

'Protagoras is the father of modern anti-realism.' – Discuss

Protagoras of Abdera, a fifth century BCE sophist, in positing man as the measure signified a shift from natural philosophy, which was the main concern of his presocratic predecessors, to human philosophy. Protagoras championed the powers of human knowledge and its ability to know the physical world. He presented a mind-dependent theory in which the real was synonymous with human knowledge. To Protagoras there was no way around human knowledge. Hidden truths did not exist. Thus if modernity is understood to be post European Enlightenment onwards (whether modernity has ended or not is debatable) it is reasonable to consider Protagoras as the father of modern anti-realism.

To investigate this claim further, firstly, a brief outline of anti-realism and how it differs from realism is necessary. Next, Protagoras' claim that man is the measure must be addressed. Lastly, Protagoras' claim shall be measured against the tenets of anti-realism while investigating how influential his thought was (directly or indirectly) on some of his immediate successors, 18th and 19th century philosophers and 20th century philosophers, in order to present the case for Protagoras as the father of modern anti-realism.

Realism posits that reality exists independent of human thought. There are properties out there that can be discovered. In other words, that which cannot be perceived exists. Claims about the objective world can also be true or false, depending on how they correspond to objective reality even though what constitutes objective reality is not always clear.

Anti-realism is the anti-thesis of realism. According to anti-realists reality is mind-dependent. Reality is derived from human perception. Claims are true insofar as they are verifiable. Mind dependent experiences create beliefs about what the world is like. Truth is based on how an utterance coheres with collections of beliefs. There is nothing out there to discover. References to unobservable states, events, things are not considered real. Things are invented and can be verified or falsified depending on how they cohere with collections of beliefs.

Such coherence must be viewed contextually. What coheres in one culture may not cohere in another and thus coherence is relative. It is not possible to know whether beliefs correspond with anything external to the mind, but what can be determined is if beliefs cohere with one another.

Protagoras stated that, "Of all things a measure is man – of things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not" (JB §491, p. 541; cf. MCK §18.20, p. 379).

In stating man is the measure, Protagoras, eliminates objective reality and posits 'man' or human knowledge as the measure of reality. Reality is not objective. Reality is what is perceived and sensed by human beings. The only conceivable way to verify or falsify is via human perception and judgment. Protagoras is not necessarily positing a philosophy of radical relativism. Individual perceptions or views, in a Protagoraean sense, can be perceived as data, which can be used in the formation of an objective account of knowledge.

In other words, Protagoras views reality as subjective, but viewing reality from the point of view of the subject is not necessarily a homogenous matter and thus must be unpacked. When considering the nature of reality two overarching questions may be asked, what 'really' exists and what 'really' is true. The two questions are not mutually exclusive, but embarking on a path to answer one rather

than the other may yield different results, conceptual dilemmas, debates etc.. If the focus is on existence, questions on the impact objects make on the senses with a focus on judging how the best interpretation of those experiences should be decided upon would be emphasized. In this case factual knowledge depends on human experience. A focus on truth would be concerned with determining if a statement is true or false. Thus questions of verification and falsification would come to the fore. In this case, all truth is human truth about the world.

Those who were influenced (implicitly or explicitly) by or responded to Protagoras' thought can be grouped into two general groups. The first group, which is comprised of his immediate successors and 18th and 19th century philosophers, was interested in questions of existence while the second group, comprised of 20th century philosophers, was more interested in questions of truth.

Aristotle was receptive to Protagoras' theory as he firmly believed that a theory which disregarded human perception was not sufficient to understand the physical world. Plato, on the contrary, vehemently rejected many of Protagoras' claims and clearly stated so in *Theaetetus*. He presented Protagoras in a manner that made Protagorean thought seem chaotic and contradictory. It is likely that contradictions did exist, but Plato dismissed Protagoras' subjectivism all together. Yet, Protagorean subjectivism may have served as an impetus to Plato in developing his transcendental forms.

Protagoras' influence was not only apparent in Ancient Greece, but it was also present in 18th and 19th century philosophy. For example, Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism, postulated that human beings can only experience appearances (not things in themselves or the actual make up of an object) in space and time, positing that space and time are not independent of human experience. Thus in a way Kant is stating that man is the measure. Hegel also praised Protagoras for presenting an active consciousness that produces content, but Hegel viewed Protagorean thought as a moment in the unfolding of reason or the becoming of Spirit, not a stand-alone theory of reality. Subjectivism was important to many other philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries, but for the purposes of this paper, referencing two philosophical giants of idealism is sufficient.

In his 1963 paper *Realism*, the British Philosopher Michael Dummett used the term 'anti-realist' to refer to theories that denied transcendent knowledge or truth. According to Dummett the matter is one of verification and falsification. Dummett's new term mirrored the language turn of 20th century philosophical thought, which witnessed a shift from experience to language and from theories of existence to theories of truth.

More specifically, Michael Dummett was the first to coin the term 'anti-realist' for theories which put concepts of verification and falsification on center stage to account for the workings of languages. The US philosopher Richard Rorty also strongly contributed to modern anti-realist philosophy by introducing a philosophical method focusing on contingency to social norms, hence with a focus on truth as human truth.

Deconstructionists with their focus on the relationship between text and meaning with meaning being understood with reference to opposites, also contributed heavily to anti-realist thought. Such provocative philosophies have given the realist versus anti-realist discussion prominence in contemporary philosophy. In a sense Protagorean relativism was revived and expanded upon.

The above does not claim that Protagoras was more interested in what 'really' is true as opposed to what 'really' exists. In fact it is impossible to know as the limited extant fragments of Protagoras' work do not reference either. Nonetheless, both belong to the realm of anti-realism, but what is apparent is that some strands of contemporary philosophy are interested in subjectivism in itself, and as such the subject is being debated more than it was in past centuries. Man is the measure has come back to the fore.

In conclusion, Protagoras emphasized human subjectivity as that which determines the way the world is understood. This was a revolution of sorts as it rejected objective truths and embarked on a different path than that of his presocratic predecessors. He brought man to the fore, even if the understanding of individuality and what that constitutes was much different in Ancient Greece than it is today. His revolution had an impact on his immediate successors, who wrestled with his provocative claims. Aristotle viewed it with interest and expanded upon it, while Plato vehemently attacked it. The two pillars of Greek philosophy were interested in subjective versus objective reality, a focus that raged on until the 19th century. The language turn of the 20th century with its focus on subjectivism and the ascendance of post-modernism brought Protagoraen thought back to the forefront.