In Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152 C 8–E 9 Socrates introduces a strong type of Heracliteanism as the secret truth of Protagoras’ man-measure doctrine, which he had just equated with Theaetetus’ account of knowledge as sense-perception (151 E 8–152 A 4). In 153 D 8–154 A 8 he tells us that a perceptual property is the result of an interaction between a perceiver and an object. Thus, a given colour, say white, is something peculiar to each perceiver and varies with each time of perception. Now, if something were white or large, it could not become different without changing itself. But this will force us to say ridiculous things—so Protagoras would say (154 B 1–9). This is made clear by an example. When you take six dice and put four dice beside them, they are more than the four, while when you put twelve dice beside them, they are less. What is one to say about that? Surely, something cannot become ‘more’ without undergoing increase? (154 C 1–9). From 156 A 3 onwards Socrates further elaborates the Heraclitean theory. Everything is movement. But there are two types of movement: one having the power to act, and another the power to be acted upon. When two movements of different types meet, for instance, a stone (active) and a perceiver or an eye (passive), they simultaneously generate a twofold offspring, a sensed quality (for instance, a colour) and a perception (for instance, seeing a colour). The movement of the generators is slow, that of the offspring quick.

Commentators roughly agree on a number of points about the interpretation of this so-called Secret Doctrine (cp. ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ 152 C 10), which together are what may be called the standard interpretation. The kernel of the standard interpretation, i.e., that Protagoras’ doctrine involves perceptual relativism, has been criticized by Gail Fine, but wrongly so. Nevertheless, the problem that gives rise to her reading is a serious one and cannot be solved

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1 Fine 2003.
by the standard interpretation. I will further criticize this interpretation and argue that it results in a distorted reading of the text and a theory of flux that is too awkward to be taken seriously. To conclude, I will offer another interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION: PERCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

Most commentators hold that Protagoras’ doctrine amounts to perceptual relativism.² Perceptual properties are relational, that is to say, objects do not really and intrinsically have them; in the case of a change of colour, the coloured object undergoes a mere Cambridge change,³ that is to say, it does not itself genuinely change (just as the six dice in the example do not genuinely change from being more to being less).

This interpretation is criticized by Fine on the ground that it makes Heracliteanism irrelevant to Protagoras’ position, or even incompatible with it.

1.1. Fine’s Criticism

The argument against perceptual relativism is concentrated on 154 B 1–3, where Socrates says:

[1]

οὐκοὖν εἰ μὲν ὁ παραμετρούμεθα ἢ ὁ ἐφαπτόμεθα μέγα ἢ λευκόν ἢ θερμόν ἢν, οὐκ ἢν ποτε ἀλλὰ προσπεσών ἄλλο ἢν ἐγεγόνει, αὐτὸ γε μηδὲν μεταβάλλων.

Well now, if what we measure ourselves against or what we touch were large or white or hot, it would never have become different by having collided with another person, at any rate, not if it did not undergo any change itself.

Plato Theaetetus 154 B 1–3

Interpreted in terms of perceptual relativism, this passage says that an object can appear white and then not white whilst remaining unchanged itself. But this is in contradiction with 156 A 3–5, where Socrates says:

[2]

ἀρχῇ δὲ, ἐξ ὑς καὶ ἐνυδὴ ἐλέγομεν πάντα ἠρτηται, ἢδε αὐτῶν, ως τὸ πᾶν κίνησις ἢν καὶ ἄλλο παρὰ τούτῳ οὐδὲν.

² For instance, Cornford 1935; Burnyeat 1990; Lee 2000; McDowell 1973; Sedley 2004.
³ For a ‘Cambridge change’ see note 6 below; cp. Macé in this volume, n. 1, pp. 195–196 above.