

# Pinning Down Plato's Protagoras

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## 1 Introduction

Protagoras is often mentioned in discussions of relativism about truth, on the strength of the position Plato attributes to him in the *Theaetetus*:

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

Many consider him the first truth relativist, and Plato's famous self-refutation argument against him is mentioned in virtually every general discussion of truth relativism. So it's a matter of some interest to settle what kind of relativist position, if any, Plato is attributing to Protagoras.

There is a large literature on this question. As Myles Burnyeat pointed out in the 1970's (Burnyeat 1976a), later Greek philosophers did not take Protagoras to be a relativist about truth; they represented him instead an advocate of *infallibilism*, the view that whatever appears to someone is true, not relatively or perspectively, but absolutely.<sup>1</sup> However, Burnyeat argued, the position ascribed to Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus* was a relativist one (Burnyeat 1976b). More recently, Gail Fine has argued that Plato, too, takes Protagoras to be advocating infallibilism (Fine 1994, 1996, 1998, all reprinted in 2003). However, she thinks of the infallibilist position differently from Burnyeat. Burnyeat takes infallibilism to imply rejection of the Principle of Non-contradiction (PNC). It's easy to see why: if it appears to A that the wind is cold, and to B that the wind is not cold, then infallibilism implies that the wind is both cold and not cold. On Fine's view, by contrast, Protagoras takes our judgments to view concern private, temporary objects. If A's appearance is about A's wind, and B's is about B's wind, then their judgments don't really conflict, and both can be true without contradiction. On this construal, infallibilism is consistent with the PNC.

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<sup>1</sup>Burnyeat used the term "subjectivism"; to avoid multiplying terminology, I use Fine's term "infallibilism."

I think this way of framing the debate—between a relativist reading, on the one hand, and an infallibilist one, on the other—is not very perspicuous. “Relativism” is most naturally opposed to “absolutism”: the debate here is whether the contents of perceptual appearances have their truth values relatively or absolutely. This semantic question is orthogonal to the *epistemological* question suggested by the term “infallibilism”—whether we can be mistaken in believing that things are as they appear to us. Indeed, pretty much all interpreters agree that Protagoras held that appearances are infallible. That is why Socrates appeals to Protagoras’ view in trying to make sense of Theaetetus’ claim that perception is “always of what is, and *unerring* [ἀψευδὲς]—as befits knowledge” (152c).<sup>2</sup> The debate between Burnyeat and Fine is not about the epistemic issue of infallibilism. It is a semantic debate about the contents of appearances.

So far I have been complaining about the term “infallibilism.” But “relativism” isn’t perspicuous either, because it can be used to characterize several distinct views, which differ in ways that are quite important for understanding the arguments of the *Theaetetus*.

So here is what I propose to do. I will first outline a spectrum of possible positions about the contents of appearances. Philosophers may differ about how they want to label these positions, and which they will call “relativist,” but the important thing will be to see what positions are possible. Then we can turn to the exegetical question of which of these positions best fits Plato’s Protagoras.

I think it is important for us, as contemporary interpreters of Plato, to see how the positions he describes can be positioned in our own map of conceptual space. One might worry about anachronism here, but I think that part of our responsibility as interpreters of ancient texts is to say, *in our terms*, what is going on in these texts. That is why we need to keep at this enterprise, even though people have been doing it for thousands of years. What *would* be anachronistic would be to assume that the position Plato fits determinately into one of the squares in our own conceptual grid. I won’t do that, and at the end I’ll question whether Plato could have made all of the distinctions we think it’s important to make.

## 2 A map of options

Plato explains Protagoras’ position by discussing examples of conflicting appearances. The examples have the following basic shape:

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

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<sup>2</sup>Here and elsewhere I use the Burnyeat/Levetz translation (Burnyeat 1990) unless noted.

Since Protagoras seems to regard an appearance as a kind of judgment, I will not distinguish between appearance and judgment in what follows.

Whether an appearance is true depends on two things: the content of the appearance—it's an appearance that what is what?—and on how things are in the world. So, the semantic question factors into two parts:

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

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

The most straightforward answer to the Content Question is

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

The most straightforward answer to the Ontology Question is

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

Combining these answers gives us our first position,

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

It's pretty clear, though, that Protagoras rejects Objectivism.<sup>3</sup> First, Objectivism is plainly incompatible with the thesis that perception is knowledge, since at most one of our perceivers can be getting it right.<sup>4</sup> Second, Protagoras' denial that "the wind itself, by itself [αὐτὸ ἑφ' ἑαυτοῦ], is cold or not cold" (152b) looks like a rejection of Simple Ontology.

In rejecting Simple Ontology, Plato's Protagoras is saying that the minimal facts that are relevant for the correctness of these appearances involve something else besides

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<sup>3</sup>You might suppose this interpretation of Conflicting Appearances is ruled out by Protagoras' claim that "...as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you" and that the wind "is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold" (152b). But Fine has suggested, in her defense of infallibilism, that the "for me" and "for you" here (and elsewhere in the dialogue) could be interpreted as datives of "person judging." So the datives alone cannot give us reason to reject the objectivist reading. At any rate, objectivism is no worse off than Fine's infallibilism in this respect.

<sup>4</sup>Small linguistic complication: "perceive" with a propositional complement seems to be factive in English. Saying "she perceived that the wind was cold" presupposes that the wind was cold. It therefore sounds funny to say "A perceived that the wind was cold and B perceived that it was not cold." The same issue does not arise with "perceive to be cold." I take it that either *aisthanesthai* is not factive in the same way, or it is being used with nonpropositional complements.

just the wind and coldness or warmth. The “Secret Doctrine” spells out an alternative picture. According to this picture, as I understand it, the relevant facts are facts about an interaction between the object perceived (the wind) and the perceiver. When these come together, something new is generated “between” them: a perceptual quality and a perception of this quality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Moderate Relativism** An appearance is *accurate* or *correct* (simpliciter) just in case its content is true relative to the person who has it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I simplify here by omitting relativity to occasions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fine (1994) calls this position “perceptual relativism,” and notes correctly that it is not a form of relativism about truth. Evans (2015) calls it “predicate relativism.”

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

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

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

Summing up, then, we have four possible views of the content of conflicting ap-

pearances which might be attributed to Plato's Protagoras: Moderate Relativism, Radical Relativism, Relational Properties, and Private Objects. Among defenders of Moderate Relativism, I would count Burnyeat (1976b), Evans (2015), and Matthen (1985).<sup>6</sup> Lee (2005), I think, defends Relational Properties.<sup>7</sup> And Fine, as noted, defends Private Objects. I do not know of anyone who clearly defends a Radical Relativist interpretation—but usually commentators do not distinguish between Radical and Moderate Relativism.<sup>8</sup>

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

### 3 Locating Protagoras on the map

#### 3.1 Supporting Protagorean epistemology

Protagoras' semantic view is supposed to support a Protagorean epistemology: the view that perception is knowledge. We rejected Objectivism partly on the grounds that it cannot support this view. What about the other views?

Relational Properties and Private Objects are on solid ground here: they are both consistent with epistemological infallibilism, the view that every perception is true (absolutely).

One might think that Radical Relativism can be ruled out on the same grounds as Objectivism. According to Radical Relativism, A cannot agree that B knows what she perceives. For, from A's point of view, B's appearance is not accurate.<sup>9</sup>

The only way I see to read Protagoras as a Radical Relativist is to understand "knowledge is perception" as saying, to each person, "what *you* perceive is always known by you, but you are unique in that respect; others' perceptions are frequently inaccurate." This does not strike me as a plausible interpretation. In the *peritropé* of 170–1, it is supposed to be an embarrassment to Protagoras that he is committed to saying that others are ignorant. But if he is a Radical Relativist, he should be happy to embrace this consequence.

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<sup>6</sup>According to Burnyeat's *principle of translation*, "a proposition of the form '*x* is *F*' is true (relatively) for person *a*, if and only if '*x* is *F* for *a*' is true (absolutely)" Burnyeat (1976b, 193). This implies that there are simple contents with relative truth values, but also that correctness is absolute.

<sup>7</sup>"...when Plato represents Protagoras as saying, 'Socrates' belief that the wind is hot is true', this means that Socrates' belief is true *simpliciter* that the property of being hot belongs to the wind relative to Socrates. One could put it by saying that 'Socrates' belief that the wind is hot is true for him'. But this doesn't say anything more than 'The wind is hot for Socrates', and all occurrences of "*x* is *F*" is true for *A*' can be replaced by statements of the form '*x* is *F* for *A*'. Thus, in the statement '*p* is true for *A*', it is not truth, viewed as a property of sentences, which is being relativized, but the state of affairs that the sentence *p* is about." (Lee 2005, 44)

<sup>8</sup>Evans (2015) is an exception.

<sup>9</sup>As noted above, there are some complications expressing this in English, due to the factivity of "perceives that."

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

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

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

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

(1) B knows that the wind is warm, but it isn't warm.

Unfortunately, I do not see any texts that are directly relevant to this question. Protagoras (and Plato) certainly connect knowledge with truth, but perhaps Protagoras thought that a connection like

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

### 3.2 Explicit relativizations of truth

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

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

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

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

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

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

...the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all [οὐδενὶ...ἀληθής], not even for himself? (171c5–6)

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

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

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

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

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

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

must be understood as proposing that whatever a man thinks at any time, he thinks. That doesn’t *need* proposing—or arguing against.

Again, when Socrates says

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But what if we want to generalize, and say:

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

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

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

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

This kind of use of “true for” is completely standard in English (and I assume would have been natural in ancient Greek, though it would be nice to back this up with some good non-philosophical examples). Here is an example from a recent issue of the *New York Times*:

The new sanctions, which prohibit him from entering the United States or doing business with American financial institutions, will have almost no impact on the ayatollah. The same appears to be true for most of the other individuals sanctioned on Monday. (Fassihi and Kirkpatrick 2019)

This is not an endorsement of relativism about truth. It just means that the new sanctions have the property of having no impact on  $X$  for many values of  $X$ , including the ayatollah and most of the other sanctioned individuals.

On this reading, the Protagorean is using “true for” to state Relativized Properties, not to endorse a form of Truth Relativism. On this point I agree with Mitzi Lee.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>“it seems to me that Plato does not use ‘is true for A’ in the *Theaetetus* to assign a property to sentences or propositions. Rather, he uses statements of the form ‘p is true for A’ as a shorthand way of referring

### 3.3 Evidence for same subject

Private Objects denies that the two parties in cases of conflicting appearances attribute incompatible properties to the same object. This goes against some of the textual evidence. For example, at 152b, Socrates says that “when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels cold and the other not,” and then presents Protagoras as holding that “it” [presumably the wind] is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold [τῷ μὲν ῥιγῶντι ψυχρόν, τῷ δὲ μὴ οὔ].” The grammar forces the subject to be the same in this case.

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

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

It is the *wine*—a public, not a private object—that comes to be qualified as bitter. The *bitterness* is private, but it is not the bitterness that is represented as bitter, but the wine—the “active factor.” The presence of bitterness makes it the case that the wine is bitter for the perceiver, but it isn’t what is perceived. We must not confuse the ontological claim that the bitterness does not inhere in the wine *in itself*, with the semantic claim that the wine is not the object which is being said to be bitter.

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

The eye is filled with sight; at that moment it sees, and there comes into being, not indeed sight, but a seeing eye; while its partner in the process of producing colour is filled with whiteness, and there comes into being not whiteness, but white, a white stick or stone or whatever it is that happens to be coloured this sort of colour. (156e)

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

This wording suggests that a private white stick or stone comes into being in the perceptual interaction. But the Greek is more naturally interpreted as saying that a stick or stone (a public, enduring object) comes to be white:

ὁ μὲν ὀφθαλμὸς ἄρα ὄψεως ἐμπλεως ἐγένετο καὶ ὄρα δὴ τότε καὶ ἐγένετο οὐ τι ὄψις ἀλλ' ὀφθαλμὸς ὄρων, τὸ δὲ συγγενήσαν τὸ χρῶμα λευκότητος περιεπλήσθη καὶ ἐγένετο οὐ λευκότης αὐτὴ ἀλλὰ λευκόν, εἴτε ξύλον εἴτε λίθος εἴτε ὄψων συνέβη χρῆμα χρωσθῆναι τῷ τοιούτῳ χρώματι. (156e)

The subject of “comes to be” [ἐγένετο] here is not the expletive “there” but “its partner” [τὸ δὲ συγγενήσαν]. McDowell’s translation gets this right:

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

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

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

For if whiteness were being ascribed to a private object that exists only in the context of a single perceptual episode, and only for a single observer, it is not clear why we should deny that the private object is not “just one thing” (that is, white and not also non-white).<sup>11</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>11</sup>Matthen (1985) presses a similar line of thought.

Relational Properties rather than Private Objects. I think this reading is suggested by what comes immediately after the passage quoted above:

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

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

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

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

Fine rests most of her case for Private Objects on 158e–160d, which she thinks argues that “no two perceivers can perceive the same object, e.g. a stone, nor can the same perceiver do so twice” (Fine 1994, 2003, 144 n. 28). We have already seen that part of this passage seems to require public objects. The only part of the passage that really speaks in favor of Fine's reading is this sentence:

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

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

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

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

### 3.4 Evidence for incompatible properties

Relational Properties denies that the two parties in cases of conflicting appearances are attributing incompatible properties to the object. So if there were good evidence

that Plato's Protagoras took the properties to be incompatible, this would tell against Relational Properties.

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

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

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

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

### 3.5 Role of the Secret Doctrine

A core part of Fine's case for Private Objects is what she calls the “connection criterion” (Fine 1994, 1998, 142). Socrates evidently thinks that the Protagorean position needs to be supported by the Heraclitean Secret Doctrine. So a viable interpretation of the measure doctrine must explain why it requires an ontology of constant flux.

Fine argues Truth Relativism does not satisfy this constraint.

if Protagoras denies that there are any absolute truths, either *tout court* or in the perceptual sphere, then there is no need for him to appeal to an ontology of change to resolve the problem of conflicting appearances. For denying that there are any absolute truths dissolves the problem all on its own: the seeming conflict disappears once it is explained that the seemingly conflicting utterances are merely relative truths. (Fine 1994, 2003, 142)

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

She thinks Relational Properties (what she calls “perceptual relativism”) also fails to satisfy the constraint, for it would resolve conflicting appearances by relativizing the predicate, removing the need to posit any real change in the object:

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

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

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

Second, not all of the Secret Doctrine’s talk of constant movement and flux needs to be interpreted as a commitment to literal motion or change, as opposed to what Irwin (1977) calls *aspect-change*.<sup>12</sup> Aspect-change is the kind of “change” that occurs when Socrates goes from being tall (in relation to one person) to being short (in relation to another), without changing in height. A Property Relationalist or Truth Relativist might well be committed to constant *aspect-change*—that is, to ubiquitous variation with perspective. Indeed, the view that nothing is “in itself just one thing” just *is* the view that everything is in constant aspect-flux: what is white (from one perspective) is also non-white (from another).

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

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<sup>12</sup>Irwin’s own view is that, although in the *Theaetetus* Plato “does not find it odd to talk of a-change as a kind of flux,” and uses an example of a-change (the dice at 152d), he ultimately accepts constant s-change (genuine self-change), arguing that it is needed to explain the cases of a-change (Irwin 1977, 5, interpreting 155b–c). But I do not think that is the most reasonable interpretation of the passage. Plato is rejecting the idea that, when Socrates goes from being smaller than Theaetetus to being bigger because Theaetetus has grown, Socrates has not *become*. But that need not be because he thinks some literal process of movement has occurred in Socrates; indeed, Plato elsewhere (e.g., *Republic V*) happily uses “becoming” to describe cases of mere a-change.

### 3.6 The Peritropê

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

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

THEOD. Undoubtedly.

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

If Protagoras is a Truth Relativist, Fine argues, then he could parry this line of argument easily, by saying that he is only committed to the claim that what others judge is true *for them*, and hence that the negation of his measure doctrine is true *for them*. He need not accept that it is true *for himself*—which is presumably what a relativist would mean by calling it *true* without explicit relativization.

We should avoid giving Socrates a cheap and easy victory, particularly right after his sermon (167e-168a) about how unjust it would be to score an easy victory by tripping up his opponent with verbal tricks, without helping his opponent give the best response possible. So, Fine concludes, we should not interpret Protagoras as a Truth Relativist. We should take him to be committed to the “infallibilist” view that whatever anyone judges is true, simpliciter—a view which Fine spells out in terms of Private Objects.<sup>13</sup> For Socrates’ argument is a cogent one against that view, and really shows it to be contradictory.

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

Similarly, a proponent of Relational Properties could have squirmed out of the objection by relativizing the properties of truth and falsity as applied to the measure

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<sup>13</sup>Of course, Relational Properties could also support an infallibilist position, but Fine rejects this for independent reasons.

doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

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

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

#### 4 Can Plato make these distinctions?

Where do we stand? As I see it, Relational Properties and Moderate Relativism are the two positions most consistent with the textual evidence, with neither ruled out decisively. (The argument from Factivity would be a strong one against Moderate Relativism, but it is hard to tell from the text whether Protagoras acknowledges Factivity.) So it's not entirely clear which of these positions Plato intended to attribute to Protagoras. But how confident should we be that Plato distinguished these positions sufficiently to intend one of them as opposed to the other? In order to distinguish them, we need to help ourselves to a technical notion of *proposition* or *content* that we might balk at attributing to Plato.

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

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

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<sup>14</sup>This seems to be how Lee (2005, 55) reads the dialogue, since she thinks truth relativism only comes in at this stage, when we are talking about second-order beliefs about others' beliefs.

Table 1: “The wind is cold”

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

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

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

the Moderate Relativist will interpret this as attributing a relative truth value to the proposition that the wind is cold. But the Property Relationalist, as noted in the section on Explicit relativizations of truth, above, can interpret this as attributing an absolute truth value to the proposition that the wind is cold-for-A.

Nor does it help much to talk of contradiction. As noted above in the section on Evidence for incompatible properties, talk of “saying the opposite” can sometimes refer to just part of a proposition.

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

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

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

Pinning down a more determinate notion of proposition, then, requires going beyond these ordinary things—and probably constructing some substantive theory in

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

I think that these considerations are relevant to an argument Matthew Evans makes to favor Moderate Relativism over Relational Properties:

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

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

## 5 Conclusion: Plato and Protagoras

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

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

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

It seems to me that Plato is clearly not going to say that the wind is cold in its own right, "itself, by itself." That is the language he reserves for Forms. And in several places in the middle dialogues Plato (especially the *Phaedo* and *Republic*) talks of the sensible world as a realm that is characterized by the compresence of opposites, in which nothing is (as he would say in the *Theaetetus*) "just one thing." He characterizes this in terms strikingly similar to those used in the Secret Doctrine, as a domain

of constant flux, where things are “becoming,” not “being.”<sup>15</sup>

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

That’s a point about semantics. I think Plato clearly rejects the Protagorean *epistemology*, even restricted to the sensible world. The portion of the Divided Line corresponding to the sensible world has two segments: the first segment, I take it, represents a mode of thought that does not draw a distinction between how things are and how they appear, while the second introduces this distinction for the sensible world. I take it that the main point of the first part of the *Theaetetus* is to reject the Protagorean epistemology. But the Protagorean semantics is not part of what is rejected here; I believe that Plato shares it.<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup>These parallels have been noted by many commentators, including Cornford (1935) and Plato (1977).

<sup>16</sup>Here I am in broad agreement with the view found in Cornford (1935) and represented in Burnyeat (1990, 8) as “Reading A.” See also Matthen (1985, 47).

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