Protagorean relativism and physis

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In the literature there have been basically two theories about the CHREMATA which the Protagorean man was to measure: the subjectivist interpretation and the objectivist interpretation. According to the former the facts one measures are relative to oneself, while the latter interprets the man-measure fragment as a kind of naive realism where each individual inevitably perceives actual properties of physical objects. But whatever interpretation one forms of Protagorean relativism must make use of other sources besides the one famous and cryptic fragment. And this means weighing the apparently conflicting testimonies of Plato, Aristotle, and Sextus

1 The Greek text for the Protagorean fragment reads: πάντων χρημάτων είναι μέτρον τῶν ἄνθρωπων, τῶν μὲν ἄντων ὡς ἐστὶν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ἄντων ὡς οὐκ ἐστὶν. The text is found in Sextus Adv. Math. vii, 60 and Pyr. Hyp. I 216 and repeated by Diogenes Laertius IX, 51. Plato quotes the text reading ME ONTON instead, Thl. 152A2-4. For other versions see Aristotle (1053 a 35-36, 1062 b 13-15), Plato (Crat. 385B6-386A1), and Hermias (Ira gent. philos. 9). In a previous article, “Protagorean Relativism and the Cyrenaics” in Studies in Epistemology ed. N. Rescher, American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph No. 9 (1975), I argued for this translation of the fragment: “Man is the measure of all states of affairs, of what is the case, that it is the case, of what is not the case, that it is not so.” This is in agreement with Charles Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” Foundations of Language 2 (1966) 245-265, as well as with A. Levi, “The Man-measure Principle: Its Meaning and Applications,” Philosophy (1940), 149.


against one another. In his subjectivist interpretation Vlastos relies heavily on Plato’s testimony, to the complete exclusion of Aristotle and Sextus. Gomperz relies on Sextus to substantiate his objectivist interpretation. At the heart of the controversy stands Plato’s allusion to a Secret Doctrine of Protagoras (SDP) and the question whether it represents Protagoras’ views. Here I shall continue to argue for a subjectivist interpretation of Protagoras. Yet subjectivism has many strains, and it is crucial to ascertain which is the Protagorean variety.

We shall find that a proper understanding of Protagorean subjectivism leads to this discovery: the central thesis of the Gomperz-Kerferd objectivist reading of Protagoras remains correct, that the study of truth for Protagoras was a study of nature (PHYSIS) and not simply a study of social convention (NOMOS).

Despite this correct insight of the objectivist interpretation it is important to review its other failings. First of all the attempt to construe Protagoras as a naive realist cannot succeed by the ruse of understanding ‘PANTA CHREMATA’ as a technical term from Anaxagoras. Of course if the Protagorean doctrine had been an extension of the Anaxagorean thesis that everything is in everything, it would have followed that any assertion that a thing has a certain

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5 Vlastos, Protagoras, note 26 a (pp. xiii-xiv). Vlastos dismisses the testimony of Sextus and Aristotle as “confused and corrupt” and discounts as well any use of the SDP as a clue to Protagorean relativism.


7 Theaetetus 152c-160c. Most commentators now regard the SDP as a unified whole having nothing to do with Protagoras: Vlastos (note 5 above), Cornford (pp. 34-36), Natorp (pp. 21-22), H. Maier, Sokrates (Tübingen: Mahr-Siebeck, 1913), p. 210, Kapp, Gnomon 12 (1936) 71-72, Guthrie (III, 185), and Levi (op cit. passim). Gomperz stands almost alone in defending the SDP, but even he only defends the version of Sextus – Pyr. Hyp. I 217-219 (Gomperz, pp. 230 ff.).

8 See, for example, Vlastos’ too sweeping reference to the “freakish extremism of Protagoras’ generalized subjectivism.” Protagoras p. xvii.