Understanding the Threat of Relativism in the *Theaetetus* of Plato, PhD Thesis, U. of Chicago
My dissertation offers a novel interpretation of Plato’s mature epistemology through a careful reading of the *Theaetetus*. I argue that Plato’s engagement with relativism in this dialogue extends beyond his treatment of Protagoras’ Measure Thesis (“Man is the measure of all things”) and of what he takes to be Protagoras’ theory that knowledge is perception. I show that the threat of a relativist epistemology looms over even theories of knowledge presented as alternatives (e.g. mere true judgment, true judgment(s) with certain specifiable characteristics pertaining to form or content). Plato rejects that family of views due to their inability to sustain an account of knowledge that is appropriate to human life and human psychology. The culprit turns out to be a failure to recognize that human souls are characterized by a capacity that is teleologically organized towards truth, aiming to distinguish it from falsehood. I argue that knowledge describes the purposeful exercise of this capacity. The implication of the extended critique of Protagoreanism that we find in the *Theaetetus* is that it falls upon us to maintain the distinction between truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, and thus avoid the threat of relativism.
TEACHING EXPERIENCE

As Postdoctoral Fellow
Starting in the Autumn of 2023, I begin my Postdoctoral Fellowship. This is a two-year position, in which I teach some courses in the Humanities Core Curriculum (mandatory for all first-year students) and some courses of my own choice and design, for a total of four courses per year. I list below my appointments for the first year of the Fellowship. In the second year of the Fellowship, I will teach at least two courses of my own design, in the Philosophy Department. I will likely teach a course on Perception in Antiquity (from the PreSocratics to the Stoics) and on Plato’s Philosophy of Language. I am also eager to design a course on Plato’s Epistemology.

Autumn 2023
Greece & Rome: Texts, Traditions, Transformations
This is a course in the Humanities Core with a focus on epic. We read Homer’s *Iliad*, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Winter 2024
Greece & Rome: Texts, Traditions, Transformations
This is a course in the Humanities Core with a focus on tragedy. We read a number of tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*. We also read *Phaedra* by Seneca and by Jean Racine. I hold two appointments to teach this course.

Spring 2024
Mathematics in Plato
This is a course of my own design. We will read *Meno, Republic* V-VII, *Timaeus*, and excerpts from *Theaetetus, Statesman*. The course investigates the extent to which philosophical practice bears affinity to mathematical practice for Plato. It has a special focus on the problem of incommensurability and the task of commensuration.

As Graduate Student, Instructor of Record

Winter 2021
Plato’s *Theaetetus*
This was a course designed for advanced undergraduates majoring in Philosophy. In addition to a close reading of the text and the related scholarship, we studied the Dreyfus-McDowell debate on perception and Russell’s Logical Atomism.

As Graduate Student, Teaching Assistant

My responsibilities as Teaching Assistant involved leading weekly discussion sections (for two groups of students, per course), grading, and holding regular office hours. Listed is also a U. of Chicago summer course for high school students. My responsibilities involved grading, leading small group discussions in every meeting, and holding regular office hours.

Spring 2022
Mind, Brain, and Meaning
Instructors of Record: J. Bridges, C. Kennedy, L. Kay
This was a multidisciplinary course, cross-listed in the departments of Philosophy, Linguistics, and Neuroscience and co-taught by faculty from all three departments. I was the Philosophy Teaching Assistant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Instructor of Record</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2022</td>
<td>Introduction to Ethics</td>
<td>B. Callard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2021</td>
<td>Film and the Meaning of Life (for high school students)</td>
<td>R. Hanlon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2019</td>
<td>History of Philosophy I: Ancient Philosophy</td>
<td>A. Brooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History of Analytic Philosophy</td>
<td>B. Callard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2019</td>
<td>End of Life</td>
<td>A. Ford, J. Lear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This was a course that pursued the two meanings of ‘end’ with a focus on Aristotle, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Other readings included Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Cora Diamond.

**TEACHING CREDENTIALS**

I have participated in a number of workshops on teaching practices, geared primarily towards practices that promote Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity. I have also participated in workshops geared towards teaching Philosophy, in fulfillment of the Philosophy Department’s Pedagogical Requirements. I have also been among graduate students panels leading such workshops.

- **Department of Philosophy Pedagogy Certificate**
- Pedagogy Faculty Events, 2018, 2019, 2021
- Pedagogy Alumni Events, 2018, 2019
- Diversity & Inclusion Training Events, 2019, 2020
- Departmental Course Assistant Event, 2020

- **Chicago Center for Teaching**
- Teaching @Chicago, 2018
- Fundamentals of Teaching Four-Week Workshop (topic: Diversity & Inclusion), 2021
- Course Design and College Teaching, Spring 2020

This was a quarter-length course taken for credit, Instructor of Record: C. Richardson

**LANGUAGES**

- Ancient Greek (proficient, received High Pass on departmental exam)
- Latin, German (competent)
- Modern Greek, English (native)
REFEREED CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

2023  “Understanding Why the Dream Theory (*Theaetetus* 201d–202c) is Objectionable”
46th Annual Ancient Philosophy Workshop, University of Texas at Austin

Comments on N. Howell-Whitaker’s paper on epistemology in the *Laws*
4th Annual Rackham Interdisciplinary Workshop in Ancient Philosophy, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

2022  13th Munich Philosophical Masterclass, at Ludwig Maximilians Universität München, July 2022
Instructor: Jessica Moss

2020  “Commensuration and Dialectic in the Divided Line”
Poetry, Philosophy, and Mathematics: Performance, Text, and External Representations in Ancient Greek Cultural Practices, University of South Florida

2019  11th Ludwig Wittgenstein Summer School in Kirchberg-am-Wechsel, Austria, Organized by the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Summer 2019
Topic: Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
Instructors: James Conant, Cora Diamond, Martin Gustafsson

INVITED PRESENTATIONS

2022  “Smoke & Mirrors: The Dream Theory in Plato’s *Theaetetus*”
Prof. J. Vlasits’ Course “Plato’s Epistemology,” University of Illinois at Chicago

“Commensuration and Dialectic in the Divided Line”
Minorities and Philosophy Conference, University of Chicago

2019  “Commensuration and Dialectic in the Divided Line”
Conference on G. Lehman and M. Weinman’s *The Parthenon and Liberal Education* (2018), University of Chicago

“Commensuration and Dialectic in the Divided Line”
Undergraduate “Philosophy Club,” University of Chicago

PRESENTATIONS AT U. OF CHICAGO WORKSHOPS

2022  “Relativism in Hiding: Why We Should Not Try to Salvage the Dream Theory”
Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop

2021  “The Dream Theory in Plato’s *Theaetetus*”
Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop
Ernioni Prokopaki

“The Self-Refutation of Protagoras in Plato’s *Theaetetus*”
Theoretical Philosophy Workshop

2020  “The Puzzle of False Judgment in Plato’s *Theaetetus*”
German Philosophy Workshop

   “Models of Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*: the Case of Perception”
   Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop

   Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop

2016  “The Method of Hypothesis: Mathematics & Dialectic”
   Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Workshop

RESPONDENT AT U. OF CHICAGO ANNUAL GRADUATE CONFERENCE
During my first three years at U. of Chicago, we hosted a Graduate Student Conference on
Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy. Chicago graduate students were respondents.

2019  Respondent to R. Brown’s paper on Plato’s *Phaedrus*

2018  Respondent to U. Bery’s paper on Plutarch’s moral philosophy

2017  Respondent to E. Schultz’s paper on Socratic *epagōgē*

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Coordinator

2021  Admitted Students Visiting Week

2018-2020  Theoretical Philosophy Workshop
   I was the coordinator for the first two years of the Theoretical Philosophy
   Workshop. My role entailed scheduling presentations and reading groups,
   advertising, organizing social events, moderating the meetings, and ensuring the
   continuation of the conversations. I was able to maintain a majority of women
   presenters. I declined to coordinate the Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy
   Workshop in 2019-2020 in order to continue with TPW. I was invited to
   coordinate the Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy again in 2022-2023.

Minorities and Philosophy (MAP)

2018-2023  Member
   I was a co-founding member of the U. of Chicago chapter of MAP. I was an
   official Mentor to a student for two years, until she graduated, and have worked
   closely with a number of undergraduates affiliated with MAP on their senior
   theses and graduate school applications, outside of my official duties as mentor.
Ermioni Prokopaki

**Women in Philosophy**
2016-2023 Member
I am an active member of our department’s Women in Philosophy group, which was revived, in my first year at Chicago, on the initiative of graduate student women.

**Committee Work**
2019 Graduate student member of the committee outlining best mentoring practices

**Referee**
2017-2019 Annual Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy Graduate Student Conference

**Presenter**
2021 Departmental event for new Teaching Assistants

**Chair**
2022 Central APA, Chicago

**AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

2023 Humanities Division Conference Grant, University of Chicago

2019 Visiting Doctoral Fellow, Leipzig University

2015 Mitch Miller and Michael McCarthy Prize, Vassar College
Awarded for distinguished philosophical work and the promise of teaching

**GRADUATE LEVEL COURSEWORK** (* indicates audit)
Listed below are the courses I have taken for credit or as auditor at the University of Chicago. They are organized according to topic.

**Preliminary Essay, Spring-Autumn 2018**
Completion of this essay certifies that the student can advance to dissertation work. As such, it has an equivalent role as the MA Thesis or Oral Exams. It is written in the context of a two-quarter long workshop and is read by two faculty.

“Reinterpreting the Capacities Argument (*Republic 5.476e-478e*)”
Readers: Gabriel Richardson Lear, Agnes Callard

**Ancient Greek Philosophy & Thought**
Plato's *Statesman*, Winter 2017, G. Lear
Topics in the Philosophy of Mathematics: Proof and Euclid, Winter 2017, K. Davey
Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Spring 2017, E. Asmis
Plato and Aristotle on Craft and Wisdom, Autumn 2017, G. Lear
Survey of Greek Literature: Prose, Winter 2018, H. Dik, Classics Department
* Socrates, Plato and Aristotle on Courage, Autumn 2018, A. Callard
* Changing, Resting, Living: Aristotle’s Natural Philosophy, Winter 2019, A. Callard
* Aristotle’s Friendship, Winter 2019, G. Lear
* Socratic Elenchus, Spring 2019, A. Callard
* Plato’s *Timaeus*, Spring 2020, E. Fletcher
* Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Spring 2020, M. Boyle
* The Ethics and Poetics of Mimesis, Autumn 2021, G. Lear-J. Lear
* Plato’s *Philebus*, Winter 2022, J. Proios
* Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Winter 2022, A. Brooks
* Virtues of Citizenship, Spring 2023, G. Lear

**History of Philosophy (other)**
John Stuart Mill, Autumn 2016, M. Nussbaum
Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Spring 2017, M. Boyle
The Philosophy of Gilbert Ryle, Spring 2017, M. Kremer
Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Winter 2018, J. Bridges
* Kant’s Transcendental Deduction and its Contemporary Reception, Spring 2018, J. Conant
* Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Autumn 2019, M. Kremer
* Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Winter 2020, J. Bridges
* The Analytic Tradition, Spring 2020, J. Conant
* The Philosophy of Cora Diamond, Spring 2021, J. Conant
* The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe, Spring 2021, C. Vogler
* Wittgenstein’s Treatment of Rule-Following in Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics and *Philosophical Investigations*, Spring 2022, J. Conant
* The Philosophy of Language of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Autumn 2022, S. Bronzo

**Theoretical Philosophy**
First-Year Seminar (on the Myth of the Given), Autumn 2016-Winter 2017, D. Finkelstein
Naturalism, Autumn 2016, J. Bridges
Intermediate Logic, Winter 2017, A. Vasudevan
* Intro: Philosophy of Science, Winter 2017, T. Pashby
* Special Topics in the Philosophy of Mind: Imagination, Autumn 2017, M. Boyle-J. Lear
* Conceptual Change and the A Priori, Winter 2018, K. Davey
* The New Riddle of Induction, Spring 2018, A. Vasudevan
* Causation and Necessity, Winter 2019, J. Bridges
* Transparency & Reflection, Autumn 2020, M. Boyle

**Practical Philosophy**
Neo-Aristotelian Philosophical Anthropology, Autumn 2017, C. Vogler
* Habit, Skill, and Virtue, Winter 2020, M. Haase
* What is so Good about Virtue?, Spring 2021, A. Mueller
DISSESTATION ABSTRACT

Understanding the Threat of Relativism in the Theaetetus of Plato

My dissertation on the Theaetetus is motivated by this question: Why is the text in which we expect to find Plato’s mature epistemology centered around relativism and what is Plato’s answer to it? The very posing of this question presupposes that relativism is the dialogue’s primary topic and demonstrating that this is so is one of my principal tasks.

The first and longest part of the text is dedicated to the definition of knowledge as perception and is taken up in a critique of Protagoras, who states that all judgments are true, there is no such thing as falsehood, and disagreement is impossible. Protagoreanism stands for the idea that all activities that presuppose a distinction between knowledge and ignorance are unintelligible. The position is propped up by an account of perception, according to which perceptible reality is private to each perceptual episode. Generalized relativism follows on the assumption that all judgments are outcomes of private perceptual episodes.

The topic of relativism is ostensibly disposed of in the first part of the dialogue. Yet, Socrates and Theaetetus remain gripped by relativist commitments. Specifically, I argue, they fail to pursue their own insight that human psychic activity is teleologically organized with an aim to the truth. This prevents them from making sense of falsehood and from seeing clearly that the distinction between the true and the false is one that human beings value. Consequently, the only theories of knowledge that Socrates and Theaetetus are in a position to consider come dangerously close to Protagoreanism. Hence, I conclude, the reason that the Theaetetus is centered around relativism is that its threat is pervasive and Plato’s answer is to remind us that it is up to us to stand up for the value of truth.

In Chapter 1, I focus on the Self-Refutation of Protagoras (169d-171d). I argue that relativism seeks to threaten not only the concept of knowledge but a whole way of life that is organized around it. I show that relativism can prevail only if we allow it to: it is up to us to safeguard that way of life and doing so requires continuous affirmation of the fact that we value the distinction that the relativist seeks to undermine.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the Final Refutation of the first definition (184b-186e). I argue that the definition of knowledge as perception will be avoided only if we realize that our capacity for speaking the truth does not have the form of a capacity that can be ascribed to the body. Unlike the thoroughly receptive capacities of the body, our capacity for speaking the truth is spontaneous and has a teleological structure. The knowers are distinguished by their purposeful and continuous use of the capacity for truth. To purposefully exercise this capacity is to affirm that we wish our lives to be bound by the truth.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the False Judgment Digression (187c-200d). I argue that unless the soul’s independent activity is conceived as teleologically organized with an aim to the truth, it will not be possible to account for falsehood. I show that Socrates and Theaetetus fail to make sense of falsehood because they revert to a conception of our capacity for speaking the truth that gives it the structure that is appropriate to the body. The only other option considered is one in which the capacity for truth is ineffectual.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the Dream Theory (201d-202c). I argue that epistemologies that do not make use of our capacity for teleological psychic activity devolve into Protagoreanism. Theories that rule out such activity altogether have to identify our capacity for thinking with
perception and some of these views have to commit themselves to perceptual privacy. Theories that fail to place our capacity for truth at the core of knowledge obscure the value of knowledge.

In Chapter 5, I argue that cultivating the capacity for truth requires engagement with the Socratic Midwife (148e-151d). In doing so, one learns how to investigate justly and thus, how to maintain the distinction between truth and falsehood. I end with some reflections as to how it is that the exercise of this capacity makes it so that we determine our own world without falling into relativism.

REFERENCES

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