

## Humanism, Baboonism, and Future Being in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Owen Goldin, Marquette University

As will become abundantly clear this weekend, the term “humanism” can refer to a number of different philosophical approaches. It can refer to the pedagogical principle that if the young are going to be good citizens and good people, they need a solid training in the humanities, those disciplines that focus on human achievements and productions. It can refer to a reorientation of human speculation and research away from supernatural and theistic matters towards those that are more amenable to human, rational inquiry. It can refer to the view that human beings are central to truth and meaning of any sort. Is the term what Aristotle would call a *pros hen* equivocal? That is to say, is there one sense which is central, by virtue of which the others are to be understood? Or is the term truly equivocal? Is it an accident of history that the same term refers to intellectual approaches that are related only insofar as all have some relation to human beings?

I raise the question, but do not answer it. Nonetheless, the three varieties of humanism have often been found together, and were apparently so conjoined at the very dawn of the Western intellectual and educational tradition. I am thinking of the early Greek sophistic movement, and, in particular, in the thought and teaching of the most notable of the sophists, Protagoras. For Protagoras advertised himself as one who could train the young in virtue, and an integral part of his educational program was training in literary criticism and interpretation.<sup>1</sup> He

---

<sup>1</sup> See Plato, Protagoras, 339a. “I consider, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man’s education is to be in command of poetry, by which I mean the ability to understand the words of the poets, to know when a poem is

was explicitly agnostic concerning the gods, and kept himself from speculation concerning theological matters.<sup>2</sup> And, notoriously, it was Protagoras who opened his book *Truth* with the pronouncement that “Human beings are the measure of all things, but things that are, that they are, and things that are not, that they are not” (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a).

Beyond his emphasis on training his students in the ability to argue for both sides of a question,<sup>3</sup> we are certain of very little more of Protagoras and his teachings. But there are two dialogues of Plato, *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*, in which Plato explores Protagoras’ thought in a creative and speculative manner. My focus today is one aspect of the *Theaetetus*’ expansion, elaboration, and refutation of Protagorean relativism. Plato has Socrates offer a Protagoras whose views of truth and reality that put human perception at the center of things. For Plato, Protagoras’ metaphysical humanism, as it were, accounts for his educational program and avoidance of any appeal to a transcendental source of truth or value. The views of Protagoras are discussed here more fully and more charitably than those of nearly any other Socratic interlocutor. For often in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates’ arguments against another’s position leave the interlocutor speechless, that is, without a *logos* by which to defend it. But in the

---

correctly composed and when not, and to know how to analyze poems and to respond to questions about it.” tr. Lombardo and Bell.

<sup>2</sup> DK 80 B4: “I can have no knowledge concerning the gods, neither whether they are nor whether they are not, nor what sort of form any of them have. For many things prevent knowledge – the matter is unclear, and life is short.” my translation.

<sup>3</sup> DK 80A1.

*Theaetetus*, Protagoras gives a full and spirited defense of his views, offered by a most able advocate, Socrates himself (166a-168b). This is followed by a series of arguments even more severe than the first (170a-186e), after which Theaetetus and Socrates both abandon Protagoras' views. Yet even as he presents these arguments Socrates mentions that were he able, Protagoras might well poke his head out of the ground and say even more on his behalf, to meet Socrates' critique (171c-d). This may be a mere humorous aside; on the other hand it might be an admission that there is more to say, that dialogue might well continue, and might do so without any prospect of resolution

I here continue the juxtaposition of and dialogue between the two perspectives. My focus is the argument concerning the predictive power of knowledge, which, according to Theodorus, is that by which Protagoras is especially refuted (*malista haliskesthai*, 179b), to the effect that Protagoras' own admission of expertise entails that some people are better than others at predicting the character of future perceptions, from which admission Socrates concludes that not all beliefs are true (177c-179d). I suggest that Protagoras could well have met this objection, on the basis of the denial of the substantiality and continuity of the human person, a denial to which Protagoras is antecedently committed. I suggest that the stance of Protagoras is not as marginal and odd as first appears, and begin to speculate concerning its applicability to two meditative and religious traditions.

I begin by tracing the line of argumentation that leads up to the argument concerning expertise about the future. Theaetetus does not object when Socrates identifies his thesis that knowledge is perception with Protagoras' dictum: "Humans are the measure of all things, both

those that are, that they are, and those that are not, that they are not” (152a). It is not immediately clear why the theses are to be identified. Can one not consistently say that my knowledge that the pen is blue consists in my perceiving it to be so, without thereby making the further claim that the pen is blue *because* I so perceived it? Protagoras’ dictum follows only if we conjoin to the identification of knowledge and perception the empirical truth that different things are perceived differently, both by different perceivers and by the same perceiver differently disposed. In explicating Protagoras’ thought, Socrates provides evidence for this: the same wind will be perceived as cold by one emerging from warm air, and will be perceived as warm by one emerging from cold air. The air, then, is neither warm nor cold in itself. To know the hotness or coldness of the air is simply to perceive it (152a-c).

Socrates proceeds to universalize Protagoras’ point, and draws out two major sets of implications. First, if we conjoin to Protagoras’ principle the apparently uncontroversial premise that all of the characteristics of sensible things are themselves sensible, then there is no stable, nonrelative truth of the perceived object as such. All of its characteristics will be relative to how they are perceived (152d-e). Second, this result can be extended to the sense organ, or the perceiving himself or herself. All three aspects of reality: the perceiver, the cause of the perception, and the perceived characteristics, are dependent on changing circumstances. Because the circumstances by which perceiver and perceived come together are in motion, these circumstances themselves are always different, with the result that all of these three aspects of reality are always changing. Hence, Protagoras’ view is said by Socrates to entail that he attributes to Heraclitus, that all things change and nothing stays the same (156c-157c, 158e-160e).

Second, as I have mentioned *aisthēsis* refers to more than the apprehension of simple sensed features like color or warmth that Aristotle calls *aisthēta*; it includes perception of facts like “Theaetetus is sitting” or for that matter anything of which one is aware or conscious. There is no need to restrict what Protagoras says to direct sensory perception: any sort of belief results from an awareness of the world. This is why Socrates reexpresses Protagoras’ view as to the effect that all beliefs are true to those who hold them (167a-b); within the context of the discussion of Protagoras’ views, “belief” is synonymous with “perception.” All beliefs, including ethical and other normative ones, arise as a result of the interface between certain circumstances and those who are making judgments or choices concerning them. But those circumstances, and the nature of those making them (virtuous or unvirtuous? wise or unwise?) are necessarily a result of the sort of ethical evaluation in question.

At this point Socrates offers two lines of argument to refute Theaetetus’ position. The first is to the effect that neither Protagoras, nor we, can believe the implications of his view: that the mad or the dreaming, as well lower beasts, such as pigs or baboons, are just as much perceivers as are those human beings generally recognized as in their right minds. Are they to be the measure of all things? Further, given that all beliefs are true, why ought we to spend good money to learn from Protagoras at all? The second brings up cases (as when an object is perceived with one eye but not another, or as when something is remembered but not perceived). If knowledge is perception, we must conclude that in such cases something is both known and not known.

Socrates now imagines the sorts of things that Protagoras might say if he were to offer a

spirited defense of his view. After accusing Socrates of unfair argument for the sake of scoring points, Protagoras reaffirms his original position. He strongly suggests (166d), though does not explicitly state, that the first two sets of counterintuitive results that Socrates derived from his position are indeed ones that he would endorse. Things are for the mad or the dreaming as they seem. But why harp on that, if we are (apparently) neither mad nor dreaming? Further, for Protagoras pigs or baboons are indeed just as much the measure of all things as human beings. In not dwelling on the point, Protagoras is in effect saying “well, so what?” For Protagoras is himself a human being, and so are the ones with whom he, and others, need to deal, in convincing others to look at things differently, or in taking note of how things seem to others in order to get them to act in a way that seems best to him. This is why, in saying that the measure of all things is human beings, Protagoras is a humanist and not a baboonist.

Further, it will indeed be the case that one who perceives something in one respect but not in another will both know and not know.<sup>4</sup> Now is not the time to develop this point, but Protagoras is able to avoid a simple and direct refutation on the basis of the principle of noncontradiction by taking all truth claims (including those concerning his own thesis on the relativity of truth) to be relative to those to whom they appear; nonrelativized assertions are as if they were syntactically incomplete. So, in this case, Protagoras could easily evade Socrates’ objection that one with one eye closed both knows and does not know the apple before one,

---

<sup>4</sup> At 166a Protagoras is made to say that Theaetetus is frightened by the result that one can both know and not know the same thing, which suggests that this is the fright of a child, to what is neither uncommon nor dangerous.

either by asserting that, to *him*, such a result does not seem impossible, or by showing that, even if one does hold to the principle of noncontradiction, there is no contradiction involved in *one eye's* knowing something and *another eye's* not. Such a response, of course, raises questions concerning the unity of the knowing subject, to which Socrates will soon turn.

Protagoras next turns to the question of his own expertise. All perceptions are indeed true. But we would all agree that not all of our perceptions are good; that is to say, we would rather not have them. Thus, one ill might feel and unpleasant chill, or familiar foods might taste bad. Such a percipient becomes the patient of a doctor, not in order to perceive more correctly, but simply to have those perceptions that would be preferred (in this context, this would mean, more pleasant). The doctor's expertise is an ability to change the bad perceptions to good perceptions. So too, in regard to an individual or society's perceptions concerning the just and the unjust, or the noble and ignoble (166e-167d). Protagoras reaffirms his ethical relativism: a practice or action is just to the one, or ones, who deem it such. What the sophist Protagoras can do, and can teach others to do, is substitute better, not truer, perceptions or beliefs concerning these matters. We note that Protagoras offers his defense in the form of attributing to him and other experts not knowledge, but the action of altering appearances, making them appear, and be, good (*metaballōn poiēsēi agatha phainesthai te kai einai*, 166d). It is not that the expert rids one of false beliefs. "Rather, I believe that he makes the one who, by virtue of a bad disposition of soul, has beliefs that are akin [to that disposition], have other such beliefs, by virtue of a good disposition – beliefs which some, through inexperience, call true appearance, but I call the ones

better, but not truer, than the others” (167b).<sup>5</sup>

Protagoras’ defense is the occasion for a new line of argument by Socrates. The first is the full expression of what has become known as “the turning of the tables argument,” to the effect that, if Socrates does not believe that human beings are the measure, then human beings are not the measure, and, to the extent that those who reject Protagoras’ thesis outnumber those who endorse it, his thesis is falser than it is true (170e-171c). This brings us to the argument that is the focus of this paper. Socrates returns Protagoras’ view, to the effect that the expert changes negative perceptions to positive ones. consists in the ability to transform negative perceptions into positive ones. But note how he restates this point. Protagoras has asserted that some beliefs or perceptions were better than others, but not truer than others, and that the expert *does* something – namely, transform bad perceptions to good ones. Socrates makes the point that the expert, who so effects the transformation, does a better job of having beliefs (*doxazein beltion*, 178d5, cf. e5, *beltion prodoxasais*) since he has the criterion, or basis for making the distinction within him (178c1). Socrates presumes that the power to alter perceptions, granted by Protagoras, involves not better beliefs (the existence of which Protagoras also grants) but believing, better, which Protagoras would not. But how serious is the distortion of Protagoras’ views? For surely Protagoras would grant that the expert not only does this or that; she does it by virtue of beliefs concerning the future effects of her actions. So understood, Protagoras’ account would commit us to two levels of beliefs. First order beliefs are those that everyone has in their interactions with the world, such as “this room is very chilly” or “this tax is unjust.”

---

<sup>5</sup> My translation. the text is disputed; I follow Burnyeat.



Protagoras has said that all such beliefs are true, even if some of them are unpleasant or otherwise “bad.” The expert has beliefs concerning how to best substitute positively evaluated beliefs for negatively evaluated ones. Socrates points out that we are necessarily committed to saying that these second order beliefs are either true or false. For the expert either has that ability or he does not, and the matter will be verified by future perceptions. If a doctor promises that a certain medication will take away the chills (that is, the beliefs that the air is chilly), and it does not, the second order beliefs of both the doctor, as well as those of the patient who believes him, will have been shown to have been wrong; likewise in regard to the effects of *logoi* (178e). Hence, Socrates can claim, Protagoras must admit that not all beliefs are true.

Socrates’ argument against Protagorean relativism on the basis of future expertise presupposes a continuity of the perceiving subject, from the asking of advice from the expert, through the taking of the advice, and the determination of whether the action taking indeed worked to change bad perceptions into good ones. But, as Socrates himself pointed out (157a-b), if Protagorean relativism is to be associated with a radical flux theory, there will, indeed, be no continual subject, for the percipient, too, is ever changing. Although this move provides yet another escape hatch for Protagoras, it threatens to do so in a way that makes consultation with Protagoras, or any expert, meaningless. For if it is not the same me that will experience the results of taking Protagoras’ advice, then one could always literally ask in regard to the advice “what’s in it for me?” Likewise, if Protagoras is defending himself, or anyone else, as an expert, should someone hold him responsible for promising what he could not deliver, again, the sophist can slip away by insisting that, he, Protagoras, at the time the accusation is being made, is not the same as the Protagoras who urged his potential follower to receive instruction. Socrates had

cited Epicharmus as one who, Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Homer, advocated that all things are in flux (152e). In so doing, he implicitly alludes to how Protagorean relativism, taken so far as to avoid positing the continuity of the subject, ultimately renders meaningless the notion of ethical responsibility. For Epimarchus fr. 136 PCG tells us that in one of his plays, one character asks another to pay his fair share for participating in a symposium. The character refuses: as he has since grown, he is no longer the same individual who incurred the debt. This response is met by blows from the first character who, when charged with battery absolves himself with the remark that he is no longer the same one who threw the punch. Protagoras or any alleged expert could acquit himself likewise.

Accordingly, if we push the Protagorean view as far as we can, what appears to be the case – concerning part, present, and future, is truly the case for the one to which it appears, where that one exists only at the moment of appearance, and future events will not be such as to contradict such appearance, since the future self will be different. How, then, are we to interpret Protagoras' defense of his, and others' expertise, as one who can change bad perceptions into good ones? The only way to do so, which does not become subject to Socrates' criticisms, is to say that Protagoras' expertise is not thought to bear on the future at all. Protagoras has the ability to change one's perceptions *at the moment* from negative to positive. We note how this brings Protagoras' understanding of his craft in line with what Socrates in the *Gorgias* has to say concerning the *empeiriai* of sophistry and rhetoric – they are not true *tekhnai* as they do not have their eye on transforming the current state of affairs into what is truly good, rather, they aim towards the pleasure of the moment, and are forms of flattery (462c-465d). A Protagorean response might be – what is wrong with that, if all there is, is, in fact, for one in the moment?

It is tempting to say that this Protagorean account, pushed to its conclusion in this way, rests on an atomistic account of human identity, according to which the self only exists in an unsplittable instant. But even this would be saying too much. After all, it seems to each of us that the self endures, and Protagoras would be the last to deny the validity of this belief on the basis of a metaphysical account of time. But it would be enough for Protagoras to say that the denial of the identity of the self to be a possible belief, whenever it seems appropriate. And it is for this reason that Protagoras can defend himself from the objection that the denial of human identity through time cannot be sustained since normally we cannot deliberate and act on its basis. For to this Protagoras might well say “Fine – if there are areas in your life that seem to you to require a persistent subject, then it is indeed true that there is a persistent subject – to you. And if there are aspects or areas in your life in which it does not seem to be the case that there is a persistent subject, then there is not, to you, in that respect.”

I myself do not go so far as to endorse the Protagorean point of view, but as I conclude this paper I would like to explore it a bit more, and see how far Protagoreanism can be, and is, taken.

Protagoras is not only telling us that it is possible to substitute positive perceptions for negative ones; he is saying that it is his very teachings that will make this possible. His teachings include his teachings concerning truth, perceptions, and identity. The unstated consequence is that worry concerning the future is a negative perception, which demands substitution for a better one. Protagoras would insist that such worry, itself, results from a faulty perception of oneself as a continuously existing subject. Apparently, in order to achieve

happiness, that is, a state in which one's perceptions are better – is consider oneself as not substantial at all, as only a point of awareness, in the moment.

Protagoras does not tell us how to achieve this sort of realization, not exactly what life would be like were we to achieve it. Here are two ways of thinking about it. Protagoras could be encouraging us to live in the moment, without care for the future at all. So considered, he is indeed encouraging us to live as a pig or a baboon, which is precisely the implication that Socrates first draws once he interprets Theaetetus' suggestion that knowledge as perception in a Protagorean manner (161c). From the Socratic standpoint, the capacity to deliberate concerning the future is distinctive of human beings; accordingly, a good life, for human beings, will involve deliberation concerning the future. If one who takes the good to be constituted by present positive perceptions, that is, pleasures, were to accept that a distinctively human life involves deliberation, and were to also take human identity to be continuous into the future, he would conclude that the good life requires the capacity to accurately measure the sum total of future pleasures that would be consequent from one's actions. I parenthetically note that this is the view that Socrates' derives from what he takes to be Protagoras' presuppositions, within the *Protagoras*.

Of course, "living in the moment" need not take the form of living like a lower animal. For example, one of the professed goals of certain varieties of Buddhist meditative practice is the recognition, through meditation, that there is no substantial ego, only thoughts, without a thinker. A related goal is to cultivate a nonjudgmental attitude in regard to such thoughts, by which they are accepted as they are without their being a springboard for future deliberations. There is more

than a superficial parallel with Protagoras, who, on Socrates' understanding, asks that we not condemn some perceptions as true rather than false, and asks his students to concentrate on the improvement of perceptions in the present moment. But while the promise of Buddhist meditation is direct apprehension of things as they are, without the intermediacy of belief or logos, Protagoras refuses to posit such a thing as things as they are, or direct accurate perception, since he would insist that can never get beyond how things appear.

I leave you with a question. It is not clear to me to what extent the extent to which acceptance of Protagoras' second order beliefs concerning the relativity of all beliefs, including those of the future, is compatible with holding first order beliefs concerning the future. There is no incompatibility between believing that the wind is *now* cold, and believing that the coldness of the wind is relative to the believer. But can one truly believe that one *will* perceive a certain event, and at the same time believe that this belief is true, only for the believer, at the moment of the belief? Or does the second, insofar as it implicitly denies that the believer persists into the future, contradict the first? Again, I draw an example from a religious tradition, this one, unlike Buddhism, with a focus on the future. Could I at the same time believe that the arrival of the Messiah is imminent, in my lifetime, and at the same time hold that this belief is relative to me, now, and that there is no possibility of this predicting being falsified by how things turn out, in the course of my life? If so, the second order belief concerning the nature of the first order belief could, as it were, immunize the first order belief against being disproven by any future course of events, such as the failure of the Messiah to appear. If not, that is, if the first order belief concerning a future perception is incompatible with the second order belief concerning the relativity of that belief to the one who holds it, at the time of its being held, one must conclude

with Socrates that because beliefs concerning the future can be falsified, not all beliefs are true, and knowledge and belief must be distinguished.