

3. What do you think Protagoras meant by his statement ‘Man is the measure’? In the light of your interpretation, how fair is the account that Plato gives of Protagoras’ doctrine in the ‘Theaetetus’.

Man, ‘the instrument’, uses objective human measurement as the only true description of the world as it is – empiricism is the only route to true knowledge.

The reality of the world can only be perceived in the mind of man, and so even science is ultimately subjective.

It is only in the perceptions of men that reality exists and so Protagoras is the original ‘idealist’.

Each man has his own view of what is and what is not, which is valid for him and so Protagoras is the original ‘relativist’.

There is no God, man has agency and humanism is the centre of knowledge.

These are the readings, some contradictory, I have interpreted from Protagoras’ statement. Protagoras was a sophist and much interested in society. He was apparently not struck by the relevance of mathematics, and if he formulated the idea that truth is to be found in ‘convention rather than nature’, then I am not convinced he was formulating an empirical model of reality. My interpretation of Protagoras is a highly qualified form of relativism in that our perceptions, and our translation of them, are all we have to examine the world. To this extent, Protagoras is alluding to an anthropocentric perspective that is later expressed in Descartes, seemingly anchoring modern philosophy in the overwhelming profundity of man’s finitude.

The dialogue Plato constructs between Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus in the *Theaetetus* is a critique of a ‘sensory relativist’ reading of Protagoras. Socrates portrays the ‘absurd’ example of two people’s sensory experience of the wind; the first sensing it as cold while the second as warm, leaving the wind with no objective temperature. Socrates continues his critique with several further problems. If knowledge is perception, then animals must have equally justifiable claims to know. This presents a problem – if ‘man’ is the only measure. Socrates then gives an example of where someone may be taller than another, but should the other grow taller over the course of a year then the other will be shorter – so someone was taller but now shorter without actually changing. Other false perceptions occur when men are sick, or when mad, or when dreaming. Further, if man ‘the perceiver’ is the only measure, then truth is in the mind of the perceiver and so all their individual claims must be judged to be equal. There is no superior or inferior claim and so all claims are raised to the highest status, which calls into question the very idea of pursuing knowledge or truth at all, since any claim is valid under relativism. At the same time, Protagoras must demand we reject every claim that we cannot perceive through our senses making memories, for example,

invalid. Socrates speaks of the man who is asked to close one eye and so is in the contradictory position of perceiving and not perceiving at the same time. Indeed, Socrates notes, there are a whole variety of ways to perceive the same thing according to differences: 'from near to far, sharp and dull, more or less intensely'. In the opening part of the *Theaetetus* then, Socrates rattles off a whole load of objections to the idea that knowledge can be gained from sensory perception alone.

For me, these rational objections provided by Socrates do not conflict with my assertion that all human knowledge can only come from being human. My interpretation does not depend on the view that man can be 'the measure' solely through perceptions derived from the senses. Sensory perceptions are important as raw data, but then we must apply the overall faculty of man as constitutive to the 'knowledge' that can be acquired. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates himself suggests his criticisms are simply making fun of the youthful enquiry of Theaetetus and defends Protagoras by suggesting that even though men can only perceive reality differently, Protagoras might argue that the minds of individual men might not be 'truer' but may be 'better'. 'A good mind causes men to have good thoughts.' 'The teacher of wisdom causes the good to take the place of evil, both in appearance and in reality'. And so it is The Sophist, such as Protagoras, who can educate us in our perceptions. Socrates demands of himself that he be less polemical in his attitude and ascertain whether the relationship between knowledge and sensation be examined with more philosophical rigour.

On p37 of the *Theaetetus* Socrates defines 'man is the measure' as: 'What seems to man, is to him.' He then applies a contradiction to the very definition, in that any follower of Protagoras has to agree that no other man can ever be wrong, and if that is the case, then they can't be wrong if they say 'man is *not* the measure' and so Protagoras has to agree with them that man is not the measure. Protagoras will then have to concede that those who disagree with him must be correct, putting him in an absurd position. This attack on relativism can be refuted and the relativist position salvaged as non-contradictory by such as Geoffrey Kempner when expounding an 'either/ or' defence such that: 'Either every judgement is relative, or if any judgement is not relative then just one judgement is not relative, namely, that every *other* judgement is relative.'

After certain digressions in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates goes on to redefine 'man is the measure' as more than perceptions alone but inclusive of the judgements made from those perceptions. Here he is closer to my definition in that having access to raw data men can then abstract/ measure/ judge/ rationalise and so 'plan for the future' as Socrates postulates. The law, for example, is formulated on the expectations of future behaviour. Who judges? The expert in their field Socrates suggests. They are informing us of what is good for us and what is not good which suggests expediency or

pragmatism. But again, Socrates has a problem with the 'truth' of these judgements. In making judgements, people, as in juries, can make mistakes due to the lack of evidence, or the ability or inability of The Sophist legal representative to make a sound argument in court. The jury are not discovering the truth but accepting as true the best sounding argument; arguments that could contain logical fallacies.

Having refuted judgement as synonymous with knowledge, Socrates qualifies judgements with a necessary account. If we can account for judgements then they might be knowable. Socrates goes on to show that accounts are also unreliable as he tries to define an account first as the vocalization of expressions, which all people, having the ability to vocalize, might be able to do without necessary validity. These expressions then are only opinions. Secondly, Socrates suggests you might need to have knowledge of the elements of what you say to justify the whole of what is known as in the elements of language or music or even a wagon. Your account is dependent on the knowledge of its components, which he again refutes since you could be mistaken in your elucidation of the components, or have knowledge of the order of the components without knowledge of the full component. Someone could spell out the name Theaetetus without knowledge of Theaetetus the man. Socrates' third analysis of the truthfulness of the account is derived from the account's ability to explain the difference between things. Here, Socrates identifies a regress about knowledge having to be dependent on knowledge. To know about Theaetetus you have to know what makes him different but you can't know what's different about him unless you know Theaetetus, but you can't know Theaetetus without knowing the difference. In the end, Socrates walks off to his trial still not knowing what knowing is.

As for my definition of 'man is the measure' based on human reasoning being the only judge/ description/ explanation as 'measure', the *Theaetetus* does not refute my definition since my definition is ontologically based rather than being epistemological in context: man is the measure of reality rather than he can only know the truth through his senses. 'Man is the measure of all things that are and things that are not' is in other words an attempt to 'describe' reality. I realise I am heading towards arguing that any argument a man might make against the truth that 'man is the measure' proves the point, since it is a man making the argument. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates or Plato are proving the point that man is the measure as they try to rationalise what it means; they are measuring the claim that 'man is the measure'. Here, I am looking to turn Protagoras' aphorism into a tautology: any attempt to say man is not the measure, is itself a measure. Is there any man who is not a measure? If there is, then he is not a man.