THE 'EXQUISITE' ARGUMENT AT THT. 171 A

BY

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In his well-known and very helpful 'Introduction' to the Protagoras, Gregory Vlastos accuses Plato of "inadvertently vitiating his own polemic" against Protagorean subjectivism, in the 'exquisite' argument at Tht. 171 A, by failing to add the appropriate Protagorean 'for'-s after relevant truth functional words in the passage:1)

"Even Plato himself is not as careful as he should be on this point. While he puts in the 'for... ' almost invariably while reporting or describing Protagoras' doctrine (not only at 170a, but at 152b, c, 158a, and all through 166c-167c, where the repetition gets almost tiresome, and then again at 171e-172a; also at Crat. 385e-386d), he sometimes drops it in the course of arguing against Protagoras (e.g. in the 'exquisite' argument at 171a), thereby inadvertently vitiating his own polemic".

The argument in question reads as follows: "Protagoras, for his part, admitting as he does that everybody's opinion is true, must acknowledge the truth of his opponents' belief about his own belief, where they think he is wrong" 2).

Now the suggestion that Plato's omission of the relevant 'for'-s here was inadvertent seems dubious in light of the heed he has paid to this detail in both previous and subsequent passages (as Vlastos himself notes), and the close attention with which he has been pursuing the argument in this section of the dialogue (169 D-171 D). It is at least worth inquiring after alternative explanations.

Cornford provides us with one such alternative: the relevant 'for'-s are not really missing at all. Plato intends that the subjective

1) G. Vlastos, Plato's Protagoras (LLA: Indianapolis 1956), xiv, n. 27.
2) F. M. Cornford, Plato's Theory of Knowledge (LLA: Indianapolis 1957), 79. (Cornford notes here a similar argument attributed to Democritus in Sextus, Math. VII 389.) I shall follow Cornford's rendering throughout.
referents be understood, even where they are not explicit: “The argument has fairly deduced, on Protagoras’ own principles, the consequences of asserting that what every man thinks true is true for him. It does follow for Protagoras’ opponents that his doctrine is not true, and, for Protagoras himself, that their belief in its falsity is true for them”. Cornford then purports to find the argument’s weakness in another quarter: “This argument, however, is ad hominem. The real issue between Protagoras and Plato is too serious to be disposed of so lightly” 1).

This reading, however, shares with Vlastos’ interpretation one rather damaging false assumption: the assumption that it is possible to fill in the relevant ‘for’-s in 171 A in a manner consistent with Protagorean subjectivism.

Now Protagoras’ position is that “what seems true to anyone is true for him to whom it seems so” (170 A 3-4). Further, false judgments are impossible, “for it is not possible either to think the thing that is not or to think anything but what one experiences, and all experiences are true” (167 A 7-B 1). But what of judgments that other judgments are false? It is an “inevitable consequence” of the Protagorean doctrine, Socrates points out, “that no one regards anyone else . . . as making false judgments” (170 C 7-8, D 1-2). Yet it is just such an ‘impossible’ judgment that we find embedded in an essential way in the argument at 171 A (7-8). Hence there can be no acceptably Protagorean version of this argument.

The flaw in Protagorean subjectivism which Plato puts his finger on in 169 D-171 D is its inability to account for that class of second order judgments which assert the falsehood of first order judgments. And since the point has been overlooked, it is worth dwelling on it. The difficulty with these judgments is that no account can be given of them which does not at least implicitly recognize as legitimate (in at least this area of discourse) an objective notion of truth. And this consequence, we may gather, Protagoras himself would acknowledge as signaling his own defeat.

The relevant aspect of the Protagorean notion of truth in this passage—that which applies to what we may for convenience

1) Ibid., 8o.