PART I

Logic and Dialectic
CHAPTER I

Protagoras and self-refutation in later Greek philosophy

If a philosophical argument is worth attention, so is its history. Traces it has left in the thought of philosophers who have concerned themselves with it have the historical import they do in part because they reveal aspects, often unexpected ones, of the argument’s philosophical interest and significance. Such is the case, at any rate, with the argument I want to investigate here.

This is an argument directed against Protagoras, the most famous of the Greek sophists of the fifth century BC, claiming that his doctrine that man is the measure of all things is self-refuting. It is an argument which had a long history. The most familiar version occurs in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (171ab), where it has an important part to play in refuting the extreme empiricist epistemology which the dialogue elaborates out of a definition of knowledge as perception. But already before Plato Democritus had used the argument, and in his hands it no doubt played some part in securing the epistemological foundations of atomism. After Plato the argument appears in Book π of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1008a28–30, 1012b13–18; cf. K1063b30–5) in connection with Aristotle’s defence of the law of contradiction. It then turns up again in the writings of Sextus Empiricus as part of the Sceptic philosophy’s elaborately systematic refutation of all dogmatisms. This last context is the one I shall be considering here.

Sextus was the leading Sceptic philosopher of his time (circa AD 200) and his surviving works, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (abbreviated PH from the Greek title) and *Against the Mathematicians* (abbreviated M), are full of information about the controversies that took place between and within the philosophical movements which grew up in the period after the death

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1 The evidence is the passage of Sextus Empiricus which is to be quoted shortly. Admittedly, Sextus is the sole testimony to the fact, but there appears to be no reason to distrust him and there is independent evidence that Democritus wrote, in Plutarch’s words (Against Colotes 1109a, in DK 68b16), ‘persuasively and at length’ against Protagoras. The natural inference is that Democritus was in some sense the inventor of the argument. It hardly counts that Plato does not acknowledge his predecessor’s use of it, since the name of Democritus is never allowed to appear in any Platonic work.
of Aristotle. The Greek Sceptics were engaged on all sides in attempting to show up the worthlessness of other philosophers’ dogmatisms, meaning any definite views about external reality and matters not immediately evident in appearance. The goal of their arguments was to induce epoché, a complete suspension of judgement and the cessation of all definite assertion beyond the acknowledgement of immediate appearances (cf. PH 1.13–15). Naturally, these arguments did not go unchallenged. The Stoics in particular, the great logicians of the period, had much to say in defence of their own brand of dogmatism. What I hope to do by placing the self-refutation of Protagoras in the context of some of these controversies is, on the one hand, to illuminate the argument itself and, on the other, to call attention to some interesting features of the controversies and the methods by which they were conducted. A subsidiary aim is to contribute to dispelling the impression given by so many history books that the period was one of rigid schools and systems, without the discussion and debate which enlivens the work of Aristotle, Plato and their predecessors.

But first, a preliminary word about Protagoras himself and the doctrine which the self-refutation argument proposes to subvert. Protagoras wrote a book entitled Truth, which began

Man is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not.

According to Plato, whose account in the Theaetetus has by far the best claim to authenticity, this pronouncement introduces a form of relativism. The doctrine that man is the measure of all things asserts that each man is the measure or authoritative judge of how things are for him, in this sense, that things are for him exactly as they appear to him to be. Perceptual appearances are the paradigm case: here we can understand ‘It appears to a that p’ as recording a perceptual experience which the doctrine claims is invariably veridical (for the perceiver). But Protagoras applied the same principle to nonperceptual cases, where, one might think, ‘It appears to a that p’ hardly amounts to more than that a judges or believes that p.

The extension may have little but bluff to support it, but that difficulty need not concern us here. It suffices that Protagoras’ position, according to Plato, is that, quite generally, the way a man takes things to be is the way they are for him, so that every judgement whatsoever is true for the person whose judgement it is.

The title and the position of the fragment are vouched for by Plato, Theaetetus 165c. Sextus Empiricus, M v.7.60, confirms the position of the quoted fragment but gives a different and probably later title, Downthrowers, which no doubt reflects the type of argument to be found in the book.
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After Plato, however, in Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus and the later sources generally, Protagoras is understood rather differently: not as a relativist but as a subjectivist whose view is that every judgement is true simpliciter – true absolutely, not merely true for the person whose judgement it is. To illustrate the difference: the subjectivist version of the Measure doctrine is in clear violation of the law of contradiction, since it allows one person’s judgement that something is so and another person’s judgement that it is not so both to be true together; whereas the relativist version can plead that there is no contradiction in something being so for one person and not so for another. The difference will also show itself in connection with the self-refutation argument. It is certainly curious that what appears to be one and the same argument should be found in both Plato and the later writers, despite their different interpretations of Protagoras and despite the fact that it is not at all obvious that the argument has equal validity against both the relativist and the subjectivist versions of his philosophy. But this problem is part of the wider historical puzzle set by the transformation in the ancient tradition which left Protagoras with an arid subjectivist viewpoint that no one is likely to defend in place of an intriguing form of relativism which some think is still unrefuted. We are to consider here the argument in Sextus Empiricus, and that means tackling Protagoras in the subjectivist guise which prevailed from Aristotle onward; in a companion paper I shall take up the question of how the charge of self-refutation fares against the relativist Protagoras of Plato’s Theaetetus.

All this has been introduction and background to the following passage:

One cannot say that every appearance is true, because of its self-refutation [periptōρ, as Democritus and Plato urged against Protagoras; for if every appearance is true, it will be true also, being in accordance with an appearance, that not every appearance is true, and thus it will become a falsehood that every appearance is true. (Sextus Empiricus, M vii.389–90)"
This is the argument as it is preserved in Sextus Empiricus, its bare bones laid out in proper order and marked with a logician’s label: peritropē, self-refutation or reversal. Both name and presentation bespeak a more sophisticated consciousness of logical form than we may suppose was to be found several centuries earlier in the polemic of Democritus against Protagoras, which Sextus here suggests was the argument’s original home. But what does the name mean, and what view does it imply of the form and validity of the argument? That is the question I shall try to answer.

I have said, following Bury, that peritropē means self-refutation or reversal.6 Cornford, in a footnote to his translation of Plato’s version of the argument, renders it more vividly, ‘turning the tables’, and he implies that the word served as a (proper) name for this particular argument or variants of it.7 That the term is not, however, the special property of the argument against Protagoras is clear from the very next sentence in Sextus, which says that Protagoras’ subjectivism is plainly false ‘quite apart from self-refutation of this kind’ (καὶ χωρὶς δὲ τῆς τοιοῦτης περιτροπῆς). Here peritropē is used to denominate a kind or type of argument, of which Protagoras’ self-refutation is just one specimen. In fact, the noun peritropē and the verb peritrepein from which it derives are common terms of art in Sextus and if they ever sounded a metaphor as lively as ‘turning the tables’, all trace of it has vanished in his writing. The verb peritrepein means basically to turn around or over, hence to refute a claim or idea – whether because this is thought of as turning it around into its contradictory opposite or because the notion of overturning

καὶ τὸ μὴ πᾶσαν φαντασίαν εἶναι ἀληθῆ, κατὰ φαντασίαν ὑψιστάμενον, ἔσται ἀληθῆς, καὶ οὕτω τὸ πᾶσαν φαντασίαν εἶναι ἀληθῆ γενήσεται ψεῦδος.

Two comments on Greek terms: (1) φαντασία (appearance) is usually, and more properly, translated ‘presentation’ or ‘impression’, but the technicalities of this later Greek concept may safely be disregarded here. (2) ὑψιστάμενον (being) is either a mere variant for ὕψος or is a trace of Stoic terminology. Either way it should be translated noncommittally, the point being simply that there is an appearance with the proposition that not every appearance is true as its content. On Sextus’ stylistic variations for ἔως, cf. Janáček (1948) ch. ix; for the Stoic terminology, cf. M vii.70 (κατὰ λογικὴν φαντασίαν ὑψιστάμενον) and Long (1971c) 80–90.

6 R. G. Bury in the Loeb Sextus Empiricus (1933–49); his translation alternates ‘self-refutation’, as in the present context and PH ii.186, and ‘reversal’, e.g. PH ii.128, 133 (but see n. 9 below). Cf. his glossary in iii.129.

7 Cornford (1931) 79 n. 1: Sextus . . . says that an argument of this form, known as “turning the tables” (περιτροπῆς), was used against Protagoras by Democritus, as well as by Plato here. Strictly, the remark is ambiguous as to whether the argument or its form is known as περιτροπῆς, but I have little doubt that the former is intended; so, clearly, Kirwan (1971) 104: ‘The argument [of Metaph. 108b28–30] came to be known as peritropē or turning of the tables.’ Another scholar who seems to have been misled by Cornford in this matter is Sayre (1969) 87. Cornford in turn may have been following Burnet (1914) 244, n. 1.
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is dominant (PH II.193, 206, 222, III.28, 103, 109, 130, 161, 197, 259; M VII.11, VIII.361, IX.342). Any refutation, of course, establishes the contradictory of what it refutes, but peritrepein tends particularly to be used of the special case where the thesis to be refuted itself serves as a premise for its own refutation, where starting out with \( p \) we deduce ‘not-\( p \)’ and so conclude that the original premise was false (PH II.64, 78, 88, 91, 185–6, III.19; M VII.440, VIII.55, IX.204). In such a case a thesis is turned around or reversed into its contradictory within the confines of a single inference, and this seems to be the notion the verb then expresses, as comes out in a more explicit construction to the effect that (some-) \( p \) is reversed into (peritrepeitai \( \epsilon \iota \)\) (saying) ‘not-\( p \)’ (PH II.76; M VIII.295–6; another verb is used to the same effect at VII.399). The noun too has a preference for arguments taking the special form of refutation by reversal (PH II.128, 133, 185, 187). Add to this evidence the frequency of phrases like peritrepein heauton, to refute oneself (PH I.122, II.188; M VIII.331a, 360, 463, x.18), and the interpretation of peritropē as self-refutation becomes compelling. For precisely what self-refutation consists in is a reversal whereby advancing a proposal commits one to its contradictory opposite.

But caution is needed. If in a peritropē a proposition is turned round into its contradictory, does this mean that to classify an argument as a reversal whereby advancing a proposal commits one to its contradictory opposite.

8 The listing for περιτροπή, περιτρόπω, συμπεριτρόπω, ὑπερτρόπως in K. Jandaček’s index (vols. III or IV of the Teubner Sextus Empiricus (1934) and (1962) is complete. I shall pass over two occurrences: PH I.81, which is nontechnical, and M 1.106, which I do not understand. My classification of the remainder is at some points rough and ready, being devised for the purposes of this paper, not to give a thorough analysis of the terms.

9 PH I.120 is an exception where the reference may be a more general one, although the narrower reading would make sense in the context. PH II.128 and I.133 call for a word on the phrase κατά τὴν περιτροπὴν τοῦ λόγος: the nominalisation involved is clearly of περιτροπήτατον ὁ λόγος (PH II.64, 76, 78, 88, 91), where λόγος means ‘statement’, not ‘argument’, and the phrase should be translated accordingly. Bury’s ‘reversal of the argument’ is wrong, if not unmeaning: what gets reversed is not an argument but a proposition. Again, it should be a statement maintaining the nonexistence of proof, not an argument, as Bury’s translation has it, that Sextus adduces at M VII.461 (λόγος secundum) in connection with the Stoic charge that it is self-refuting (cf. PH II.179). There is argument about it, which Sextus in the immediate sequel terms λόγος, and later he considers whether to admit that this argument does away with itself (M VIII.479–80; cf. PH II.188), but for that he does not use the vocabulary of reversal. Oddly enough, Bury gives the correct translation at PH II.64 and 76. On ‘statement’ vs. ‘argument’ see further n. 17 below. For a distinct sense in which one can speak of reversing an argument, see the Appendix to this chapter.
If (A) every appearance is true,
and (B) it appears that not every appearance is true,
then (C) not every appearance is true.

(If the inference holds, then, given that one can assert (B) as a truth of fact, one can proceed to detach (C) as conclusion and refutation of Protagoras’ subjectivism.) The problem, then, is this: what is the justification for calling the above a reversal, or for saying that (A) is self-refuting, when (C) is arrived at only with the aid of (B)?

Sextus does give examples of single-premise reversals. In upholding Scepticism against all dogmatisers, the Sceptic purports to evade the counter-charge of dogmatising himself by allowing that the formulae || which express his unwillingness to take sides one way or the other on the issues that divide everybody else – formulae such as ‘I determine nothing’ and ‘No more this than that’ – apply to themselves and cancel themselves, by reversal, along with all other assertions. Just as the tenet of certain dogmatists ‘All things are false’ or ‘Nothing is true’ says that ‘Nothing is true’ is not true, so the Sceptic’s ‘No more this than that’ counts itself as no more true than false (PH i.14–15; cf. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers ix.76). Alternatively, without the reliance on self-applicability, Sextus argues that ‘There are no truths’ implies it is true that there are no truths, which in turn means that something is true (namely, this very proposition that there are no truths), so that the principle ‘There are no truths’ entails its contradictory opposite and is, in the strictest sense, self-refuting (M vii.399). He does not extend the reasoning to show that ‘No more this than that’ also carries the self-refuting implication that something is true, in this case that nothing is more true than false, but he would not resist the parallel, which at least one critic of the Sceptics urged against them (Aristocles, a Peripatetic writer of the second century AD, apud Eusebius, Praeparatio evangelica xiv.18.5). The medicine of Scepticism is avowedly designed to eliminate itself along with the noxious humours it purges (PH i.1206, 11.188; M viii.480; Aristocles loc. cit., xiv.18.21).

But although, that is to say, Sextus holds the proposition ‘All things are false’ to be itself one among all the things it claims to be false (M viii.55; cf. vii.397), he shows no sign of thinking that the appearance described in

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8. [Diogenes uses the verb περιπτέτειν, but Sextus here and at PH i.106 writes συμμετριγράψειν instead, on which see the brilliant paper by Luca Castagnoli (1000).]

10. St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae 122, 1, adapted this argument to prove that God’s existence is self-evident, God being truth itself. [Correction: Aquinas states this adaptation of the argument only to rebut it. He names no opponent, but the materials, at any rate, for the argument can be assembled from Augustine, as follows. God is truth (De mag. 21, Conf. x.24) and truth cannot die, for if it did, it would be true that truth was dead and so truth would still exist after all (Solil. ii.2).]
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(\(B\)) is already given as one among the appearances \((A)\) claims to be true. On the contrary, his formulation of our argument suggests that \((B)\) is for him an independent premise (cf. also \(PH\) ii.88). And rightly. It is quite contingent that subjectivism should appear false to anyone – just as it is utterly contingent that there should have been a man called Gorgias whose intellect pronounced that one should heed neither sense nor intellect and so, according to Sextus, caused a reversal of the thesis that things should be judged by all the senses and all men’s intellects \((PH\) ii.64). In fact, this Gorgias-inspired reversal is a more typical specimen than the single-premise examples. While these are peculiarly self-refuting, in that their content is directly responsible for their falsity, other reversals \(\parallel\) retailed by Sextus involve a more complex mode of self-refutation.

The most interesting and the most tightly constructed of these reversals come – and this is part of their interest – from disputes between Stoics and Sceptics. Take the following pieces of Stoic reasoning:

(i) If the Sceptic uses a criterion to assert that there is no criterion,\(^{11}\) ‘he will refute himself/be reversed and in asserting that there is no criterion he will acknowledge that he is using a criterion in proof of this assertion’ \((M\ vii.440)\).

(ii) If the Sceptic argues for the nonexistence of signs,\(^{12}\) he produces a sign for the nonexistence of signs and in so doing acknowledges that there is a sign \((M\ viii.282)\). Thus he who states that there is no sign will be reversed into saying that there is a sign \((ibid.\ 295)\).

(iii) If the Sceptic purports to prove there is no proof, by this very fact he acknowledges that there is proof; the argument which proves there is no proof is a proof that there is. Thus the thesis\(^{13}\) of the nonexistence of proof is rebutted/reversed by itself, the very means it uses to abolish proof establishing the reality of proof by self-refutation/reversal \((\varepsilon\ k\ \pi\varepsilon\iota\rho\iota\tau\varrho\sigma\iota\tau\tau\eta\gamma)\) \((M\ viii.463ff.;\ PH\ ii.185)\).

(iv) If the Sceptic cites a reason why there is no such thing as a reason (or cause: \(\varepsilon\iota\tau\iota\iota\iota\nu\)) he refutes himself/is reversed, and in the act of saying there is no such thing as a reason he lays it down that there is \((PH\ iii.19;\ M\ ix.204)\).\(^{14}\) The pattern of reversal in these examples is no longer that of views directly falsified by their own content. Instead, it is the Sceptic’s undertaking to

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\(^{11}\) By ‘criterion’ in this context is meant a criterion for deciding the truth of beliefs or impressions – something the Sceptics were anxious to deny could be found \((PH\ ii.14ff.,\ M\ vii.27ff.)\).

\(^{12}\) ‘Sign’ is a technical term of the period meaning, roughly, evidence for something; cf. Stough (1969) 97–9, 125ff.

\(^{13}\) Cf. n. 9 above on the translation of \(\lambda\acute{g}o\sigma\).

\(^{14}\) The Stoic origin of these arguments is attested at \(M\ vii.445,\ viii.298,\ 470\).
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establish his thesis by reason that falsifies it, for his thesis is that there is no such enterprise to undertake. The view he advances conflicts not with itself but with the way he advances it.

It may be felt that an anti-dogmatist has no business advocating \( \parallel \) any view. The answer, as Sextus explains (\( M \) vii.443–4, viii.298, 476–7), is that within the dispute the Sceptic attempts a straightforward refutation of notions like criterion and proof which are ordinarily accepted, and it is this refutation that the Stoics have to meet. The twist comes when the Sceptic says that he is not actually committed to his conclusion: it is enough for him to have shown it to be as well supported as his opponents’ view, so that the right attitude is to suspend judgement between the two sides. In more ways than one, the Sceptic’s arguments are like a ladder which he overturns after climbing up (\( M \) viii.481).

But to return to the conflict between the way the Sceptic advances his view and the view itself. There are two possibilities here, which J. L. Mackie has used to distinguish two types of self-refutation.\(^{15}\) **Pragmatic** self-refutation occurs if a proposition is falsified by the particular way it happens to be presented, as when I write that I am not writing, as opposed, say, to whispering it: if I whisper that I am not writing, what I say may well be true, but if I write it, it must be false. **Operational** self-refutation, on the other hand, occurs if there is no way of presenting a proposition that does not falsify it, as when I say, whether in speech, writing, or silent soliloquy, ‘I am not saying anything.’ Of these the weaker, pragmatic type of self-refutation would seem to be the one at work in the Stoic polemic against Scepticism. For typically the charge of self-refutation is embedded in an argument to the following effect: either the Sceptic contents himself with bare assertion of his thesis, in which case he is no more to be believed than one who asserts the opposite, or he argues for it and in so doing refutes himself (\( M \) vii.440, viii.281–2, 464, ix.204).\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Mackie (1964).

\(^{16}\) At PH iii.19 it may look as if both alternatives come under the heading of reversal, but it is more likely either that Sextus has been careless in arranging the components of his argument or that the verb \( \text{peritrepein} \) carries its broader meaning ‘to refute’ (so Bury).