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David Levy
SUNY Geneseo, Levy@geneseo.edu

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“The ‘Digression’ in Plato’s *Theaetetus*:
A New Interpretation”

David Levy
University of Rochester

I take it that one of Plato’s goals in the *Theaetetus* is to point out exactly what is wrong with the following Protagorean doctrine:

Man is the measure of all things—alike of the being of things that
are and of the not-being of things that are not (152A).¹

Indeed, this task occupies the largest single section of the dialogue; the discussion of the Protagorean doctrine takes up the better part of 27 Stephanus pages, beginning at 152A, and continuing through 179D. That this is so should initially surprise the reader of the dialogues. Hadn’t Protagoras already received his due in the dialogue named for him? And why should Protagoras, or at least his teachings, play so central a role in a dialogue concerned with finding a definition of *knowledge*, when Protagoras himself, a sophist, was primarily concerned with teaching his students to be better at the game of politics?

In this paper, I propose that answers to these questions are found in Socrates’ “digression” at *Th.* 172D-177C. As will become clear, the digression primarily takes up political themes, which again should leave the reader wondering about its placement in a dialogue concerning epistemology. It is my contention that Plato believed these themes to be intimately bound up with Protagoras’s doctrine, and that his comments on these themes are an integral part of his critique of that doctrine.² In arguing for my position, I do not intend to take up the question of whether or not Plato succeeds in *refuting* the Protagorean doctrine. Rather, I believe that the literature which focuses on that question is deficient for its failure to pay sufficient attention to the digression. After briefly reviewing this literature, I will offer an interpretation of the digression which makes clear its relationship to Plato’s overall critique of Protagoras.

Before turning to the literature, I will provide a brief synopsis of what happens in the digression. At 172D3 Socrates begins to contrast those who spend their time in law courts and those who engage in philosophical study. Lawyers, politicians, and orators do not have the leisure to engage in truly free inquiry; instead, they conduct their examinations under pressure from the water clock. Moreover, they are not free to follow the path of the argument wherever it takes them, but must stay close to the heart of the matter at hand. Philosophers, on the other hand, conduct their inquiries without concern

¹All references to the *Theaetetus* are to F. M. Cornford’s 1935 translation. Stephanus page references to this dialogue will appear in the body of the text. The question of precisely what form this critique of Protagoras takes is an interesting one. Indeed, one of the purposes of this paper is to try to get clear on this very issue. As will become clear, for many commentators the central question is whether or not Plato succeeds in *refuting* Protagoras through strict, logical argument. For a commentator who believes that this question is misguided, see Edward N. Lee, “‘Hoist with His Own Petard’: Ironic and Comic Elements in Plato’s Critique of Protagoras (*Th.* 161-171)”, in *Exegesis and Argument* (ed. E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, R. M. Rorty), *Phronesis* Suppl. Vol. 1, 1973: Van Gorcum & Co. (Assen, The Netherlands), 225-261. See esp. 256, n. 41.

²The precise placement of the digression, I believe, should indicate that Plato himself thought it an integral part of his arguments against Protagoras. After all, it is “sandwiched” between the so-called *peritrope* and the final arguments levied against Protagoras. As I will make clear in what follows, I think that this placement has too often been misunderstood, leading to the relative lack of serious discussion of the digression within the secondary literature.

for time. This absolute freedom of inquiry allows them to take up whatever topic arises. Whereas the orator has a great need to keep up with the gossip of the marketplace--knowledge of personal scandals can serve one well in a debate judged by the rabble, after all--the philosopher does not even know the way to the marketplace. Of course, this makes the philosopher appear foolish if ever he enters a law court. However, the orator appears equally foolish if he is ever required to consider the nature of justice or kingship, rather than particular matters of one person wronging another.

The digression comes to an end with Socrates discussing the right motive for being virtuous and avoiding vice. Contrary to what is generally believed, the right motive is not to have the *appearance* of a good person. Instead, the right reason for taking the righteous path is that, in doing so, one is following the pattern of divine happiness. All those who fail to follow this path live in an eternal state of godless misery; such misery is brought about by the very lives they lead, where they find themselves in constant association with others like them. If only they would agree to submit their beliefs to an impartial examination, they would discover that they cannot give a satisfactory account of them, and would become as silent as children.

A common mistake made in the literature on the *Theaetetus* is to ignore entirely the presence of the digression.³ Kenneth M. Sayre, in *Plato's Analytic Method*,⁴ makes this mistake. Sayre includes an 80-page chapter on the *Theaetetus* in which the digression is not mentioned at all. Indeed, in the entire book, only one passage from the digression is cited, and that appears in Sayre's chapter on the *Sophist*.⁵ This might be understandable if Sayre were not focusing on the part of the dialogue which deals with the critique of Protagoras.⁶ Yet, Sayre does take up this part of the dialogue. Sayre works very hard to get clear on the precise form of the argument which immediately precedes the digression, the *peritrope*, and argues that this argument is unsound.⁷ Moreover, Sayre offers some remarks on the argument which immediately follows the digression.⁸ Highly conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the digression. We should expect Sayre to provide some justification for ignoring this part of the dialogue, yet none is forthcoming. As I will argue later, understanding the digression is essential to understanding what Plato is doing with the Protagorean doctrine. As such, Sayre's discussion of this part of the dialogue is limited by its failure to take note of the digression.

Another common approach to the digression is to acknowledge its presence, but set it aside as a relatively insignificant rhetorical device. This is the tactic Robin Waterfield employs in the critical essay attached to his translation of the dialogue.⁹

³There are even some translators who leave this section of the dialogue out entirely. This is the case with Gwynneth Matthews' translation in *Plato's Epistemology*, 1972: Faber & Faber (London).

⁴Kenneth M. Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, 1969: University of Chicago Press (Chicago).

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 179, n. 40 recalls the digression's characterization of the philosopher as a "free man" (*Tht.* 172D).

⁶This is the case with Nicholas P. White's *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 1976: Hackett Publishing Company (Indianapolis). Although White's book contains a 40-page chapter on the *Theaetetus*, he is mostly concerned with the dialogue's treatment of the problem of false belief.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 87-91.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 91-92. This argument turns on the expert's ability to predict the future.

⁹Robin Waterfield (trans.), *Theaetetus*, 1987: Penguin Books (New York). See also Gilbert Ryle, *Plato's Progress*, 1966: Cambridge (Cambridge University Press). Ryle describes the digression as "long and philosophically quite pointless" (p. 158).

Plato pauses from hard argument against Protagoras and inserts a few pages of glorious, impassioned writing contrasting the mentality of philosophers with that of the worldly-wise...[A]s a rhetorical passage, it needs little commentary: *its merits are on the surface*.¹⁰

Later, Waterfield adds that the digression “stands on its own.”¹¹ What could Waterfield, and others like him, mean by this? We might begin to answer this question by focusing on Waterfield’s claim that Plato “pauses” here from strict argument.¹²

The section immediately preceding the digression is one of the harder sections of the dialogue to follow. Indeed, a considerable body of literature concerns the form of the argument from 170A to 172C is. The success or failure of this argument turns heavily on figuring out what form it takes; an invalid deductive argument does not prove anything. Plato himself seems to have recognized that some defect has infected his argument; so Socrates notes that, if he could, Protagoras “would expose me thoroughly for talking such nonsense and you [Theodorus] for agreeing to it” (171D). With this comment in mind, all the commentators who focus on finding the flaw, if any, in the argument preceding the digression are certainly justified in their work. Moreover, when Socrates refers to the immediately following pages as a “digression” (177C), it does seem natural to read the intervening pages as a hiatus from strict argument.

However, the attitude implicit in Waterfield’s comments seems to be that the digression is nothing more than Socrates’ way of entertaining the reader with a song and dance. After being run ragged by the difficult arguments of the preceding passages, the story seems to go, the reader needs a break in order to catch her breath.¹³ And so Socrates presents his caricatures of the orator and the philosopher. The commentators who adopt this attitude to the digression fail to recognize that, behind Socrates’ caricatures, serious philosophical work is being done. Not only is Plato directing his mouthpiece to comment on the characteristics representative of the orator and the philosopher and of the situations in which each finds himself, but in doing so, he is continuing his critique of the Protagorean position. The position for which I wish to argue takes Socrates’ description of the passage from 172D-177C as a “digression” as ironic. That is, contrary to the attitude which best explains the position taken by commentators such as Waterfield, I propose that we take the digression very seriously, and look for its merits well beneath the surface.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 177. Emphasis added.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹²Although Francis M. Cornford does not make this exact mistake, it is worth noting here one remark from his treatment of the *Theaetetus* (*Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*, 1957: New York (The Library of Liberal Arts)). Cornford notes that at the end of the digression, “[t]he argument is now resumed” (p. 89). This places Cornford squarely in the group of commentators who, like Waterfield, believe that Plato uses the digression to take a break from strict argument.

¹³There is another way of interpreting the attitude which leads to ignoring the digression. Rather than providing an opportunity for the reader to catch her breath, perhaps the digression is seen as Plato’s way of signaling that a lot of work needs to be done in order to understand the preceding arguments. Perhaps the digression is placed at this point in the dialogue as Plato’s way of saying to the reader, “If you want to try to figure out that last argument (the *peritrope*), go right ahead. The dramatic action of the dialogue will continue, but you will not be missing any important philosophical points.” Again, I think that this way of reading the digression is equally flawed for failing to recognize the serious work which Socrates is doing in this passage.

A commentator who has realized the importance of the digression is Edward N. Lee, who acknowledges that the digression "helps shed important light upon the purposes and central ironies in the critique he [Plato] levels at Protagoras."¹⁴ Moreover, Lee indicates that he believes that any reading of the dialogue which fails to take into consideration the points made in the digression is, at most, incomplete. This is a crucial point about which I agree with Lee.¹⁵ However, the only use Lee makes of the digression is to demonstrate how it relates to Plato's earlier critique of Protagoras. To be fair, Lee acknowledges the limited focus of his interpretation. He writes: "The present analysis directs itself only to the ironic structure of...161B-171D, but it is not at all my thesis that these pages form any simply detachable unit or that they are discontinuous with the remainder of the critique."¹⁶ So Lee is to be given credit for *not* saying that the *only* value the digression has is as an instrument for understanding the preceding arguments against Protagoras. Still, it must be admitted that Lee does not do any work toward establishing a reading of the digression in which it stands on its own, in which its value is intrinsic rather than instrumental. Again, the absence of this work is excusable, given Lee's project. But it is this very absence which I wish to eliminate, in order to provide a more complete account of the digression and its role in the critique of Protagoras. And so I now turn to my own interpretation of the digression.

The digression is immediately preceded by Socrates speaking about extreme conventionalism with respect to "right and wrong and in matters of religion" (172B). People who adopt this sort of position affirm that justice and injustice, holiness and unholiness, have no natural independent existence; rather, all that exists with respect to these things is the common opinion, which becomes true as soon as it is enacted and remains true as long as that opinion does not change. Given that much of the digression concerns individuals who find themselves in places where decisions about such matters are made, we should pause for a moment and try to figure out the connection Plato sees between this topic and the overall epistemological critique of Protagoras. I believe Plato

¹⁴Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

¹⁵I have mentioned this conviction of mine several times already, and so I think it is time for me to say a little more about it. It is *not* my belief that a reading of the dialogue which fails to account for the digression is, *ipso facto*, wrong. I do think that it is a legitimate undertaking to try to figure out the logical form of the arguments Plato offers, determine if they are valid, and, if so, how credible the premises are. To this extent, the question of whether or not Plato succeeds in *refuting* the Protagorean doctrine is an important one. (Here is one of the points where I disagree with Lee; see n.1, above.) However, I think the mistake such commentators make is believing that this is the *only* way to read the dialogue, and the *only* question to ask. On the assumption that Plato recognized that not everyone would be convinced by the *peritrope*, coupled with Plato's desire to point out all the ways in which the Protagorean goes wrong, we should expect Plato to offer various reasons not to accept the Protagorean doctrine; those who would be able to follow the logic of the *peritrope*, or at least get excited enough by it to try to figure out if it succeeds or not, were not all the members of Plato's audience. Moreover, even among those who could follow the argument there might be those who would resist the conclusion, *viz.*, those disposed to accept the Protagorean position. As I will argue later, Plato believed, with good reason, that the most important practical and moral matters stand or fall with the rejection or acceptance of the Protagorean doctrine. For this reason, it was extremely important to Plato to persuade as many people as he could not to be Protagoreans. Plato was not willing to let those people who could not follow the logic of the *peritrope* become Protagoreans just because they could not follow that argument. Nor was he willing to let those generally suspicious of that sort of argument become (or remain) Protagoreans. As such, it is equally legitimate to identify the reasons Plato offered to those people, and to evaluate them on their own terms. (I guess the moral I wish to draw from this is that the goals of, on the one hand, refuting Protagoras and, on the other hand, convincing people not to be Protagoreans even if they do not see that the position is self-refuting are not mutually exclusive.)

¹⁶Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

recognizes at least two such connections. In the first place, the sort of conventionalism mentioned at 172B is, as Cornford puts it, “the extreme consequence of making man the measure of all things”.¹⁷ Although Plato seems to have recognized that this position goes beyond what the historical Protagoras held,¹⁸ it is not surprising that he would include it here. In the process of examining a philosophical position, we often want to know what consequences result from a consistent application of the principles constitutive of that position. At times, such an investigation reveals consequences we reasonably find unacceptable. Although this does not give us reason to reject the position under investigation, it indicates that there is a need to appeal to some other principle in order to block those consequences.¹⁹ In the process of compiling all the reasons to reject the Protagorean doctrine, then, this move is methodologically sound.²⁰

The second connection I believe Plato draws is more peculiar to Plato’s metaphilosophy. For Plato in particular, there is good reason to discuss matters political and ethical while doing epistemology. For Plato, the answer to the question, “What is knowledge?” has significant ethical ramifications.²¹ It is inseparably connected to the answers to the questions, “What is virtue?”, “Can virtue be taught?”, and “How ought I to live my life?” To help see this, I think we need to remind ourselves that virtue is identified with knowledge at *Meno* 88C-D and at *Protagoras* 361B-C. Further, we should recall the triple role assigned to the Good-Itself in *Republic* VI and VII.²² Not only is the Good-Itself the pinnacle of Plato’s ethics, but it is also the capstone of his ontology and the supreme object of knowledge.²³ With this background in mind, it becomes somewhat easier to see why we are led into a discussion of ethics and politics in the middle of the investigation into the nature of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. If Protagoras’s relativistic doctrine—even in its most extreme form—is the correct account of

¹⁷Cornford, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁸At 172C, he calls the adherents to this position “those who do not argue altogether as Protagoras does”. That this position goes *beyond* what the historical Protagoras maintained can be seen from what Socrates says at both 166C-167D and 171E-172A. In both cases, Socrates attributes to Protagoras—in the earlier passage, going so far to put the words in Protagoras’s mouth, were he able to come back from the dead and defend himself—the position that, though all decisions in these sorts of matters are true, some are better than others. Extreme conventionalists of the sort described at 172B reject this final claim; for them, there is no basis for making any such judgment.

¹⁹Plato often uses this strategy. For just one example, see the *kinaidos* objection to Callicles’ hedonism at *Gorg.* 494B-495C.

²⁰At the end of the paper, I will return to this issue and connect the points against Protagoras made here with those made elsewhere in the overall critique.

²¹I am tempted to say something quite a bit stronger here. It almost seems as if, for Plato, the question, “What is knowledge?” is itself an ethical question. Nowadays, it is commonplace to (logically) distinguish between questions metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical. It is not clear to what extent Plato recognized these distinctions. However, I do not think anything of any great weight turns on this in the present discussion.

²²See especially 505A-B, 509B-C, and 516B-517C.

²³I recognize that these remarks will be contested by many interpreters of Plato. Not only are they a controversial reading of Books VI-VII of the *Republic*, but they also ignore substantive questions concerning the evolution of Plato’s thought between the writing of the *Republic* and that of the *Theaetetus*. Whether or not my reading is correct, I remain convinced that Plato held onto his systematic approach until at least this stage in his career.

knowledge, disaster results in matters of ethics and politics. This, I believe, is the point of placing the digression in the middle of the critique of Protagoras.

Early in the digression, Plato has Socrates give a characterization of the orator, and of the situations in which the orator is most likely to be found.

The orator is always talking against time, hurried on by the clock; there is no space to enlarge upon any subject he chooses, but the adversary stands over him ready to recite a schedule of the points to which he must confine himself. He is a slave disputing about a fellow slave before a master sitting in judgment with some definite plea in his hand, and the issue is never indifferent, but his personal concerns are always at stake, sometimes even his life. (172E)

From this description, it is clear that Plato is talking about the law courts. The *Theaetetus* is filled with images of legal proceedings, from the earliest pages--at 145C Socrates tells Theaetetus that "we don't want [Theodorus] to have to give evidence on oath" concerning the youth's character--to this middle section of the dialogue, to the famous "jury" passage from 201A-C--the point of which is to show that the methods of inquiry demanded by such proceedings are incompatible with knowledge acquisition--to the final image of the dialogue at 210D, where we see Socrates going to meet the charges which have been brought against him. In all of these images the tone is decidedly negative. I would suggest that this is so in every case for two reasons.²⁴ First of all, when charges were brought against an individual, both the charged individual and the person bringing the charges would have to make a written statement which strictly limited the range of points admissible during the legal procedure. Moreover, during the trial each side would have a fixed amount of time to make his points. In this way, the orator was not "free" to explore other issues, nor was he able to investigate completely issues from within the permitted range. Given these limitations, and given the interests at stake ("personal concerns..., sometimes even his life") it would not be unusual for the truth of the matter to be lost in the shuffle. Instead, the primary concern became convincing the jury to believe your side of the story over your adversary's. To succeed at this task, it was extremely useful to have at one's disposal the skills of rhetoric. That this is so may be reinforced by Plato's second point against the legal system.

In the law court, once each side has had a chance to make its case, the matter is turned over to the jury. Each member of the jury is given a vote, and what the jury decides is the ruling on the matter. In other words, the jury is treated as the measure of the matter. Regardless of what really happened in the case at hand, regardless of the actual guilt or innocence of the accused, as far as society is concerned, what the jury says is the truth. Given this situation, Plato believes it is absolutely essential to be skilled in rhetoric in this setting. With the jury as the measure, there is no necessary connection between the facts of the case and the verdict. What is more important is the ability to manipulate the jury members so that they accept your side of the story. In this way, Plato sees the entire jury system as a product of a Protagorean way of thinking.

Plato is highly critical of this situation. He describes the man able to succeed in this environment as

narrow and crooked. An apprenticeship in slavery has dwarfed and twisted his growth and robbed him of his free spirit, driving him into devious ways, threatening him with fears and dangers

²⁴In what follows I will limit my discussion to proceedings within the law courts. However, I take it that most of my points are equally applicable to the sort of debates which took place in the Assembly or even the marketplace.

which the tenderness of youth could not face with truth and honesty; so, turning from the first to lies and the requital of wrong with wrong, warped and stunted, he passes from youth to manhood with no soundness in him... (173A-B)

Plato's first criticism of the extreme Protagorean in the digression, while not explicitly directed at the man-measure doctrine, does have as its ultimate target that doctrine. Plato is critical of the legal system and its institutions for "warping" the minds of its participants. Given that juries were often comprised of hundreds of people, and that debates in the popular assembly were often attended by thousands of citizens, these participants would have included virtually everyone with Athenian citizenship. What Plato sees, then, is a connection between the Athenian legal system and the declining health of the average Athenian's soul. Rather than allowing its citizens to develop fully, it leaves them in a grotesquely deformed state. They do not know how to conduct an inquiry the goal of which is truth; they do not know how to give free range to their thoughts and take the kind of perspective needed to see the connections among a large variety of concepts. Instead, the sole purpose of conducting an inquiry is to prevail over your opponent, and to win public honors for having done so. Given the connection we have seen between these institutions and the man-measure doctrine, I will call this warped state of the soul the Protagorean deformation.²⁵

To see further why Plato would be concerned about this, it will be useful to recall one of the most famous parts of Socrates' defense. It is especially appropriate to do so in this context, given the overall dramatic setting of the *Theaetetus*. Toward the close of his defense, Socrates says:

"...I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" ...I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things...I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence brings about wealth and all other public and private blessings for men."²⁶

For Plato, as for Socrates, the most important matters have to do with the state of one's soul. The state of one's soul is not determined by the acquisition of external goods; an

²⁵ There are many interesting connections between this line of thought and several points made in the *Gorgias*. Although there is not space to explore these fully, I will briefly mention one. In the closing pages of the *Gorgias*, Socrates describes for Callicles the process of judging souls before they enter either the Isles of the Blessed or Tartarus. At 525A Socrates characterizes those souls bound for Tartarus as "deeply scarred, ... twisted by lies and impostures, crooked because [they have] received no nourishment from truth" (Helmbold translation). In the overall context of the discussion with Callicles, it is clear that the sort of individual being described is one who lives a life of impunity and who uses rhetoric solely for the purpose of flattering others, "whether the few or the many" (*Gorg.* 527C).

²⁶ *Apol.* 29D-30B. Grube translation.

individual who amasses great wealth and receives many public honors does not necessarily have a healthy soul. Just as Socrates found the level of psychic sickness high among the Athenians who focused their energy on possessing wealth and power instead of wisdom and truth, so Plato found the souls of the Athenians to be deformed.

Moreover, Plato criticizes those who capitalize on the needs brought about by this system and its institutions. To return to the passage from 173A-B quoted above, we should remind ourselves that Plato relates the deformation of the average Athenian's soul to some sort of "apprenticeship". By implication, then, there is a second individual--or group of individuals--being discussed. This individual, whoever it is, is responsible for the training of those Athenians who were able to succeed in the law courts through their use of rhetoric. We have already seen the relationship between institutions such as the law courts and Protagoras's measure doctrine. Although Protagoras claimed to be a teacher of virtue or excellence, it is clear that he also taught rhetoric.²⁷ There is a strong connection between his relativism and rhetoric. If all impressions are true for the individual who has them, then whenever there is an issue to be settled by the jury, there are no independent "facts" to which one can appeal. If there are no such facts, then the only way to get the members of the jury to adopt the position one is advocating is to make it seem the most salutary of their options. The ways to do that, of course, are the area of expertise of the teacher of rhetoric.

At this point in the digression, at Theodorus's insistence,²⁸ Socrates offers a contrasting picture of the philosopher. In highly exaggerated terms, Socrates paints a picture of an entirely other-worldly ascetic. The true philosopher never finds himself in any place where people are wont to gossip. He has no concerns with the affairs of his neighbors. Rather than concerning himself with matters of this world, he turns his attention to the heavens, and tries to discover the true nature of everything.²⁹ Of course this characterization is exaggerated.³⁰ However, what emerges from it is a picture of the philosopher completely contrary to the product of the Protagorean deformation. We are told that the true philosophers "never hear a decree read out or look at the text of a law" (173D). The philosopher has no need to pay attention to such mundane things. After all, it is the philosopher who recognizes that there is a universal law which is the true governor of man's actions. What one man, or one assembly of men, decrees to be the law does not thereby gain any special power over the actions of humankind. In this way, the true philosopher recognizes that man is certainly *not* the measure of all things.

In contrast, those who offer such decrees, and those who stop to listen to them and to read the text of the conventional law, are the same people who worry about the gossip of the marketplace and who judge their neighbors on the basis of their ancestry. Although these people may not recognize the Protagorean foundation of their actions, their actions are certainly grounded in some sort of Protagorean principle. They believe that the decree of the assembly becomes the law to which they are beholden simply because men have said so. They believe the tales told in the marketplace and at social

²⁷See, for example, DK 80B6b.

²⁸By quite a comic turn, Plato has Theodorus here say: "[W]e are not the servants of the argument, which must stand and wait for the moment when we choose to pursue this or that topic to a conclusion" (173C). If my reading of the digression as itself part of the argument against Protagoras is correct, we must take Theodorus's remark about the argument being put on hold as ironic. For those who hesitate to attribute to Theodorus the sophistication needed to recognize this, I offer that Plato has allowed Theodorus to *unwittingly* make this ironic comment.

²⁹Quite literally in Thales' case, as we are reminded at 174A.

³⁰One is here reminded of the "common" perception of the philosopher as "useless" at *Rep.* 487D, or of Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates' "school" in *Clouds*.

dinners, and alter their relations accordingly.³¹ To use Plato's metaphor, they never seek "the true nature of everything as a whole," choosing instead to sink "to what lies close at hand" (174A).

As Plato sees it, these are also the people who dominate Athenian society. Athenian democracy and law courts encourage and embrace Protagorean relativism, whether they realize it or not. This situation spells trouble for the philosopher, whose complete lack of concern for this world plays to his disadvantage when he is thrust into a situation in which "he is forced to talk about what lies at his feet or is before his eyes" (174C). In particular, if the philosopher finds himself in a law court, facing charges brought against him by one of the rabble, he will have no hope of convincing a jury of his innocence. For Plato, exposing this situation for what it is and trying to initiate some push for reform is a matter of the greatest urgency.

I think we are now in a position to see what the argument of the digression is. After presenting it in its most general form, I will make some brief remarks about it before returning to the rest of the digression, and to the question of the digression's placement in the overall critique of Protagoras's doctrine.

Pr. 1—If the acceptance of a philosophical position produces bad consequences in important matters, then it ought to be rejected.

Pr. 2--Acceptance of the Protagorean measure doctrine produces bad consequences in important political and ethical matters.

C-- The Protagorean measure doctrine ought to be rejected.

We have already reviewed a bit of Plato's support for the second premise. There are at least two areas in which acceptance of the Protagorean doctrine produces bad consequences: it warps the "spirit" of the average Athenian, and it leads to injustice in the legal system.

That Plato would endorse the first premise of this argument I take to be generally clear. I have already provided some reason for believing this. For Plato, there are very close connections among epistemological, ontological, and ethical issues; this seems to be one of the key ideas expressed by placing the Good-Itself at the pinnacle of his ontology. What is needed, however, is some reason to think that this premise is at work in the digression. At first glance, there is not any. Still, we have already seen that we can be grossly misled about the digression if we rely on initial appearances. With that in mind, I propose that we can find the first premise within the text of the digression.

As I mentioned earlier in my brief synopsis of the digression, the final movement of the passage concerns the right motive for being righteous. Rather quickly, Socrates rejects the common idea that the right motive is to "seem innocent and good" (176B). In the absence of genuine goodness, the mere semblance of goodness is insufficient when it comes to what is really important.³² While it is true that the semblance of goodness is often enough to avoid penalties in this life,³³ the absence of righteousness in the soul brings a penalty which "cannot be escaped" (176E). This penalty is an earth-bound life

³¹Once again we are reminded of Socrates' trial at this point. The effects of gossip are what Socrates labels the "old charges" at *Apol.* 18B-E. Socrates also recognizes that these effects will be the hardest to overcome.

³²Note that this common idea, which equates seeming good with being good, itself bears a close connection to Protagoras's measure doctrine.

³³These are the "stripes and death" referred to at 176D/E.

of “godless misery,” devoid of all hope of entering the realm of divine happiness (176E-177A). For our purposes, what is crucial to note about this is that it is an *argument* for rejecting the common conception. The reasons for rejecting it point out that those who accept the common conception will be eternally miserable. More generally, acceptance of this conception produces bad consequences in an important matter. If this is an accurate reading of the closing of the digression, then, for the argument to have any merit, Plato must be employing our Pr. 1.

Given the dramatic setting of the dialogue, Plato forces us to confront the reality of the situation. The general acceptance of the Protagorean doctrine leads to the greatest injustices, not the least of which is Socrates’ execution. Plato, then, is trying to compile all the reasons not to accept the Protagorean measure doctrine. He has already tried to demonstrate that the Protagorean position is self-refuting. On the assumption that this argument would not persuade everyone not to accept that position, Plato continued to offer arguments against accepting it. By turning his attention to the extreme conventionalism of the digression, and the unacceptable consequences that result from accepting it, he is pointing out the need modify the position by appealing to other principles.³⁴ Once the digression is complete, Socrates and Theodorus return to a more moderate version of the Protagorean position in which qualitative differences among judgments are spelled out in terms of experts and their ability to make reliable predictions about the future. Socrates then proceeds to argue that the principle invoked here is not consistent with the measure doctrine.³⁵ If these are the only, or the most appealing, ways to spell out the Protagorean position, then Plato has succeeded in eliminating the Protagorean position from the table of viable alternatives, and in setting the stage for discovering the true nature of knowledge, virtue, and justice. Finally, Plato is not guilty of employing the same tactics for which he criticizes Protagoras, for the brand of persuasion he employs is “beautiful, a genuine attempt to make the souls of [his] fellows as excellent as may be.”^{36,37}

³⁴Andrew Barker, in “The Digression in the *Theaetetus*”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976), 457-462, refers to the argument of the digression as “popular” as opposed to “philosophical” (p. 462). Barker considers the argument to be focused on the different sorts of subjects discussed by the orator and the philosopher: whereas the orator discusses particular local conventions only, the philosopher discusses universal moral natures. Barker then criticizes the argument for the “common-sense assumption” on which it rests (p. 462). I have two points to make, one against Barker’s interpretation, and one in favor of my own. Against Barker it can be noted that he fails to draw the connection between the man-measure doctrine and the institutions which give it license. In favor of my interpretation, it can be noted that it does not rest on any “common-sense assumption”.

³⁵ See 177C5-179D1 for this argument.

³⁶*Gorg.* 503A.

³⁷An earlier version of this paper was read at the 21st Annual Graduate Philosophy Conference sponsored by the Graduate Philosophy Organization of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Matt Johnston provided comments. I would like to thank the Philosophy Department of the University of Rochester for supporting my research on this project. Eva Cadavid, Catherine McKeen, David Merli, and Greg Wheeler forced me to work through several of the broader issues involved in this paper, especially the way in which I see the digression fitting within Plato’s overall critique of Protagoras. Finally, Deborah Modrak and Randall Curren have provided many valuable insights and criticisms as my thoughts on this issue have developed.