Plato’s Self-Refutation Argument in Theaetetus 171A-C Revisited

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The last of a sequence of arguments Plato advances against Protagoras’ doctrine that Man is the measure of all things in the Theaetetus is the argument that has come to be known as the Self-Refutation Argument (171A6-C3). Commentators have correctly pointed out that in this passage Plato is applying to itself Protagoras’ Measure doctrine – understood as the doctrine that what seems to someone, or what someone judges, is true for that person. It is uncontroversial that the ostensible result of applying the doctrine to itself is Protagoras’ confession – which Socrates and Theodorus obtain in his absence – that the doctrine is false: he is made to agree that the doctrine is false because it is supposed to imply that those who judge it to be false are right. But there is little agreement on precisely how the argument is supposed to work, on its function in the context of the dialogue as a whole or on its soundness.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the argument is the absence of the qualifiers indicating for whom the various propositions are true. It has seemed to many that this omission is illegitimate and that Protagoras could rightly insist that the qualifiers be respected. If this were done, no confession could be forced from him as to the falsity of the Measure doctrine: Protagoras might admit that his doctrine is false for his opponents, but he could plausibly insist that their view is false for him.1 Yet, as Plato shows himself to be perfectly aware of the importance of the qualifiers elsewhere in the dialogue, it is hard to believe that their omission is a simple error. For such reasons some interpreters regard the argument as not fully serious.2


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It is clear and in fact taken for granted by most interpreters that *Theaetetus* 171A6-B8 reports in a dialogue between Socrates and Theodorus another hypothetical dialogue between Protagoras and opponents of his doctrine that Man is the measure of all things. That is to say, these lines report a hypothetical exchange between Protagoras and his opponents as a result of which Protagoras is supposed to admit the falsity of his doctrine. My main concern in this paper is to provide a plausible reconstruction of this original hypothetical dialogue. In particular, this involves explaining what is going on in lines B4-B8, whose function in the argument has generally been left unexplained. I come to the conclusion that a plausible reconstruction must suppose the qualifiers to be used in Protagoras’ hypothetical words. I contend that 171B4 must be understood as the opponents’ refusal to let Protagoras escape by means of qualification. Secondly, I evaluate Plato’s argument so reconstructed. My conclusion is that even if Plato does not prove Protagoras inconsistent here, he succeeds in silencing him in the sense that the opponents can claim to have obtained everything they wished for from Protagoras who does not have anything plausible to say in return.

In his “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*” Myles Burnyeat undertakes to defend Plato’s argument. I agree with Burnyeat on most of the philosophical background issues. In particular, I agree that on Protagoras’ theory the propositions “It seems to Socrates that *p*” and “It is true for Socrates that *p*” are intended to be equivalent but different in meaning and that Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine is best construed as a doctrine of personal worlds, as it were, in which everything really is as it seems to the person whose world is being described. A crucial step in Protagoras’ undoing is the consequence of the Measure doctrine that those who do not believe in it live in a world where truth is not relative. Furthermore, it seems to me that Burnyeat gives compelling reasons for believing that the argument is quite seriously meant and for interpreting it in such a way that the qualifiers are understood in the relevant places. However, as Burnyeat’s interpretation of the argument itself is unsatisfactory, I shall propose a new interpretation of it.

Here is the text of the passage itself (171A6-C5), numbering the steps for convenience in later references.

4 Burnyeat, 179-83.