

Protagoras of Abdera

The Sophists professed to be wise and to be capable of teaching wisdom. They often travelled from city to city, teaching rhetoric, politics, and how to be successful in life, commanding high fees for their expertise. Much of our evidence concerning the Sophists comes from Plato, who criticised them for seeking money rather than the truth and took them to be incapable of teaching virtue or indeed understanding its nature. Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490–420) was the most well known of the Sophists. He famously claimed that ‘man is the measure’ and seems to have defended a number of novel and interesting theses.

[T1] Protagoras was the first to declare that there are two mutually opposed arguments on any subject.

Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.51 (= DK 80 A1)

[T2] Protagoras made the weaker and stronger argument and taught his students to blame and praise the same person.

Stephanus of Byzantium *Ethnica* (= DK 80 A21)

[T3] Protagoras took it from there and said, “Young man, this is what you will get if you study with me: The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better.”

Plato *Protagoras* 318a–b (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T4] “If Hippocrates comes to me he will not experience what he would if he studied with some other sophist. The others abuse young men, steering them back again, against their will, into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music, and poetry” — at this point he gave Hippias a significant look — “but if he comes to me he will learn only what he has come for. What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters — how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action.”

Plato *Protagoras* 318e–319a (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T5] Protagoras claimed that: “man is the measure of all things: of those which are, that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not” (φησὶ γάρ πού “πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον” ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, “τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστι”).

Plato *Theaetetus* 152a (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T6] I'll tell you the kind of thing that might be said by those people who propose it as a rule that whatever a man thinks at any time is the truth for him [...] Whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him.

Plato *Theaetetus* 158e, 161d (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T7] Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself.

Plato *Theaetetus* 167c (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T8] Protagoras has it that human beings are the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are not that they are not (Καὶ ὁ Πρωταγόρας δὲ βούλεται πάντων χρημάτων εἶναι μέτρον τὸν ἄνθρωπον, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν).

Sextus Empiricus *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.216 (trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes [CUP])

[T9] Some people have also included Protagoras of Abdera in the chorus of philosophers who do away with the criterion, since he says that all appearances and opinions are true, and that truth is among the things in relation to something, given the fact that everything that has appeared to or been opined by someone is immediately the case in relation to that person. At any rate, at the beginning of his *Downthrowers* he announced “A human being is measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not” (“πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν”).

Sextus Empiricus *Against the Logicians* 7.60–1 (trans. R. Bett [CUP])

[T10] “I consider myself to be such a person, uniquely qualified to assist others in becoming noble and good, and worth the fee that I charge and even more, so much so that even my students agree. This is why I charge according to the following system: a student pays the full price only if he wishes to; otherwise, he goes into a temple, states under oath how much he thinks my lessons are worth, and pays that amount.”

Plato *Protagoras* 328b–c (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])

[T11] Among fallacious arguments the one which the Greeks call ἀντιστρέφον seems to be by far the most fallacious. Such arguments some of our own philosophers have rather appropriately termed *reciproca*, or “convertible.” The fallacy arises from the fact that the argument that is presented may be turned in the opposite direction and used against the one who has offered it, and is equally strong for both sides of the question. An example is the well-known argument which Protagoras, the keenest of all sophists, is said to have used against his pupil Euathlus.

For a dispute arose between them and an altercation as to the fee which had been agreed upon, as follows: Euathlus, a wealthy young man, was desirous of instruction in oratory and the pleading of causes. He became a pupil of Protagoras and promised to pay him a large sum of money, as much as Protagoras had demanded. He paid half of the amount at once, before beginning his lessons, and agreed to pay the remaining half on the day

when he first pleaded before jurors and won his case. Afterwards, when he had been for some little time a pupil and follower of Protagoras, and had in fact made considerable progress in the study of oratory, he nevertheless did not undertake any cases. And when the time was already getting long, and he seemed to be acting thus in order not to pay the rest of the fee, Protagoras formed what seemed to him at the time a wily scheme; he determined to demand his pay according to the contract, and brought suit against Euathlus.

And when they had appeared before the jurors to bring forward and to contest the case, Protagoras began as follows: "Let me tell you, most foolish of youths, that in either event you will have to pay what I am demanding, whether judgment be pronounced for or against you. For if the case goes against you, the money will be due me in accordance with the verdict, because I have won; but if the decision be in your favour, the money will be due me according to our contract, since you will have won a case."

To this Euathlus replied: "I might have met this sophism of yours, tricky as it is, by not pleading my own cause but employing another as my advocate. But I take greater satisfaction in a victory in which I defeat you, not only in the suit, but also in this argument of yours. So let me tell you in turn, wisest of masters, that in either event I shall not have to pay what you demand, whether judgment be pronounced for or against me. For if the jurors decide in my favour, according to their verdict nothing will be due you, because I have won; but if they give judgment against me, by the terms of our contract I shall owe you nothing, because I have not won a case."

Then the jurors, thinking that the plea on both sides was uncertain and insoluble, for fear that their decision, for whichever side it was rendered, might annul itself, left the matter undecided and postponed the case to a distant day. Thus a celebrated master of oratory was refuted by his youthful pupil with his own argument, and his cleverly devised sophism failed.

Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 5.10 (trans. J. C. Role [Loeb Classical Library])

Plato's Criticisms of Protagorean Relativism in the *Theaetetus*

[T12] SOCRATES: He says, does he not, that things are for every man what they seem to him to be?

THEODORUS: Yes, that is what he says [...]

SOCRATES: What then, Protagoras, are we to make of your argument? Are we to say that all men, on every occasion, judge what is true? Or that they judge sometimes truly and sometimes falsely? Whichever we say, it comes to the same thing, namely, that men do not always judge what is true; that human judgments are both true and false. For think, Theodorus, would you, would anyone of the school of Protagoras be prepared to contend that no one ever thinks his neighbour is ignorant or judging falsely?

THEODORUS: No, that's not a thing one could believe, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And yet it is to this that our theory has been driven — this theory that man is the measure of all things.

THEODORUS: How is that?

SOCRATES: Well, suppose you come to a decision in your own mind and then express a judgment about something to me. Let us assume with Protagoras that your judgment is

true for *you*. But isn't it possible that the rest of us may criticize your verdict? Do we always agree that your judgment is true? Or does there rise up against you, every time, a vast army of persons who think the opposite, who hold that your decisions and your thoughts are false?

THEODORUS: Heaven knows they do, Socrates, in their 'thousands and tens of thousands', as Homer says, and give me all the trouble that is humanly possible.

SOCRATES: Then do you want us to say that you are then judging what is true for yourself, but false for the tens of thousands?

THEODORUS: It looks as if that is what we must say, according to the theory, at any rate.

SOCRATES: And what of Protagoras himself? Supposing he himself did not believe that man is the measure, any more than the majority of people (who indeed do not believe it), must he not say that this *Truth* which he wrote is true for no one? On the other hand, suppose he believed it himself, but the majority of men do not agree with him; then you see — to begin with — the more those to whom it does not seem to be the truth outnumber those to whom it does, so much the more it isn't than it is?

THEODORUS: That must be so, if it is going to be or not be according to the individual judgment.

SOCRATES: Secondly, it has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is.

THEODORUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion?

THEODORUS: Yes, inevitably.

SOCRATES: But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong?

THEODORUS: No.

SOCRATES: But Protagoras again admits *this* judgment to be true, according to his written doctrine?

THEODORUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: It will be disputed, then, by everyone, beginning with Protagoras — or rather, it will be admitted by him, when he grants to the person who contradicts him that he judges truly — when he does that, even Protagoras himself will be granting that neither a dog nor the 'man in the street' is the measure of anything at all which he has not learned. Isn't that so?

THEODORUS: It is so.

SOCRATES: Then since it is disputed by everyone, the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all, not even for himself?

Plato *Theaetetus* 170a, 170c–171c (in J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* [Hackett])