MADE TO MEASURE: PROTAGORAS’ METRON

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1. INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING A PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENT

Metaphors create realities.¹ They are among our main vehicles for comprehending abstract concepts and performing abstract reasoning. Conventional metaphors serve to organize a world of unstructured experiences into concepts we can deal with; new metaphors establish new conceptual realities. They shape abstract concepts and make us capable of dealing with them, incorporating them in our world view and draw inferences from them. A good new metaphor changes the way we see the world: it defines reality by highlighting some features of reality at the expense of others and, by this token, forcing us to accept its entailments as true.²

One such a groundbreaking metaphor is Protagoras’ ‘measure’ in his Man-Measure fragment (MM):

[1]

πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἔστιν ἀνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

Of all things the measure is man, of those that are (the case), that/how they are (the case), and of those that are not (the case), that/how they are not (the case).

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² In this article the term ‘metaphor’ will be used in the sense of a conceptual metaphor, as defined by Lakoff & Johnson in Metaphors We Live By (1980). A conceptual metaphor is a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system, i.e., the phenomenon of understanding one idea or conceptual domain in terms of another.

Few sound bites in the history of philosophy have shared the tremendous success of *MM*, up to the point that what once may have puzzled the audience as a thought-provoking metaphor has become a conventional expression to us: we use phrases like ‘the human measure’, ‘the measure of things’ and take it for granted that ‘measure’ is a metaphor for something. We do not need to picture a ‘literal’ measure anymore; in fact, that would only impair our understanding of a fossilized metaphor we think we know so well. But as often, a metaphor we live by may turn out to be a perfect stranger.

One of the key strategies to deal with metaphors is substitution. According to a long and respectable hermeneutic tradition, interpreting a metaphorical expression, whether it is a philosophical fragment or a Pindaric piece of poetry, is tantamount to solving a riddle or a cryptogram: to explain the meaning of a sentence, one should simply substitute one word for another: literal ‘meanings’ for metaphorical expressions, transparent words for opaque ones, technical terms for informal and therefore underdetermined ones, unproblematic words for awkward ones that puzzle and disturb the audience.

This method of substitution presupposes a theory of metaphor: it assumes that metaphor is an abbreviated simile; that metaphors are essentially linguistic in nature (as opposed to conceptual); and it assumes a clear-cut distinction between literal and figurative language, by virtue of which any metaphor can be translated into literal language. By implication, this theory of metaphor reveals a set of assumptions concerning the nature of language and truth, often showing a commitment to a correspondence theory of truth, which defines meaning in terms of reference and truth, and presupposing that reality precedes language in providing us with a ready-made structure and categorization. This article is an attempt to demonstrate how this method of substitution has somehow impoverished our understanding of both Protagoras’ measure and its earliest extant interpretation in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Although it is the central term in one of the most discussed philosophical fragments of antiquity,3 the word μέτρον has suffered neglect in comparison with the verb εἶναι,4 the conjunction ὡς5 and the nouns

3 For the analytical overview of the diverging interpretations of *MM* and its constituents, this article is deeply indebted to the ‘Forschungsbericht’ by Huss (1996) that is of great value for anyone interested in the reception of *MM* in the history of philology.

4 In terms of Kahn’s categorization (1973) εἶναι has been interpreted: (1) existentially (Th. Gomperz 1911; H. Gomperz 1912); (2) copulatively/predicatively (Buchheim 1986; Capizzi 1955); (3) veridically (Mansfeld 1981; Kerferd 1981; Guthrie 1969; Kahn 1973).

5 Thus far, the main lines of interpretation include: (1) ὡς as the conjunction ‘that’ (Th. Gomperz 1911; H. Gomperz 1912; Bernsen 1969; Mansfeld 1981); (2) ὡς as ‘how’ (Classen 1989); (3) ὡς as ‘that’ and ‘how’ (Untersteiner 1954; Buchheim 1986).