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Protagoras and Margolis on the Viability of Ancient Relativism

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In this contribution, I explore the understanding of ancient relativism that Joseph Margolis has provided us with in his ground-breaking *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford 1991). In doing so, I have two main aims, namely to show how, in contrast with more celebrated handlings of it, Margolis' interpretation of ancient relativism offers a sensitive understanding of Protagoras' views, as the latter are presented in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Book 4. Secondly, I shall try to maintain not only that Margolis' interpretation of ancient relativism is highly plausible from an historical point of view, but also that he is perfectly legitimate to defend the viability of that relativism in light of his own concept of 'robust relativism'. By drawing on Margolis' more recent works and on personal correspondence, I will end by illustrating a possible disagreement between Margolis' own understanding of ancient relativism and mine.

Before entering into the details of ancient relativism, let me say something more personal on my initial encounter with Protagoras. In 1998–2001 I was a doctoral student at Durham University (UK) when I first approached Protagoras' relativism. I had been (and still I am) attracted to ancient relativism by its evident philosophical strength. I was very discomforted when I realized that some celebrated ancient philosophy scholars argued much against Protagoras, being ready to show the sheer implausibility, defectiveness, and self-contradiction (to say the least) of his doctrine. My supervisor, a great and well-known Platonist, was himself perhaps not very interested in Protagoras' relativism. To help me out of such despair, how-

ever, he gave a book to me, saying that in it I could have founded a hand guiding me out from the labyrinth. The book was Joseph Margolis' *The Truth about relativism*. Ever since, I have often come back to it to feel, once again, the freshness and sense of liberation that I originally felt when I first read it back in 1998. Relativism was a noble philosophical option and one that had its deep roots in its ancient version, Margolis' book taught me. I was then ready to reinforce Margolis' interpretation of ancient relativism by plunging into a detailed reading of ancient sources on Protagoras, a reading never disjointed by the revisionary approach to relativism I learned when I first encountered Margolis' book.¹ I am very grateful to Margolis, among other things, also for having written that book. At the same time, I am extremely pleased to offer this essay as a tribute both to his originality as a philosopher and to his innovative capacity to read the history of philosophy under a truly refreshing light.

1. Protagoras' relativism in Plato's Theaetetus

Protagoras is the patriot saint of ancient relativism. All ancient sources uniformly link the doctrine of relativism to his name. He was a celebrated sophist, the greatest of all, and a figure of extraordinary relevance in the political and intellectual life of the fifth century BC Greece. Close to Pericles, the innovator of Athenian democracy, Protagoras was also the first author whose books were burnt in the public square, not because they professed relativism but because they defended a sort of agnosticism about the existence of gods.² It is one of the most damaging losses in all the history of ancient philosophy that there are not extant works of Protagoras, a prolific philosopher on all counts. We have only nine fragments of him preserved *ipsissima verba*, among which there is the famous dictum that "Man is measure of all things" (Gergel & Dillon, 9 ff.), which is taken to expound, although cryptically, his relativism.

In order to reconstruct his views, we have thus to revert to the treatment that both Plato and Aristotle devoted to him, respectively in the

¹ The main outcome of my effort on this respect is *Protagoras and the Challenge of relativism. Plato's subtlest enemy*, London: Ashgate, 2007; Chinese translation 2012.

² See the fragment 4 in the Diels-Kranz standard collection (here after DK) on the Pre-socratics and the sophists: 80DKB4 (translated in Gergel & Dillon eds., *The Greek Sophists*, London: Penguin, 2003, 21): "Concerning the gods, I am not in a position to know either that they exist, or that they do not exist; for there are many obstacles in the way of such knowledge, notably the intrinsic obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life".

Theaetetus and in *Metaphysics* book 4.³ The fact that Plato and Aristotle dealt with Protagoras in two of their major works shows how much his relativism was important in the context of ancient thought. Yet, both Plato and Aristotle authoritatively represent what Margolis calls the ‘archic canon’ in taking reality as a truly fixed item, to be known objectively.⁴ Given their philosophical commitments, they strongly oppose Protagoras’ relativism, and aim to show how incoherent it is. Their philosophical opposition, however, does not prevent them from presenting Protagoras’ views in fairly trustworthy terms, that is, without distorting the proper content of his relativism. They really want to show that Protagoras got things wrong but before showing this (unsuccessfully on my and—more importantly—Margolis’ account)⁵, they provide us with a credible reconstruction of the kind of relativism Protagoras is likely to have endorsed. We really have to be grateful to Plato and Aristotle for having saved the traces of ancient relativism in some key-sections of their works. Some scholars tend to focus on those key-texts only to see how criticized/able relativism is, without realizing that the essential element of Plato’s and Aristotle’s testimonies on Protagoras is the fairly accurate exposition of his philosophical views, not (only) the criticism that they level against it.

We just have to read Plato’s and Aristotle’s testimonies without submitting to the archic canon. Let us begin with the *Theaetetus*. The *Theaetetus* is one of Plato’s greatest dialogues and one to which contemporary philosophers often turn their eyes: I just here mention the name of John McDowell, who has contributed an illuminating commentary (and a very reliable translation, which I use in this essay) of the dialogue for Oxford in 1973. The dialogue is an investigation into the nature of knowledge and ends with no real answer to the question with which it opened: ‘what is knowledge?’ Socrates is helped in his enterprise aimed at give birth to the notion of knowledge by a young and promising mathematician, Theaetetus. He in turn provides Socrates with three definitions of knowledge that some of us would perhaps happily accept but that Socrates shows to be

³ Plato (especially) and Aristotle provide the most detailed and wide-ranging analysis of Protagoras’ relativism but Sextus is an important source too: see *Outlines of Scepticism* I 216–19 (=80DKA14=Gergel & Dillon, 13); *Against the Mathematicians* VII 60–4; 388–90 (=80DKA15=Gergel & Dillon, 14–5).

⁴ Margolis (1991), 2–3. He says: “one version of the canon takes the following form: that is possible, under real-world conditions, to discern what, tout court, is true or false about things. But what is true, it is said, is timelessly true, even if it addresses what is transient”. On the archic canon, see also Margolis (1991), 87–99.

⁵ Margolis (1991), 70–77; 149–53; Zilioli (2007), chapter 4.

ultimately untenable.⁶ The three definitions are respectively the following ones: knowledge is perception (*Tht.* 151e3), knowledge is true belief (*Tht.* 187b5–6) and knowledge is true belief with an account (*Tht.* 201c9–d1, something close to Gettier’s ‘knowledge as justified true belief’).

Now, Theaetetus’ first definition that knowledge is perception is first equated by Socrates to Protagoras’ slogan that “Man is the Measure of all things, of those that are, that are, of those that are not, that are not”.⁷ Protagoras’ maxim is, in turn, given a relativistic reading, which we had better read in the original wording of Plato. I quote a full excerpt (*Tht.* 151e9–152c7: *passage 1*) from the first section of Plato’s *Theaetetus*:

SOCRATES: Well, it looks as though what you’ve said about knowledge is no ordinary theory, but the one that Protagoras, too, used to state. But he put the same point in a different way. Because he says, you remember, that a man is the measure (*metron*) of all things (*chrēmatōn*): of those which are, that (*hōs*) they are, and of those which are not, that they are not. You’ve read that, I take it? (151e9–152a4)

THEAETETUS: Yes, often.

SOCRATES: and he means something on these lines: everything is, for me, the way it appears to me, and is, for you, the way it appears to you, and you and I are, each of us, a man? (152a6–8)

THEAETETUS: Yes, that’s what he means.

SOCRATES: Well, it’s plausible that a wise man wouldn’t be saying something silly; so let’s follow him up. It sometimes happens, doesn’t it, that when the same wind is blowing one of us feels cold and the other not? Or that one feels slightly cold and the other very? (152b1–3)

THEAETETUS: certainly.

SOCRATES: Now on those occasions, shall we say that the wind itself, taken by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we accept it from Protagoras that

⁶ Theaetetus’ attempts to define knowledge are actually four: the three I am about to list and a preliminary one, which aims to define knowledge by indicating singular instances of knowledge such as geometry, the art of the shoemaker etc. (*Theaetetus*= *Tht.* 146a–147c. I quote the *Theaetetus* rather conventionally, that is, by indicating the old pagination of Plato’s *Editio Princeps*, the one prepared by Henry Stephanus in Geneva in 1578. The same pagination numbers are to be found on the margins of every modern translation of Plato’s dialogues). Socrates dismisses such a preliminary account of knowledge by saying that he wants one definition of knowledge, not a list of items of knowledge.

⁷ The Greek of Protagoras’ maxim is highly ambiguous, both in the lexicon and in the syntax. An alternative reading could be: “man is the measure of all things: of those which are, because they are, and of those which are not, because they are not”.

it's cold for the one who feels cold, and not for the one who doesn't?
(152b5–7)

THEAETETUS: that seems plausible.

SOCRATES: Now it appears that way to each of us?

THEAETETUS: yes.

SOCRATES: and this 'appears' is perceiving?

THEAETETUS: yes.

SOCRATES: so appearing and perception are the same, in the case of that which is hot and everything of that sort. So it looks as though things are, for each person, the way he perceives them. (152c1–3)

THEAETETUS: that seems plausible.

SOCRATES: so perception is always of what is, and free from falsehood, as if it's knowledge. (152c5–6)

In these brief extract Socrates affirms—and persuades Theaetetus—that Protagoras' maxim is a form of perceptual relativism, for which something (a perceptual item in the material world, such as the wind) is perceived as hot by someone and by cold by someone else, and that both perceivers are correct in their perception. Therefore, as Socrates highlights, "things are, for each person, the way he perceives them". At a later stage in the dialogue, Protagoras' relativism is openly extended, more generally, to judgments (not only to perceptual grasping).⁸ But that Protagoras' relativism had a broad range of judgmental application is evident also from the very section I have quoted. The Greek term '*aisthēsis*' and the cognate verb '*aisthanomai*', which have been uniformly translated as 'perception' or 'to perceive' in the text above, are very broad in meaning and they may also cover such items as 'beliefs deriving from mere perception', 'judgments' and such activity as 'to judge'.⁹

2. Self-refutation, weak relationalism, robust relativism

In his initial treatment of Protagoras' doctrine, Plato insists on the epistemological aspect that Protagoras' relativism displays and also highlights the self-refuting character of that relativism and, by extension, of any relativism that restricts itself to epistemological concerns. More in particular, in the *Theaetetus* for the very first time in the history of philosophy Plato formulates the famous charge of self-refutation against relativism

⁸ See e.g. *Tht.* 166a–168c5; the section of self-refutation we are just about to read; 171d–172c.

⁹ Zilioli (2007), 44.

that since then anti-relativists of any time and age have in different fashions too often proposed. Let us read Plato directly on this (*Tht.* 171a6–c7, *passage 2*):

SOCRATES: Protagoras agrees that everyone has in his judgments the things which are. In doing that, he's surely conceding that the opinion of those who make opposing judgments about his own opinion—that is, their opinion that what he thinks is false—is true.¹⁰ (171a6–9)

THEODORUS: [a mathematician and Protagoras' friend from Cyrene, who acts as his defender in this part of the dialogue]: certainly.

SOCRATES: so if he admits that their opinion is true—that is, the opinion of those who believe that what he thinks is false—he would seem to be conceding that his own opinion is false? (171b1–2)

THEODORUS: he must be.

SOCRATES: but the others don't concede that what they think is false? (171b4)

THEODORUS: no.

SOCRATES: and Protagoras, again, admits that that judgment of theirs is true, too, according to what he has written. (171b6–7)

THEODORUS: evidently.

SOCRATES: so his theory will be disputed by everyone, beginning with Protagoras himself; or rather, Protagoras himself will agree that it's wrong. When he concedes that someone who contradicts him is making a true judgment, he will himself be conceding that a dog, or an ordinary man, isn't the measure of so much as one thing that he hasn't come to know. Isn't that so? (171b9–c2)

THEODORUS: yes.

SOCRATES: Well then, since it's disputed by everyone that, it would seem that Protagoras' *Truth* [the title of Protagoras' lost book on knowledge] isn't true for anyone: not for anyone else, and not for Protagoras himself. (171c5–7)

This argument has been much celebrated and has its modern analogue in the claim that, as Margolis puts it, "it is impossible to formulate the thesis (sc. of relativism) consistently or coherently" (*The Truth*, 1). Relativism is an epistemological doctrine on knowledge and truth—Plato argues—and is, as such, self-defeating.

¹⁰ In the whole passage, perception is replaced, more generally, by the term '*doxa*', that is, 'opinion, belief, judgement'.

One first problem with Plato's self-refutation argument against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* is that it is logically faulty: Plato does not insert the qualifying phrase 'true for' in crucial stages of his own reasoning against Protagoras (for instance at 171a6–9, 171b1–2, 171b4), hence begging the question and saddling his own argument in a fatal way. Gregory Vlastos famously noticed the point, followed by many other scholars who think that Plato did get things wrong against Protagoras' relativism.¹¹ But in another much celebrated article Myles Burnyeat has insisted that, although he does not insert the qualifying expression 'true for' at crucial stages of his own reasoning, Plato is not guilty of any *ignoratio elenchi* and that his argument against relativism is thus successful.¹²

I will not here be concerned with a formal analysis of Plato's self-refutation argument. What I wish to bring about is that every analysis of Protagoras' relativism that takes it to be a purely epistemological doctrine betrays the philosophical spirit of ancient relativism. Plato himself will show this to us. I will demonstrate the point shortly, not before having noted however that the version of Protagoras' relativism that grows out from the passages of Plato that I have brought to attention is the weakest version of (ancient) relativism, namely what Margolis calls relationalism. He defines 'relationalism' in these terms: "in one [sc. version of relativism], truth-values or truth-like values are themselves relativized, or, better, *relationalized*, so that (for instance) 'true' is systematically replaced by 'true in Lk' (for some particular language, perspective, habit of mind, social practice, convention or the like, selected from among a set of relevant alternatives ['k'] that might well yield otherwise inconsistent, incompatible, contradictory values when judged in accord with the usual canonical bivalent values ('true' and 'false'), themselves taken to range over all such k's" (*The Truth*, 8). Taken as a form of relationalism, Protagoras' relativism is confronted with some insoluble problems; as Margolis puts it, if taken as a relationalist, "Protagoras would certainly be defeated at a stroke" (*ibidem*).

Relationalism is the kind of relativism that is centered on exquisitely epistemological concerns and is thus doomed, in adopting truly bi-polar values, to be internally self-refuting. But this is not what Protagoras

¹¹ In his critical analysis of Plato's self-refutation argument in the *Theaetetus* Vlastos (1956) was anticipated by Grote (1875) and followed by e.g. Runciman (1962), Sayre (1969), McDowell (1973), Polansky (1992).

¹² Burnyeat (1976). In his subsequent commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, he seems to be more careful on the alleged success of Plato's argument against Protagoras' relativism (Burnyeat 1990, 30).

was up to, his relativism being best seen as the offspring of *ontological* and *alethical* concerns. More perspicuously, Protagoras' relativism is the stronger version of relativism, namely what Margolis calls 'robust relativism', the latter being a philosophical view that, while adopting a set of many valued truth-values, is characterized as a global view (alethic, epistemological, ontological). Protagoras' robust relativism is best interpreted as a doctrine that rejects bi-polar truth-values and adopts a quite strong view of the material world (a view that goes much against the archaic canon of Plato and Aristotle). Margolis provides us with a nice definition of Protagoras' robust relativism: "protagoreanism [...] is the thesis that: (1) man is the measure of reality, knowledge and truth; (2) there is no independent invariant reality that man can claim obtains or that he knows, consistently with affirming (1); (3) the conjunction of (1) and (2) is viable, not incoherent, not self-contradictory, not self-defeating; and (4) judgments of what is true and false, within the space of (1), disallow any disjunction between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion or belief (*doxa*)" (*The Truth*, 82).

While we have to wait until Aristotle's own handling of Protagoras' doctrine in *Metaphysics 4* to learn how ancient relativism dissociated itself with the use of the principle of non-contradiction, the most interesting point of the whole discussion about Protagoras' doctrine in the *Theaetetus* is that Plato himself shows us that the relativism of the sophist is a form of robust relativism. So far I have been excessively selective in presenting the main evidence on Protagoras' relativism in Plato's *Theaetetus*, since I have up to now focussed on those passages of Plato's dialogue that highlight the epistemological aspect inherent to Protagoras' doctrine. But Plato makes clear that Protagoras' relativism is not only an epistemological view, but it is also, and mainly, a metaphysical doctrine.

3. Protagoras' Secret doctrine.

The first hint that Protagoras' doctrine is also a metaphysical thesis may be grasped by Socrates' own reference to the example of the wind in the first passage of Plato's *Theaetetus* that I have quoted (*passage 1*). If we grant each individual the incorrigibility for his own perceptions, as Protagoras wants—Socrates observes—what will we say about the ontological status of the blowing wind? As he puts it, "shall we say that the wind itself, taken by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we accept it from Protagoras that it's cold for the one who feels cold, and not for the one who doesn't?"

(152b5–7). Protagoras' epistemological relativism is here explicitly rooted into a metaphysical view, which in turn tells us that the wind is neutral with regard to its properties: it is neither cold nor hot. To use a term that is recurrent in contemporary debates, the wind is metaphysically indeterminate. How do we need to understand that indeterminacy?¹³ Another passage from Plato's *Theaetetus* sheds new light on the metaphysical features of Protagoras' doctrine.

After having shown Theaetetus the epistemological meaning of Protagoras' relativism at 151e9–152c7 (*passage 1*) Socrates immediately says that Protagoras had a Secret doctrine that imparted to his closest disciples (*Tht.* 152c8–10)¹⁴. What is Protagoras' Secret doctrine? Here it is what Plato make Socrates say of it (*Tht.* 152d1–e1: *passage 3*):

SOCRATES: It is certainly no ordinary theory: it's to the effect that nothing is just one thing just by itself, and that you can't correctly speak of anything either as some thing or as qualified in some way. If you speak of something as big, it will also appear small; if you speak of it as heavy, it will also appear light; and similarly with everything, since nothing is one—either one thing or qualified in one way. The fact is that, as a result of movement, change and mixture with one another, all the things which we say are [...] are coming to be; because nothing ever is, but things are always coming to be.

There are some different ways to read this passage and, hence, several ways to interpret Protagoras' Secret doctrine.¹⁵ What Plato's exposition of Protagoras' Secret doctrine makes clear, however, is that the relativism of the sophist has a metaphysical root-source: "nothing is just one thing just by itself", further glossed as "nothing is one—either one thing or qualified in one way".

According to this view, each of us is perfectly legitimate and correct in his perceptions because there is no fixed reality with we all are objec-

¹³ I now stick to 'indeterminacy' when I refer to Protagoras' commitment in metaphysics: in the last section of the paper, I will deal with the question whether indeterminacy raises problems for Protagoras' relativism.

¹⁴ With 'Secret doctrine' I take Plato alluding to the hidden meaning of Protagoras' relativism, that is, to the metaphysical view that lies at the root of it and that he (Plato) is just about to reveal. That Protagoras' maxim has an overtly metaphysical significance is clear from its reference to "the things that are, that they are" and to those "that are not, that they are not". But this metaphysical significance is not evident at a first hearing of the maxim, hidden as it is under the oracular tone that Protagoras chose to use when declaring his slogan.

¹⁵ See McDowell (1973), 122–9 for an excellent overview of the various philosophical interpretations of the Secret doctrine.

tively confronted. Protagoras is here seen by Plato to reject his (Plato's) and Aristotle's archaic canon: the world is not populated by discrete objects that we come to know by means of our epistemological skills and capacities. We can discriminate between correct and mistaken perceptions. For Protagoras, the world is not changeless but it is in constant flux and in perennial change, so that no object can be really said to exist as such (more radically) or no object is qualified in a determinate way (more mildly). In other words, for Protagoras the world is, more or less radically, metaphysically indeterminate.

The metaphysical flavour of Protagoras' doctrine is reiterated once again by Plato in another important section of the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates reports a peculiar theory of perception that, as in a system of Chinese boxes, shows at a full extent the ontological commitments of Protagoras' Secret doctrine.¹⁶ The theory is fully expounded at *Theaetetus* 156a3-157c1, in a section of dense and captivating philosophical theorizing. For reasons of space I will not be able to quote it entirely but let me address the key-points of that theory. The material world, including persons, is seen as in constant flux and change. According to that theory, there are two kinds of change, "each unlimited in number, the one having the power of acting and the other the power of being acted on" (*Tht.* 156a7). From the intercourse of these two powers, there come to be twin-offspring, "of which one is a perceived thing and the other a perception, which is on every occasion generated and brought to birth together with the perceived thing" (156b2-3). In this picture, the material world is seen as a world of powers and processes, not of objects; perceptions and perceived things are the momentary result of temporary encounters. On the occasions of these encounters, both things and individuals may be understood as displaying an identity, of which they are immediately deprived once those encounters come to an end.

As Socrates says, in summing up the entire new theory and in reconnecting it to the Secret doctrine of Protagoras (156e7-157a7, *passage 4*):

We must take it that nothing is hard, hot, or anything, just by itself—we were actually saying that some time ago [sc. when for the first time

¹⁶ In Zilioli (2012), 47-71; 86-90 I offer reasons for attributing such theory to Protagoras' philosophical heirs in Plato's own time: the Cyrenaics, a Socratic school based in North Africa, whose leader was Aristippus, a close associate of Socrates. It has been objected that Cyrenaic subjectivism and Protagoras' relativism differ significantly (Tsouna 1998, 124-37). I answer to this objection by saying that, although there are surely differences between the two theories, in the *Theaetetus* Plato insists on the close analogies between the two: see Rowe (2014).

Socrates illustrated to us Protagoras' Secret doctrine: passage 3 above] but that in their intercourse with one another things come to be all things and qualified in all ways, as a result of their change. Because even in the case of those of them which act and those which are acted on, it isn't possible to arrive at a firm conception, as they say, of either of them, taken singly, as being anything. It isn't true that something is a thing which acts before it comes into contact with the thing which is acted on by it; nor that something is a thing which is acted on before it comes into contact with the thing which acts on it.

I cannot imagine anything more distant from Plato's and Aristotle's conception of reality. If the latter philosophers subscribe to what Margolis calls the 'archic canon' in believing into a changeless world of either (Platonic) Forms or (Aristotelian) essences, Protagoras' Secret doctrine and the perceptual theory deriving from it will become the paradigm of the anti-archic canon in postulating a world of processes and powers, where objects and persons have so transitory an identity to be actually best understood as not-existent (as single and stable items). The conjunction of Protagoras' anti-archic view of the material world and of the epistemological doctrine that descends from it makes his relativism a form of robust relativism. As such, if interpreted correctly on the basis of the evidence (Plato's *Theaetetus*), ancient relativism will not suffer from the usual self-refuting problems that afflict relationalism, in so far as Protagoras' doctrine offers a global (that is, epistemological, ontological and alethic, to use Margolis' terms)¹⁷ theory. Before discussing further the scope of Protagoras' relativism, let us turn briefly to Aristotle's handling of it in *Metaphysics* 4.

4. Protagoras' relativism in Aristotle' *Metaphysics*

Aristotle treats Protagoras' relativism in the context of his discussion of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (hereafter, PNC) in sections 3–6 of *Metaphysics* 4. In particular, he focuses on Protagoras' relativism in sections 5 and 6.

Aristotle offers three versions of PNC: "For the same thing to hold good and not to hold good simultaneously of the same thing and in the same respect is impossible (1005b19–20=PNC1).¹⁸ The second version is

¹⁷ Margolis (1991), 7–8.

¹⁸ After enunciating PNC1, Aristotle adds the following specifications: "given any further specifications which might be added against the dialectical difficulties", which he further

as follows: "It is impossible for anyone to suppose that the same thing is and is not" (1005b23–24=PNC2). The third and last version is to be found at 1011b13–14: "the opinion that opposite assertions are not simultaneously true is the firmest of all (PNC3). PNC1 is a metaphysical version of PNC, for it states a principle about how things in the world are and must be. PNC2 is a psychological and epistemological version of PNC, since it states a principle about how our beliefs and judgments are or must be.¹⁹ PNC3 is a logical version of PNC, since it states a principle about how our linguistic assertions must be.

Although he offers three versions of the same principle or different ways to apply the same principle to key areas of reality and thought, it is clear from the arguments of *Metaphysics* 4, 3–6 that Aristotle is most concerned with PNC as mainly PNC1 (that is, as a principle that shows how things are and must be) and, consequently, with PNC as PNC2 (that is, as a principle that shows how we think, and have to think, of things). Of course, how things are and how we think of them is, so to speak, reflected in how we speak of them, so the discussion of PNC1 and PNC2 involves discussing PNC3. Since according to him PNC is the firmest of all principles of reasoning and reality, Aristotle does not claim to be able to prove it, since the eventual demonstration of PNC would have to rest on something more fundamental than PNC and this is impossible.²⁰ What Aristotle aims to do, then, is to defend PNC by first identifying the philosophical views of those philosophers who do not accept PNC and by later showing that such views are inconsistent. The main philosophical views that Aristotle identifies thus are two: one is phenomenalism (the view that all appearances and beliefs are true), the other is relativism (the view that all appearances and beliefs are true for those who hold them). In the course of his analysis and critique of them, Aristotle treats such philosophical positions as mainly metaphysical positions and/or as epistemological positions. In short, Aristotle treats phenomenalism and relativism as mainly metaphysical and epistemological positions and, hence, his defense of PNC is mainly, although not exclusively, a defense of PNC as PNC1 and as PNC2.

specifies at 1011a22–24. See also *De int.* 17a33–37 and *Soph. El.* 167a23–27; and compare Plato, *R.* 436d4–e7. As for the translation of *Metaphysics* 4, I mainly follow Kirwan 1993.

¹⁹ It is not clear whether PNC2 is to be viewed as a descriptive claim about human psychology or as a normative one, that is, about what it is rational to believe; on the point, see Gottlieb 1994, 2–3.

²⁰ See 1005b8–b 34; 1005b35–1006a27.

The characterization, on Aristotle's part, of the defense of PNC as the defense of PNC1 and PNC2 not only marks a great difference with contemporary discussions of PNC (where PNC is conceived of as mainly a law of thought and language, that is, as PNC2 and PNC3), but it also signals from the very start that what is being discussed in Aristotle's defense of PNC are views like phenomenalism and relativism, which are mainly metaphysical and, at the same time, epistemological views. Since Protagoras is the key figure against whom Aristotle builds up his defense of PNC and to whom Aristotle ascribes both phenomenalism and relativism, this shows that, like Plato in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle believes that Protagoras' doctrine is a combined metaphysical and epistemological doctrine and, hence, a robust philosophical doctrine. Whether this robust doctrine is a form of relativism will become clear from a brief analysis of the treatment that Aristotle reserves to phenomenalism and relativism in his defense of PNC.

The doctrine of Protagoras is mentioned at the beginning of section 5; Aristotle clearly identifies it with phenomenalism, namely with the view that all appearances and beliefs are true. He connects Protagoras' doctrine with the negation of PNC: if all that is believed or perceived is true, "it is necessary that everything is simultaneously true and false", that is to say, PNC is not true, since "many people have mutually contrary beliefs, and regard those whose opinions are not the same as their own as in error, so that it is necessary that the same thing should both be and not be [i.e., PNC1 is not true of things]" (1009a9–12). This is plainly true; Aristotle notes that the converse also holds: if everything is simultaneously true and false, then every appearance and belief is, at the same time, both true and false. By this argument Aristotle establishes the full logical equivalence between phenomenalism and the negation of PNC.

Aristotle's identification of Protagoras' doctrine as a form of phenomenalism on the basis of which all appearances and beliefs are true (with no further specification) strikes any reader of Plato's *Theaetetus* who is well acquainted with the idea that Protagoras' doctrine amounts to a form of relativism. Burnyeat observes: "after Plato [. . .], in Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, and the later sources generally, Protagoras is understood rather differently: not as a relativist but as a subjectivist whose view is that every judgment is true *simpliciter*—true absolutely, not merely true for the person whose judgment it is."²¹ I agree with Burnyeat that, on the standard interpretation, ancient sources offer two seemingly alternative accounts of

²¹ Burnyeat 1976, 46.

Protagoras' doctrine, that is, relativism and phenomenalism. I claim, however, that, on another kind of interpretation, these seemingly alternative accounts can be reduced to one, since phenomenalism inevitably leads to relativism. This is at least Aristotle's strategy in *Metaphysics 4*, section 6.

5. Aristotle on phenomenalism and relativism

In *Metaphysics 4*, section 6 Aristotle provides us with the connection between phenomenalism and relativism:

But if it is not the case that all things are relative (*pros ti*), but there are also some things that are themselves by themselves (*auta kath' hauta*), then it will not be the case that all appearance is true. For an appearance is an appearance for someone. So those who claim that all appearances are true make all being relative. For this reason, too, those who want to trace the force of the argument, and who at the same time are prepared to submit to argument, must take care to assert not that appearance is true [i.e., phenomenalism], but rather that appearance is true to the one to whom it appears, and at the time when it appears, and in the respect in which it appears, and in the way in which it appears [i.e., relativism] (1011a17–24: *passage 5*).

Before attempting to understand the reasons why Aristotle believes that relativism is the source of phenomenalism, it is worth stressing that the first half of the passage just quoted provides us with a metaphysical argument: Aristotle speaks of things and beings that are relative (1011a17 and 20), contrasted with things that are themselves by themselves, namely things that are what they are in virtue of themselves and not in virtue of the relation they have with other things (1011a17–18). The contrast here is once again, as developed in the Secret doctrine of the *Theaetetus*, between (Plato's and Aristotle's) archic canon and (Protagoras') anti-archic one.

In light of the ontological distinction between these opposed conceptions of reality, the second half of the passage offers an epistemological argument: Aristotle suggests the phenomenalist some specifications he had better adopt to avoid trouble when he declares that every appearance is true. Those specifications (person, time, respect, way), initially referred to when Aristotle first formulates PNC (1005b18–21), are such as to make the phenomenalist a full relativist. On the basis of this passage, it is clear that Aristotle shows again that phenomenalism and relativism are both ontological and, at the same time, epistemological positions. But why does phenomenalism lead to relativism?

Later in section 6, Aristotle goes back to these specifications a phenomenalist has to add to his pronouncements in order not to get caught in contradictions (1011b3). He adds: "It is necessary [for the phenomenalist] to make everything relative to something, i.e., to opinion and perception, so that nothing either has come to be or will be without someone first having that opinion; and if things have come to be or will be, it is plain that not everything can be relative to opinion" (1011b 4–7). When at 1010b2–1011a2 he gives his counterarguments to phenomenalism, Aristotle remarks:

In general, if in fact only the perceptible exists], nothing would exist unless living things existed; for there would be no perception. Now it is doubtlessly true that neither perceptible things nor sense-impressions (which are an affection of a perceiver) would exist; but that the subjects which produce perception would not exist, even in the absence of perception, is impossible. For perception is not of itself, but there is some other thing too apart from perception, which is necessarily prior to perception; for what changes something is prior in nature to the thing changed, and this is so no less even if they are called these things with reference to one another.

1010b30–1011 a 2: *passage 6*

Aristotle here criticizes phenomenalism by adopting a causal theory of perception that makes the objects of perception prior (as regards their existence) to the perception of the perceiver who perceives them. He does so because he believes that phenomenalism is a doctrine that goes against the archic canon in taking the material world as not existent prior to our own perception of it. This makes the existence of the objects of perceptions be dependent upon the presence of perceiver (metaphysical claim), as well as making the perception of the perceiver, *qua* itself, knowledge of the perceived object (epistemological claim).²²

Aristotle therefore seems to believe that phenomenalism leads to relativism because they both have the same root, that is, the negation of both the archic canon and of a view of the material world as an immanent and objective structure, always there for us to be discovered. In particular, if one thinks deeply about phenomenalism, one will soon be persuaded that relativism best represents the philosophical features that are typical

²² Aristotle's greatest commentator, Alexander of Aphrodisias, remarks on the passage in the following fashion: "What he says could also be said in reply to the view of Protagoras, who, thinking that only things perceived by sense exist, said that things perceived by sense were produced in some sort of relation of sense-perception to external things; this is why Protagoras said that a thing is for each person such as it appears to him (In Arist. Met. 316. 11–150 Hayduck)".

of phenomenalism. As seen in *passage 6*, when he criticizes it by offering a causal theory of perception, Aristotle characterizes phenomenalism as a doctrine where the object of perception and the perceiver "are called these things with reference to one another" (1011a1–2). The object of perception and the perceiver are, in the context of phenomenalism, correlative in so far as the former presupposes the latter. But if this is the case, Aristotle observes, the best doctrine that puts correlativity at its core is relativism, where each thing is supposed to be conceived and understood only in relation to another. As Aristotle initially put it (1011a17–18: *passage 5*), "if things are not themselves by themselves but are relative, this will make every appearance true, for an appearance is always an appearance for someone".

Aristotle's discussion of Protagoras' doctrine in *Metaphysics 4* shows us that, like Plato in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle conceives of such a doctrine as a robust doctrine, that is, as a doctrine that inevitably combines epistemological and metaphysical claims. More in particular, Protagoras is initially depicted by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* section 5 as a phenomenalist and in section 6 as a relativist. I have provided reasons for suggesting that this is the case because Aristotle thinks that phenomenalism inevitably leads to relativism, on the ground that the latter view best expresses the anti-archic features of Protagoras' doctrine. According to Aristotle, Protagoras conceives of the world as a world of processes, where the perceiver and the perceived thing stay correlatively, each one depending both epistemologically and ontologically one from the other. The perceiver and the perceived thing create their own momentary linkage during the perceptual act and the former is, as Protagoras taught us, the measure of the latter. The myriad of such sub-atomic, relativistic worlds stand in sharp contrast with Aristotle's own view of the material world.

Much the same has to be said for Plato. He conceives of Protagoras' views in the same way as Aristotle does. The Secret doctrine that Plato attributes to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* tells the same metaphysical story that Aristotle's treatment of Protagoras in *Metaphysics 4* offers: the material world is a vast array of processes, where objects and persons as stable items are denied to exist. In that world, nothing is one—either one stable thing or qualified in one determinate way. Both perceptions and perceivers are best seen as the two poles of a correlative process, which is temporary and wholly transient. In that process, the perceived thing, the perceiver and the perception have their own lives only within that very process—and just in it. It is in the context of this metaphysical picture,

strongly opposing both the archic canon and whatever idea of a fixed and immutable reality there could be, that Protagoras' relativism makes full sense: each of us is correct in his perceptions because that perception is the relativistic measure of what we are and of the world around us.

In his global treatment of ancient relativism in *The Truth about relativism* Margolis delivers much the same interpretation of Plato's and Aristotle's treatments of Protagoras' doctrine that I have here provided. Margolis does not envisage any contradiction between respectively Plato's and Aristotle's handling of Protagoras' relativism. In doing so, Margolis has shown himself to be a sensitive historian of ancient thought. In addition, by conceiving of Protagoras' relativism as a form of robust relativism, Margolis suggests that the idea of multiple worlds that is so typical of contemporary relativism (such as incommensurabilism) may be already accommodated within ancient relativism.²³ Ancient relativism was born not as a weak creature but it may be properly seen as the philosophical father of the most promising conceptions of relativism circulating nowadays.

6. Persons

I conclude this essay by taking up a possible point of disagreement between Margolis' own analysis of ancient relativism and mine. While I follow him—as shown in ample details in this essay—in taking Protagoras' relativism as a form of robust relativism, I have referred to 'indeterminacy' when I have identified it as the possible metaphysical fulcrum of Protagoras' Secret doctrine. In other words, the world of processes that constitutes the backbone of Protagoras' metaphysical outlook may be interpreted in terms of metaphysical indeterminacy, a doctrine that has some well-known advocates today in contemporary analytic philosophy.²⁴ The interpretation of Protagoras' metaphysical commitments in terms of indeterminacy is possible because Plato seems to point in that direction when he makes Socrates give the details of Protagoras' Secret doctrine; Aristotle too suggests that this could be a good way to understand Protagoras' metaphysical views.²⁵

In the *Truth* Margolis often speaks of indeterminacy when he refers to Protagoras' relativism but the issue is not pressed further there; in any

²³ Margolis (1991), 87–118.

²⁴ See, above all, Van Inwagen (1990) and Merricks (2003).

²⁵ See section 3 above and Aristotle's own reference to indeterminacy as the common view behind all the various doctrines that do not accept PNC: *Metaphysics* 4, 1010a1–4.

case, the emphasis I give to indeterminacy as Protagoras' fundamental view in metaphysics is much stronger than Margolis'.²⁶ In addition, I see a commitment to metaphysical indeterminacy more widespread in ancient philosophy than usually thought of, linking for instance Protagoras' relativism with Pyrrho's scepticism.²⁷ In private correspondence, Margolis warns me that to refer to indeterminacy may raise the issue of predictability, but he also adds that this problem may be solved with a bit of theoretical effort. The main point of Margolis' worries for indeterminacy taken as the key-feature that lies behind Protagoras' robust relativism is that it puts both persons and material things other than persons on a par. I think this is fairly evident in the theory of perception that Plato constructs out of Protagoras' Secret doctrine at *Tht.* 156e7–157a7 (*passage 4*) and in Aristotle's emphasis of correlativity as central to Protagoras' own doctrine at *Metaphysics* 4. 1010b30–1011a2 (*passage 6*).

Margolis, however, points out that between persons and other material things there is a substantial difference: much of his more recent work, from *Selves and Other Texts* to his 2013 recent paper 'Towards a metaphysics of culture', makes this very clear. And I think he is fully right on this aspect. He writes to me: "persons may exhibit emergent properties that mere material things do not. Here, I claim that all culturally generated 'things' akin to persons and the rest may be said to possess or manifest 'determinable' but not strictly 'determinate' properties [...]. I call all such culturally generated attributes and things 'intentional', meaning by that, 'culturally significant' or 'significative' ". Indeterminacy as developed by Protagoras (at least on Plato's and Aristotle's testimonies, plausibly interpreted) does not recognize the substantial difference between mere material things and persons, both groups living in to a world of total flux and change. This is a point of weakness, I believe, of ancient relativism, because persons have to be (and actually are) ultimately responsible, also within the framework of Protagoras' relativism, for the way we make sense of things. For Protagoras, man is the measure of all things—he cannot be a mere thing, among other things. Either Plato or Aristotle have misunderstood Protagoras on this or contemporary relativists have grasped something that ancient ones did not. If the second option is correct, we shall be grateful to Margolis, once again, for pointing this out to us.²⁸

²⁶ Margolis (1991), 51–3; 122–5; Zilioli (2007), 38–42.

²⁷ Zilioli (2012), 98–100.

²⁸ I thank Joseph Margolis for having encouraged me to go back to Protagoras and relativism once again and for his insightful comments on this paper; Dirk-Martin Grube and Rob

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