change the way Plato saw the world. It must have. For what other reason could it have such a disquieting effect on the philosopher? Hawhee (2004) too realizes the power of metaphor in Presocratic thought, and she pointedly addresses the difference in Presocratic and contemporary metaphor: “It [was] not a vehicle for explanation. It [*was*] the explanation” (Padel, as cited in Hawhee, p. 35). She immediately advances the Presocratic metaphor to Protagoras' MM statement.

A conventional method of dealing with a metaphor is to treat it like a simile: substitute one word or phrase with an equivalent so that the resultant adequation translates comfortably into a familiar concept. When it comes to parsing fragmented ancient philosophy, it is not uncommon to exchange Greek word A for English word A, thus treating the metaphor as a cryptogram with

³² Poulakos (1983) suggests that a primary goal of sophistic rhetoric was “to move from the sphere of actuality to that of possibility” (p. 43).

the most accessible code (van Berkel, 2013, p. 38; Holland, 1956, p. 215). But this substitution fails to work, particularly in the case of Protagoras. For instance, Schiappa commits a grievous mistake by reducing the MM to “binding” “things” and a human’s ability to “measure” them in varying “ways” so that they correspond with Plato’s tale of Protagoras (Schiappa, 2003, p. 130), for this treatment is inexorably situated within the Platonic paradigm. Van Berkel (2013) recognized how this method of substitution “impoverished our understanding of both Protagoras’ measure *and* its earliest extant interpretation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*” (p. 38).

Van Berkel’s project becomes one of examining how complex each individual signifier becomes; when we deal with ancient languages, the distance between signified and signifier grows immensely, sometimes past the point of recovering the original meaning. Once it becomes irretrievable, new, more productive modes of engagement are required to recreate it. There are two interesting points here: If we follow Schiappa, we assent to subscribing to the most popular interpretations; but if we follow Gorgias, we realize that what we know is trivial, and even if we did stumble upon the truth of an ancient signifier, we would not know it, but even if we *could* somehow know, it would be impossible to communicate to others. Our options are to engage this puzzle through either a Platonic or Sophistic paradigm.

Setting out to explore the MM statement from without Plato’s account, van Berkel looks at one of the lesser-examined words. Compared to the other terms in the MM statement, she argues aptly that *metron* has a history as being the least unstable of the terms, whereas *einai*, *hōs*, *chremata*, and *anthrōpos* have each received a great deal of attention (p. 38-9). “The problem with *MM*,” she says, “is therefore not so much the literal *meaning* of the *word* [metron], but the fact that its literal meaning does not bring us closer to understanding the statement” (p. 50).

Van Berkel draws attention to how Plato replaces *metron* with *krinein* to distinguish modes of philosophical observation, where *krinein* denotes sifting or discriminating. In *Theaetetus*, she shows that *krinein* is “distinguishing sound philosophical offspring from wind-eggs (150 a8-c3)...true appearances from non-existing ones, true beliefs, opinions, and propositions from false ones (170 d4-9)” (p. 45). Similarly, she attributes the neologism *kritēriōn* to Plato in this dialogue. She states that

the substantivized neuter form *-tērion* appears to be most productive in the formation of neologisms in classical Attic Greek. Compare Aristophanes’ *phrontistērion* (thinking-place)...*dixastērion* (court[room]) and *bouleutērion* (council[building]). (p. 43)

Given the root and suffix, it is probable that the *kriterion* is a “place or institution where *krinein* takes place,” somewhere internal to every person “where appearances are sifting into two classes and where decisions are made” (p. 44). A person’s ability to *measure* is really an inherent capacity to *sieve* or *discriminate* specious, spurious truths from objective, philosophical truths.

But, van Berkel continues, what if there is an array of other historical proof that leads to the probable conclusion that Protagoras, even as viewed through Plato, rejected the notion of universal truth? In Herodotus and the Hippocratic treatises, she finds “meaningful epistemological background to MM...in privileging bodily sensation over the accuracy of measurement, and in denying the attainability of accuracy in cases of individual variation” (p. 53-4). That is, the reification of measurement-as-law “must have prompted the idea that measures and weights are ... human inventions” (p. 56). She concludes that Man is a reference point for the measurement of things based on metrics culturally devised.

Untersteiner (1954) concludes with a yet different take: “the word *metron* has brought us to the nucleus of the proposition and therefore of Protagoras’ epistemology” (p. 83). Where the majority of interpretations post-Plato take *metron* to be *kriterion*, van Berkel and Untersteiner opt for the path less traveled with the intents of uncovering some new possibility for Protagoras and his epistemological views.

II. Epistemological Tragedy

Before I can make a case for what many others have reduced to a “phenomenological” approach to Protagoras,³³ which is more often than not meant pejoratively, it is imperative to review the historical texts attributed to the rhetor-philosopher, in addition to the factors that could have brought about such titles. Diogenes Laertius attributes many titles to Protagoras, the most salient of which is “Contradictory Arguments in Two Books” (DK 80A1). Untersteiner realized that Diogenes did not understand many of the titles (p. 10), and Jaeger (1944) considers some of Diogenes’ interpretations as “improvisations worthy of that great ignoramus Diogenes Laertius” (p. 330n2). In other words, our account of Protagoras’ works here are likely unreliable. Untersteiner accordingly categorizes the books into *Antilogiae* and *Aletheia*, Contradictory Arguments and Truth respectively.

Contained within *Antilogiae* were likely several subsections, most prominent of which are: *On the Gods*; *On Being*; *On the Laws and all problems which concerning the world of the polis*; *On the Arts* (Untersteiner, p. 10). One questionable subtitle demands examination: *Art of Eristics*. This subtitle was almost certainly not of Protagoras’ designation, as no one referred to

³³ Van Berkel (2013) seems unconvinced by phenomenology, while Holland (1956) rejects and criticizes Untersteiner’s phenomenological enterprise. Untersteiner (1954), however, deviates severely from preexisting—*programmatically*—forms of phenomenology to propound a phenomenism appropriate to the Sophist.

himself or herself as the pejorative *eristic*. Furthermore, it is likely that this moniker was “invented by Plato” (p. 11). *Truth* should be thought of as a subsequent text, one that follows in the logical movements Protagoras made to systematize his epistemology.

I reference Untersteiner from this point forward (a) as an early example of work within the Sophistic paradigm, and (b) as a point of departure for further inquiry into the thought of the now enigmatic sophist. I extend many of his arguments by introducing new proofs from ancient sources and contemporary works. Untersteiner explains the “sequence of two movements, the first of which launches an attack by means of his critical intellect, the second of which is its constructive overthrow” (p. 19). While provocative in its English iteration, he uses cleverly *sophisticated* linguistic references to explain Protagoras *in the Sophist’s own terms*.

I must pause briefly to contextualize the lexis of the Presocratic philosophers. In his chapter on the “*Human-Measure Fragment*,” Schiappa (2003) levels the charge that both Parmenides³⁴ and Protagoras were bereft of any meaningful post-mythical-poetic vocabulary. Due to this absence of “vocabulary and syntax...geared for such rationalization,” Parmenides discoursed in language that was available, frequently using constructions of ‘be’ verbs as *estin* and *ouk estin* (p. 124-5). The latter construction, meaning ‘it is not,’ or ‘does not exist,’ was used as an example of what is not possible by Parmenides,³⁵ and therefore Protagoras’ use of *ouk estin* must be a direct response to Parmenides (p. 121, 124-5).

Hawhee (2004), in her germinal study of *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*, brilliantly articulated the changes in Presocratic lexis. She captured the essence of the “discursive cross-pollination” that transpired between the arts of oratory and sports (p. 37).

Reasons for this metaphorical appropriation of sportive terms include the close, even

³⁴ Schiappa (2003) perceives Protagoras’ work to be inextricably related and responsive to Parmenides’.

³⁵ That is, non-existence was a complete impossibility to Parmenides (Guthrie, *Parm.*, p. 33)

inextricable, relationship between physical and intellectual dexterity. Hawhee attributes the borrowing of wrestling terms for rhetorical instruction, of which Protagoras was a pivotal figure, to the emphasis wrestling places on balance between skill and strength. For instance, Protagoras' treatise in which the MM aphorism was published is titled *Aletheia e Kataballontes* (*Truth or Refutations*), "where *kataballontes* indicates the act of throwing over, as in wrestling. Protagoras' penchant for 'mixing in'³⁶...likely emerged from his interest in athletics" (Hawhee, 2004, p. 35). It was linguistic sparring, then, that Protagoras was so intrigued by, as his doctrine on *Contradictory Arguments* 'Antilogiae' (DK 80B5) shows. By the era of Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Aeschines (mid-fourth century BCE), "the language of rhetoric...had a well-established history of borrowing from the language of wrestling, boxing, and chariot racing—and from athletics and athletic training in general" (Hawhee, 2004, p. 35).

What is important is that the early philosophers grasped for lexis from previously established lexicons. In the case of Protagoras and athletic language, his speech and ideas transcended sportive discourse and created new metaphorical vehicles through which ideas were shaped.³⁷ The issues of language and Plato's framework—and Schiappa's reliance on them—therefore become problematic in the ways in which they limit the *possibilities* of Protagorean expression, as I will demonstrate below through a new Sophistic paradigmatic engagement with Protagoras' lexical correctness.

Returning to Untersteiner's adumbration of Protagoras' epistemology³⁸, we see that "overthrow" is a play on *kataballontes*, meaning *overthrow*, the alternative title to his book *Truth*. He refers also to the "movements," likely those that students of rhetoric in the 5th-century

³⁶ An allusion to another of Protagoras' lexical borrowings, *epimeiktos* (Hawhee, 2004, p. 28)

³⁷ For an excellent example of this, refer to Hawhee (p. 28-35) or van Berkel (p. 37-68).

³⁸ "a sequence of two movements, the first of which launches an attack by means of his critical intellect, the second of which is its constructive overthrow" (p. 19).

BCE were accustomed to, and “launches an attack” which grounds his subtle metaphor in *gymnasmata*.

The *Antilogiae* begins Protagoras’ criticism of knowledge as it “enters upon the negative phase which leads to the dissolution of experiences in their immediacy, while *Truth* sets out towards the mastery, logical and practical, over things” (Untersteiner, p. 19). The widely discussed fragment καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις is preserved by Diogenes Laertius (DK 80A1). Schiappa (2003), following the well-trodden path of the Platonic paradigm—the epitome of *programmatically* reading here—translates the passage as “Protagoras was the first to say that there are two arguments (logoi) in opposition about every ‘thing’” (p. 89). Schiappa continues, “Diogenes Laertius introduced the fragment with the words ‘and he was the first to say,’ implying that what followed was well-known” (p. 89). Keeping in mind the “great ignoramus” that was Diogenes Laertius, it seems prudent to consider alternative and *intellectually deeper* possibilities for Protagoras.

The *dissoi logoi* that has been recognized as an anonymous rhetorical treatise—but that is nonetheless often traced back to Protagoras—has sufficiently distracted contemporary observers from the contradictions that Greek intellectuals found themselves dealing with *before* Protagoras. Guthrie (1962) refers to the Milesians, namely Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes as examples of the first philosophers that dealt with understanding and explaining away the inconsistencies of the physical world, and that challenged the contradictions between the realms of man and the gods (p. 29-30). For instance, Ionic scientists of the period began to observe the external world, ordering the chaos of life by perceived trends in weather and nature instead of attributing that chaos to the vagaries of divinity. Similarly, the Ionian poet Mimnermus challenged the veracity of myth, and, instead choosing to live an introspective life, “extolled the

enjoyment of momentary pleasures and...mourned the swift passing of youth and the misery and feebleness of old age” (*Presocratics*, p. 30). When Protagoras gives his declamation of rhetorical education in Plato’s *Protagoras*, we see what I suggest is a reference to the ancient Ionian poets and the ways in which youth were trained to perceive the world: “the children [...] are furnished with works of good poets [...] and are made to memorize them off by heart [...] they meet with many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past” (325d-326e). *Dissoi logoi* were a natural evolution in Greek thought (Untersteiner, p. 19-20).

It should be noted that the word *logos*, singular of *logoi*, carried a wide range of meaning. Kerferd (1981) explains:

In the case of the word *logos* there are three main areas of its application or use, all related by an underlying conceptual unity. These are first of all the area of language and linguistic formulation, hence speech, discourse, description, statement, arguments (as expressed in words) and so on; secondly the area of thought and mental processes, hence thinking, reasoning, accounting for, explanation (cf. *orthos logos*), etc.; thirdly, the area of the world, that *about* which we are able to speak and to think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws, and so on, provided that in each case they are regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process. (p. 83)

There is a basic structure in Kerferd’s list that is worth noting: the first meaning, *logos* as communicative, correlates to a rudimentary use and is often compared to *mythos*. Protagoras inquires to Socrates if he would like to hear his “demonstration in the form of a fable (*muthon*), or of a regular exposition (*logō*)?” (Plato, *Prot.*, 320C). The former correlates to a false, possibly dramatized account, while the latter corresponds to a more genuine account. These distinctions

are lost on the 6th century philosophers, and so are mainly “a development of the 5th century” (Denyer, p. 100). Kerferd’s second usage, which speaks of a developing conception of thought in the 5th century BCE, depicts a specialized, internal focus that represents a more sophisticated line of reasoning. If followed through, the level conceptualization grows as the *logos* reflects abstracted introspection and its projection on the world-processes of reality. In order to view Protagoras through the Sophistic paradigm, a similar comparison must be done both to his critical intellect and the implications that has for *logos*.

But we can find other instances of contradiction in the linguistic history that Protagoras was actively part of. In other words, other words lead conclusively to the tragedy of the intellect. For instance, the Ancient Greek word and concepts surrounding *dike*, or ‘justice,’ demonstrates a contradictory history and a burgeoning awareness of the inhering contradictions. Untersteiner notes that

Greek thought becomes increasingly conscious that *dike* is not a word with a single meaning. The remote origin of this concept can be seen not only in the vicissitudes of the heroic saga but in the double nature of the divine, which is a single power active sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, and which in the particular case of Dike reveals itself when an injury transforms her (Hes., *Opp.*, 222) into the malevolent Erinyes. (p. 21)

The religious and mythical institutions had already been beset by a contradictory *dike*. At a humanistic level, the judges, *kritēs*, began searching for *dike* regarding instances wherein two or more parties had competing ‘truths’ (p. 22). In the sphere of the divine, Homer had long before addressed double standards. “Homer with his polytheism recognizes the conflicts of reality, but brings them to a peaceful settlement in Zeus” (p. 22).

Another excellent example of Pre-Protagorean thought comes from the poetry of Archilocus. Jaeger (1945) describes him as an ancient poet that addressed the shifting dynamics between religion, divinity, and life in the *poleis*. Fama, goddess of Public Belief, was one of the “most powerful judges of human conduct,” while Tyche, Fortune, and Moira, Fate, “give men all that he has” (*I*, p. 120-5). Untersteiner speaks of how Archilocus wrote of his soul being dragged by storms of passions, leading to the conclusion that he should

realize what rhythm holds Man enchained (fr. 67 Diehl): rhythm then is that which imposes bonds on movement and confines the flux of things...thought...strives to invade the soul and to control within fixed frontiers the chaos of warring passions. (p. 83)

The Man³⁹ (both individual and universal) that Archilocus wrote about was *mastered* by the experiences of an external world.

In the poetry of Aeschylus, Untersteiner argues, is where “the spasmodic harshness in which this double nature of reality finds expression” (p. 22). In *Choephoroi*, for instance, the protagonist Orestes must by order of the divine slay his mother, which will lead to a transgression against other divine edicts. After much contemplation, Orestes exclaims “Ares will come into conflict with Ares, Dike with Dike” (*Cho.*, 461 as cited in Untersteiner, p. 23). The Aeschylean tragedy deals with suffering and experience, both of which are connoted through *paschō* (I suffer; experience). “Thus for Protagoras *metron* is that mastery of experience which can give the possibility of knowledge, in such a way as to bring about a reversal of the resigned renunciation of Archilocus” (Untersteiner, p. 84). Untersteiner then judiciously suggests that “Protagoras must be isolated from the consciousness of the two *logoi* already existing in Greek

³⁹ Protagoras likely used *anthrōpos* to play on the inhering contradictions between the individual and universal man that extend to the subjective and universal knowledges. (Untersteiner, p. 86-8). The plurality of knowledges makes his philosophy incompatible with Plato’s.

intellectual processes, in order to exhibit the deep insight which was capable of overcoming a paralyzing immobility” (p. 20). That immobility was resultant of and in the contradictions inhering in religion, the divine, culture, law, and everyday life.

One final instance in 5th-century BCE Athens that receives a great deal of attention is the day-long meeting between Pericles and Protagoras regarding the death of Epitimus of Pharsalus, who was slain by javelin. The purpose of their examination was to determine whether the cause of death was the javelin, the thrower, or the attendant supervisor. Both Schiappa (2003) and Untersteiner (1954) agree that Rensi offers the most reasonable outcome: “In fact the answer to the problem could be any one of the three⁴⁰ and be always right according to the point of view—and so according to the person to whom the problem has been submitted” (as cited in Schiappa, p. 126). Accordingly, no Absolute Truth arises from their deliberations, only a subjective truth: it is “objectively correct” according to each frame of reference” (Schiappa, p. 126).

Untersteiner, however, points to an oversight in Rensi’s analysis: the guilt of the javelin has been omitted. He suggests that the weapon could acquire agency and responsibility similar to a primitive Greek tradition wherein an ox is ceremoniously sacrificed with an axe. In the case of this Athenian Bouphonia, the axe bears responsibility and *it*, the axe, is taken to trial (CofC, p. 17). In this light, the object is given agentive, active force and so should be treated accordingly for responsibility. It has also been suggested that a similar belief could have been transmitted from the Persian Magi that educated Protagoras at a young age (Untersteiner, p. 31-2). Rensi and Untersteiner determine the cause to be arbitrary and capricious; it is impossible to determine. Thus Probability and Opinion unseat the *possibility* for an Absolute Truth, and so this problem abolishes “the concept of causality (Untersteiner, p. 30-2). This *could* lead to the judgment of

⁴⁰ “To a doctor the best answer would be the javelin; to a judge in a law court...the person that threw it; and to an administrator...the supervisor” (Schiappa, 2003, p. 126).

values as portrayed by Plato in *Theaetetus*, but what should be apparent is that it extends far beyond the notion of merely perceiving the temperature of wind: For Protagoras, Reason is no longer sufficient to explain away the vagaries, incongruities, and contradictions that pervade every aspect of Ancient Greek life for Man.

This speaks of the intellectual tragedy that precipitated a need to reach the highest account of knowledge (*orthotaton logon*) with more than just the unreliability of Reason. Experience, Man's *being-in-the-world*, thus becomes the foundation of Protagoras' critical intellectual inquiry. For without Man's *being-in-the-world*, there can be neither Knowledge nor Opinion about which to communicate.⁴¹

III. Overcoming the Epistemological Tragedy

In the previous section, I reviewed Protagoras and the cultural thought that culminated in the intellectual tragedy that motivated his work. Contradictions, opposing *logoi*, are not merely available in all experience—both internal conceptualizations and external physical experiences—but inherently *manifest* in them. In order for Protagoras to overcome this double-natured reality and flaw of human reasoning, he must have found some way to establish Man—again as both the individual and universal—as the controller of his experience. Untersteiner articulates the intellectual tragedy thusly:

[Protagoras] must have demolished by dialectical arguments and with a certain systematic severity all the principal concepts created by Reason, beginning with the problem of God in order to pass on to the others. The [*dissos logos*] argument

⁴¹ If we return to Kerferd's tripartite *logos*, we see an inversion in this logical form: Man's being-in-the-world is contingent on an ability to understand modes of reason, and without the requisite input from a highly conceptualized and abstract ontology and epistemology, there can be nothing to communicate. In light of this, a study of Gorgian epistemology and ontology would be most interesting.

has as its aim the revelation of the ‘logoi in opposition’ to be found in every abstract concept. This does not involve skepticism, but it does involve *a tragedy for the intellect*, since for Protagoras the ‘logoi’ are a form of the intelligible, not a dissolution of it such as later Pyrrho was able to invoke. Since the intellect in seeking knowledge had to undergo this tragedy, he attempted to overcome it. (p. 35)

In the remainder of this paper, I argue⁴² that Protagoras overcome intellectual tragedy by not making Man the mere measure of his experiences, but the *master* of his experiences, and that as a result of this mastery Man was able to generate Knowledge in a world woefully bereft of Absolutes.

Overcoming the tragedy of the intellect requires that Protagoras advance from *Antilogiae* to *Truth*. The foundations of each argument are a duplicity of conflicting *logoi*, and to ground the negative-abstraction approach in reality, he must find a way to generate knowledge in the positivity of the world. To “overcome [the] paralyzing immobility” of a unilateral approach to Protagoras, I turn more completely to the Sophistic paradigm and the MM fragment.

Untersteiner translates the fragment as “Man is the master (*metron*) of all experiences (*panton chrematon*), in regard to the ‘phenomenality’ of what is real and the ‘non-phenomenality’ of what is not real’ (p. 42). Holland (1956) wrote an acerbic response to this translation: “of course it is not a *translation* at all. For in the first place the expression [master of all experiences] is lacking in any obvious sense, whereas the Greek it is alleged to represent *has* an obvious sense” (p. 215n2). Many others level similar criticisms against this translation.

I respond to these impuginations in three parts. First, Bett (1989) admonishes historians of Ancient Greek philosophy: “One has to be careful, when dealing with Ancient Greek philosophy,

⁴² Using Untersteiner’s seminal work on Protagoras as a point of departure

about claiming that some doctrine is ‘too bizarre to be believed’” (p. 152). The frantic dismissal by Holland is replete with criticism spawning from the bizarre, *unorthodox* interpretation of Protagoras.

Second, as Poulakos (1990) notes in his erudite response to Schiappa, there is a great deal of apprehension and fear associated with dramatic changes in what have become canonical interpretations of ancient texts. He states that, “obsession with unadulterated historical facts can easily be traced to the hyper-historicist consciousness of the 19th century,” and then warns of problems associated with “a narrowly conceived semanticism, which holds that a given passage or fragment from the Sophists is decipherable only if we pay close attention to the meaning of each of its terms” (p. 219-20). This applies to the Platonic paradigmatic approaches of both Schiappa and Holland. For Holland, the translation doesn’t correspond A to A and B to B with the most comprehensive surviving account. The problem is, that account is found *in Plato’s dialogue on the nature of Truth*; it was so placed to fulfill a specific philosophical agenda. If we limit ourselves to that account, as historical reconstructionists implore us to do, we reach a critical impasse in which our ability to produce new ideas and knowledge about the sophists becomes impossible.

Finally, I argue that Untersteiner is not merely translating, but providing a comprehensive Protagorean doctrine that is dangerous enough to (a) be omitted from Plato’s work *and* (b) be aggressively bowdlerized from work into the 21st century. The 2013 *Philosophia Antiqua* collection *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure* contains several chapters⁴³ that seek to explain Protagoras and how his work was such a monumental perturbation to 5th-century BCE philosophers and so many thereafter. If we take a decontextualized translation from Untersteiner,

⁴³ Namely the chapters by van Ophuijsen, van Berkel, and Notomi. Van Ophuijsen begins the book: “One might be forgiven for despairing of the possibility of unearthing Protagoras from under the weight of the Platonic testimonies designed...to strengthen [Plato’s] case only in order to demolish it more effectively” (p. 1).

it will indubitably fail to produce meaningful discourse; however, if we take into account the full scope of his Sophistic reading, his translation becomes the most suitable *interpretation*.

If we consider *pragmata* here to be ‘experiences’ rather than ‘things,’ for instance, Protagoras’ fragments can be used to holistically explore Protagoras’ work, instead of each as an individual specimen programmatically concatenated (Untersteiner, p. 19; Poulakos, 1990, p. 225). Experiences can be differentiated from things in several ways. ‘Things’, for instance, represents *anything* that can be seen and thought, and therefore conjectured about (Schiappa, 2003, p. 130). ‘Things’ runs the risk of representing a very specific philosophical perspective, as they are terministically unified and *necessarily (anangke)* present in the objective world. Conversely, experiences are necessary in the process of knowledge production by critical analysis wherein cognition first recognizes only contradictions regarding the realities of world-processes; no universalities or Absolutes are possible. Untersteiner explains that

the aim envisaged by Protagoras consisted in the mastery of a rich domain of ‘experiences,’ since this was not real until the moment when the ‘experiences’ *were freed from those contradictions which could nullify their value*. This moment coincided exactly with that of their realization as phenomena, which involved a corresponding certain knowledge. (p. 42, emphasis mine)

Protagoras likely did all he could to assert mastery over the contradictions inhering to all experiences. It is important to remember that his book *Truth* was not a single statement; rather, that single statement was merely a platform from which he could argue *his own*—not Plato’s—epistemologies and ontologies. Once someone becomes aware of such critical abstractions, topics such as ‘virtue’ become more approachable, though not in Plato’s view where only *one absolute* virtue can reign supreme. In these regards, there is a certain relativity and subjectivity

involved; it just doesn't correspond to the dominant, determinant programmatic frameworks thinkers typically attribute to the sophists.

What should be clear is that Protagoras rejects an Absolute Truth, but instead finds room for a most correct (*orthotaton logon*) account from which knowledge can be established. Given this epistemological framework, there should be little wonder why it wasn't—why it *couldn't* be—expounded in detail in any of Plato's dialogues. The damning repercussions of such a move manifest today in the moribund interchange of ideas between historical reconstructionists and rational reconstructionists.

An Encounter with Zeno of Elea

The culmination of intellectual tragedy and Protagoras' work to overcome it can be found in an ancient fragment. This culmination epitomizes my discussion thus far. So, to recontextualize Protagoras within his own epistemological and ontological framework (as opposed to Plato's), I analyze fragment DK 29A29. This fragment from Simplicius immortalizes a conversation between Zeno of Elea, perhaps most recognized today as the eponym of Zeno's Paradoxes, and Protagoras of Abdera. Throughout, Zeno attempts to disabuse Protagoras of his empirical relativism or phenomenalism by logically, *rationally* demonstrating that a grain of millet, a grass native to the Mediterranean region whose seeds are a source of food, will make a noise as it falls by the transitive properties of a *singularly real, objective* entities interacting with a *singularly real, objective* world:

διὰ τοῦτο λύει καὶ τὸν Ζήνωνος τοῦ Ἐλεάτου λόγον, ὃν ἤρετο Πρωταγόραν τὸν σοφιστήν. 'εἰπέ γάρ μοι, ἔφη, ὦ Πρωταγόρα, ἄρα ὁ εἷς κέγχρος καταπεσὼν ψόφον ποιεῖ ἢ τὸ μυριστὸν τοῦ κέγχρου;' τοῦ δὲ εἰπόντος μὴ ποιεῖν 'ὁ δὲ μέδιμος, ἔφη, τῶν κέγχρων καταπεσὼν ποιεῖ ψόφον ἢ οὐ;' τοῦ δὲ ψοφεῖν εἰπόντος τὸν μέδιμον 'τί οὖν, ἔφη, ὁ Ζήνων, οὐκ ἔστι λόγος τοῦ μεδίμον τῶν κέγχρων πρὸς τὸν ἓνα καὶ τὸ μυριστὸν τὸ τοῦ ἑνός;' τοῦ δὲ φήσαντος εἶναι 'τί οὖν, ἔφη, ὁ Ζήνων, οὐ καὶ τῶν ψόφων ἔσονται λόγοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ αὐτοί; ὡς γὰρ τὰ ψοφοῦντα, καὶ οἱ ψόφοι· τοῦτο δὲ οὕτως ἔχοντος, εἰ ὁ μέδιμος τοῦ κέγχρου ψοφεῖ, ψοφήσει καὶ ὁ εἷς κέγχρος καὶ τὸ μυριστὸν τοῦ κέγχρου'. ὁ

μὲν οὖν Ζήνων οὕτως ἠρώτα τὸν λόγον.

And on account of this, he solves the problem (*logos*), of Zeno of Elea, which he asked Protagoras the sophist. "Tell me, Protagoras" he said, "does one grain of millet or even a fraction of a grain of millet (one ten-thousandth), falling, make a sound?" And when Protagoras denied that either of these makes noise, Zeno continued: "Does a bushel of millet, falling, make a sound or not?" And when Protagoras said the bushel makes sound falling, "Why then is it not the property (*logos*) of a falling bushel of millet to make noise in proportion to one grain and a ten-thousandth of a grain?" inquired Zeno. And when [Protagoras] responded it to be the property of the bushel, Zeno asked: "Why then will it not be the condition (*logoi*) of sounds in proportion of some and not others? For just as the things that produce sounds (are in proportion to each other), so are the sounds (in proportion to each other). And this being so, if a bushel of millet makes a sound, then one grain and a ten-thousandth of a grain will also make noise." So Zeno was asking the question in this way. (DK 29A29)

From this we can see the multifarious applications of particular words. *Logos*, for instance, is used as ‘problem,’ ‘property,’ and ‘condition.’ But most importantly we see Protagoras’ steadfast denial of rationalist ratiocination in the face of his epistemology which necessitates the full cooperation of critical intellectual abstractions and sensual input; the fundamental difference between Eleatic rationalism and Protagorean epistemology is the latter’s acceptance of the senses as an integral component of knowledge (Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 8). Parmenides and the Eleatics entirely reject sensory input, believing it to be inaccurate and misleading, while Protagoras perceives sensual stimuli to be a necessary component of intellectual processes and subsequent knowledge acquisition. Zeno is also reputed to employ paradox and equally convoluted reasonings to defend his mentor Parmenides’ doctrines, which shows that he considers Protagorean epistemology and ontology to be both serious and threatening to his own objective constitution.⁴⁴

There are two ways of viewing this fragment given the interlocutors’ epistemological and ontological orientations. The first, that of Zeno, suggests that by the transitive property of

⁴⁴ Guthrie postulates that dialectic, of which Aristotle attributes Zeno as its originator, was employed primarily against philosophical adversaries of his master, Parmenides (*Parmenides*, p. 81).

proportions, if a large quantity of millet makes a sound when it drops, then it is logically indubitable that even the base unit—or a fraction of that—will also make a sound, *whether or not* we are sensibly aware of it. In Zeno we see faith in the tenets of the Eleatic school of thought: monism and rationale over the misleading, occluding judgments of the senses. He staunchly supports the rationalists' rejection of senses, as can be seen in the logical conclusion that if A(n) makes noise, then A and $\frac{A}{10000}$ ought to make sound too. An interesting point of note is that Zeno sets aside his dismissal of motion⁴⁵ to logically dupe his interlocutor.

The second orientation, Protagoras', is a critical ontology and an epistemology that *requires* sensory input to authenticate and actualize experience. It is dangerous here to allow Socrates much credence in *Theaetetus* (150-170d), lest Protagoras' ontology merge with Plato's, and by extension Heraclitus'; this is a shortcoming of Schiappa's Platonic paradigmatic recounting of Protagoras. Therefore sound, a characteristic of the interaction between entities in the physical world, should be as much a part of the assessment of reality and world-processes as the other sensations. In order to have a truly objective world, it must exist in ways *consistently apprehensible* to the senses and intellect after accounting for the internal sieving of inhering contradictions. This external world cannot exist as the objectivists claim if its being is contingent on the faculties of thought (intellect) and of the senses, and yet it cannot exist without Man to master worldly and metaphysical phenomena.

⁴⁵ Zeno's paradox of the arrow best captures his thought here: an object in motion is either moving in the space it occupies or in the space that it doesn't occupy, which is impossible because nothing can act upon an object in an empty space. For an object to occupy space it must be at rest (Guthrie, *Parmenides*, p. 91).

Conclusion

The Protagoras problem (and problem of Protagoras) extends beyond contemporary theoretical frameworks and historiographical practices; it extends beyond epistemology and ontology; it extends beyond what we, as a discipline, have understood, and, as a result, can be reduced to none of the aforementioned components alone. While historical and rational reconstruction have benefits and shortcomings, and each works best regarding certain subject-matter, the only way to reconstruct historical figures that are all but lost to the vagaries of time is to seek productive, *Sophistic* engagements.

It is clear that Plato's account of Protagoras betrayed historical and intellectual fidelity by conflating Heraclitean and Protagorean onto-epistemologies:

By emphasizing in strong colors the nature of Heracliteanism, [Plato] attributes to Protagoras a *dissos logos* of sensation, whereas the *dissos logos* of Protagoras... is to be considered of the Aeschylean type, and therefore conceptual. (Untersteiner, p. 26).

Protagoras is subjective in such a way that only 'objectivity' can be reached through. Objectivity is impossible without subjectivity, which goes against the programmatic readings of subjectivity and relativity presented earlier. So what happens when our object of study is caught in the *rational* reconstruction of our "most reliable source"? We can't make assumptions about how Protagoras would respond to his contemporaries (historical reconstruction) because his legacy is already *once removed* from his actual thought (through Plato). Historical reconstruction operates on the assumption that the facts themselves were documented by someone equally objectively; it

also discounts historical figures with incomplete accounts due to the ravages of time: when a figure survives due to centuries of culturally transmitted legacy in the absence of any of his actual work, there is likely reason enough to triangulate the negative aspects of his life through existing accounts, contemporaneous thought, and, when necessary, apply modern theory to fill in contradictions in existing accounts and the legacy of the individual.

The Platonic-paradigmatic framework that Schiappa employs is further problematic because it necessarily disregards the possibility of a unique phenomenalism, one that is contingent on the individual's senses *and* reason and only attainable after rigorous examination. This reality, I argued, *can* and *should* eschew Platonic overdetermination because its influence was more deeply situated in near east Greek thought and therefore had origins antedating Eleatic and Platonic thought. Within the Platonic framework, even the most subjective interpretations of reality exist in relation to—or worse, *through*—an objective physical world as *constructed through Plato's ideology*. Truth exists and can be pursued, and the senses are deemed faulty and therefore were relegated an ancillary position to the intellect. I attempted to demonstrate that Protagoras had indeed theorized a reality contingent on the senses *and* reason. Such a paradigm would inevitably be frightening to the mainstream philosophers of 5th- and 4th- century Greece, and this could warrant the simplification and reduction of Protagorean thought that is present in Plato's dialogues. Such a paradigm *is inevitably* unnerving as it seeks to dethrone the canonical understandings of our subject matter.

It is my hope that works like this will provoke discussions about historiography and the first sophists. The fragmented legacies they bequeathed to us cannot be adequately explored through a philosophical adversary, nor can it from the rote readings that have been standardized. If we take a goal as a diverse and evolving discipline is to engage our past and adapt it to a

perpetually changing communicative sphere, we will need new, more provocative modes of viewing history. The Sophistic paradigm I suggest does not by any means jettison historical fact or accuracy; it merely seeks to explain the holes in fragmented histories with a broader range of textual evidence.

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