

What do you think Protagoras meant by his statement, 'Man is the measure' (258/153)? In light of your interpretation, how fair is the account that Plato gives of Protagoras' doctrine in the 'Theaetetus'?

'Man is the measure of all things', said Protagoras. Protagoras' statement exemplifies relativism, as I will explain further below. He is the first thinker who talks about or considers a humanistic approach. Humans are his main focus, unlike most prior philosophers who concentrate on things around humans in the world. In fact, as a humanist, Protagoras could very well focus on humans to the exclusion of everything else.

From Protagoras' point of view, the nature of the world depends very much on whose point of view we are looking at it from. As a relativist, he might say 'stealing is good or bad depending on the situation'. Stealing should be bad in general because people have an agreement to protect one's own property but stealing can be good in a robber society that worships stealing as a supreme good for them. It's not absolute. This morning when I woke up and looked at the sky I said to myself 'It's very cloudy this morning'. But maybe doesn't seem cloudy for other people? Maybe it only looks cloudy for me only? The answer should be yes from Protagoras' perspective.

Rhetoric is the best partner of Protagoras' idea. It fits together perfectly because everything in the world depends on human value. So, humans can use rhetoric for persuading other people about the value of everything. Everything can be seen in different perspectives through rhetoric. Protagoras says he can persuade an audience to have opinions on both sides of the same story. He says 'To make weaker opinion stronger'. All sophists, like Protagoras, loved rhetoric and always practiced it in the Greek world. It's also perfectly well suited to the era of Greek democracy, especially in Athens, where the whole city-state was ruled by majority opinion, by voting on a constitution, voting based on opinion, opinions that can be shaped by rhetoric.

Plato's critique of Protagoras' above idea was that it's not based on a reasoned way of thinking. For me I think, If we let every opinion in this world depend on persuasion, there's no point in continuing to study philosophy. I would in that case devote all my life to only studying the art of rhetoric. I wouldn't need to think about reason, virtue, or justice. But famous sophists in Protagoras' time did well with their art of rhetoric. They convinced juries, they persuaded the city council to launch public policy or law as they wished, and through this public exercise they could make a lot of money for teaching this technique.

Even sophists have their weak points, as they cannot connect their ideas to the truth of reality as many philosophers pointed out later. But they are still around even today. Today, democracy is the main political belief for most people in the world. It is the perfect place for sophists to exercise their art of persuasion. Today, despite achieving many technological advances, and actually because of some of them, we are still faced with many difficult questions. For example, should human cloning be legal or illegal? Is it wrong, if my wife can't bear my child because of her health problems to pay another woman to bear our child for us? Who should be the

legitimate “owner” or parent of the baby? All these important issues are sensitive and open to debate. After a stronger argument wins the debate, it will become a legitimate idea in society. Like Protagoras said, he can make the weaker argument stronger. So after he persuades society of the weaker argument then it will become the stronger idea and become legitimate in that society again.

In my country, we have had high political activity in the past ten years. There is a great deal of public debate. Each side has the leader of their team. They always have a spokesperson for the group. Some of these spokespeople, as I remember, have been news presenters before. When they join this political group, they do well because of their language skill. When I listen to one side’s opinion it’s very convincing for me. But when I start to hear from the other side on the same topic, I have to acknowledge that their side has reasonable points too. Yes, Protagoras was really correct to say that one can argue both sides.

For me, even Protagoras’ idea seems negative. It implies that it is acceptable for us to be selfish and think only of our own interest. But he expressed his idea frankly and it’s true, and is influential in today’s world. Sometimes we have to accept the unpleasant truth the same way we accept our own weak points or bad habits. But before we can develop ourselves, we should know where we need to improve first. In my view, we instinctively desire many things that we are not allowed to have. It happens by instinct. Plato and Aristotle would say that human reasoning helps control our desire. Maybe one day, even though we have a number of desires, we can use reason to maintain control of them.