Research on Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN (Paper)2224-5766 ISSN (Online)2225-0484 (Online)
Vol.5, No.4, 2015

"Man Is The Measure Of All Things": A Critical Analysis Of The Sophist Conception Of Man

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Abstract

Central to this article is a basic philosophical concept of the nature of man' knowledge which exists amongst Protagorians of the sophist era, who postulates that *'man is the measure of all things'* Our daily experience of human nature however, continues to give us reasons to unlearn much of what has turned out to be prejudices and errors in our conception of man. Consequently, The question "What is Man?" still perplexes us. and the answers we provide to this question often reveal how distorted our vision of history and thought have become over the years. Philosophers and Psychologists who have approached the problem in terms of already accepted views and theories of the nature of man' knowledge continues to run in to more difficulties. In addition, the absence of direct elaboration to the proposition has given rise to endless controversies about its meaning. This paper shall, via the reconstructive methods of critical analysis in philosophy, examine Protagoras' postulate of man's knowledge of *man* against the Socratic philosophy of what the knowledge of man really is. The study reveals that there is yet a lot to be understood about Man. The reality of the absurdity of knowing and not knowing at the same time is however, identified as one factor that militates against man's quest towards attaining true knowledge. The paper submits that Protagoras' maxim about man is simply an opinion which acknowledges the truth of its denial. It follows that you can never know anything the truth of which you fail to attain.

Key Words: Man, Measure, Protagoras, Socratic, Sophist

1. Introduction

From antiquity till date, man has continued on an endless quest to discover and provide answers to fundamental questions that bothers around the nature of the world, the nature of his existence as an individual and the nature of his existence as a living being in the world (Wogu, 2010:67) captures this point when he noted that "one thing that is sure is that people who lived in the past must have been driven by a desire to explain the world and the things or phenomenon around them". In antiquity, the most puzzling issues amongst thinkers then include: "What are things really like? How do changes in things take place? These basic questions were some of the questions that they had to grapple with. It is interesting to know that the explanations they offered to these questions became what was dubbed *Philosophy* - the love of wisdom. The origin of all these speculations came from the realization that things are not really the way they appear or what they seem to represent to the one viewing them. The realization that appearance after all, differed from reality- the phenomenon of growth, birth, death and decay- fully manifested in the coming into being and the passing a way of life into death. was one puzzling issues that thinkers could not help but attempt to find answers to. For (Stumpf, 2003:5-6), "these facts raised sweeping questions of how things and people came into existence at different times. and pass out of

existence only to be followed by other things and persons". We wish to note that the many answers given by these ancient thinkers in response to the bugging question of their time were not really considered as important as when compared to the fact that they attempted to offer scientific answers to these bugging questions in the first place. Examples of these attempts were contained in the mythological answers giving by Homer and Hesiod.

For the major part of Antiquity among the Ancient Greeks, thinkers were manly preoccupied with questions that were centered on finding the single stuff from where every other thing emanated from. Among the prevailing fundamental questions that prevailed during this period include: What are things really like? How can we explain the processes of change in things? Can the knowledge of something really be possible? All this kind of thinking ended with the era of Leucippus, Democritus and Anaxagoras whose focuses were extended to inquiries in the fields of atoms. In the era of the sophist however, there was a total departure from the kind of inquiry and ideas that thinkers occupied themselves with. "Their ideas were very revolutionary for their time when contrasted with other philosophical doctrines which claimed the universe was based on something objective outside the human influence" (Osimiri, 2011:85) Thinkers of the Sophist era and the golden age began to see the need to start making practical use of philosophy to solve all manners of problems which they encountered daily and mostly for the purpose of gain. Another very important point of departure for thinkers during this era was in their mode of thought and inquiry into the subject of "Man" and all that concerns his nature and existence as a living being in time. This new point of departure, it has been argued, was one of the factors that were responsible for the major controversies that began during the time of the sophist; a controversy which was centered on the pronouncement made by the early sophist Protagoras who said that "Man is the measure of all things" (Plato's *Theaetetus at152a*).

2. Protagoras and The Sophist's Philosophy

Protagoras Doctrines or philosophy can be identifies in three distinctive specific areas: *The Orthoepeia, The Man-measure statement* and *Agnosticism*. Rather than become one of the educators of his time, who offered specific and practical training in rhetoric or public speaking for money of some other kind of reward, Protagoras attempted to formulate a reasoned understanding of a wide range of human phenomena, including language and education. He is also known to have had an interest in "*orthoepeia*" - the correct use of words, although this topic was more strongly associated with his fellow sophist *Prodicus*. In his eponymous Platonic dialogue, Protagoras interprets a poem by *Simonides*, focusing on his use of words, their literal meaning and the author's original intent. This type of education would have been useful for the interpretation of laws and other written documents in the Athenian courts" (TIEP, 1995:15-23) He was also known to have said that "on any matter, there were often two arguments (*logoi*) opposed to one another. According to Aristotle, he was criticized for having claimed to "make the weaker logos stronger (*ton hēttō logon kreittō poiein*)". (TSEP, 2012).

Of all his teachings and sayings, he was most famous for this saying: "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not".[6] Wikipedia notes that "Like many fragments of the Pre-Socratic's teachings, this phrase has been passed down to us without any context, as such; its meaning is open to various interpretations" (Wikipedia, 2011), Studies in this same volume of Wikipedia notes that the word χρήματα (*chrēmata*) instead of the general word ὄντα (*onta*, entities) suggests that Protagoras was referring to things that are used by or in some way related to humans. "This makes a great difference in the meaning of his aphorism. Properties, social entities, ideas, feelings, judgments, etc. are certainly χρήματα and hence originate in the human mind". Wikipedia, 2011),

Plato ascribes relativism to Protagoras and uses his predecessor's teachings as a foil for his own commitment to objective and transcendent realities and values particularly those that relate to his aristocratic background. His major effort, through the words of Socrates, is to convince his contemporaries that ἀρετή (*aretē*, virtue) is a present from the gods, which one either has or has not and that no sophist can teach virtue to people that do not already possess it. "Plato ascribes to Protagoras an early form of phenomenalism", (Wild, 1942:88) in which what is or appears for a single individual is true or real for that individual. However, as it is clearly presented in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras explains that some of such controversial views may result from an ill body or mind. He stresses that although all views may appear equally true, and perhaps should be equally respected, they are certainly not of equal gravity. One may be useful and advantageous to the person that has it while another may prove harmful. Hence, the sophist are there to teach the student how to discriminate between them, that is , to teach virtue.

Protagoras was a proponent of agnosticism. In his lost work; *On the Gods*, he wrote: "Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the

subject, and the brevity of human life" (TIEP, 2006)[10] According to Diogenes Laërtius, the outspoken agnostic position taken by Protagoras aroused anger, causing the Athenians to expel him from the city, and all copies of the book were collected and supposedly burnt in the marketplace. He is however known to have written several different works: *Antilogiae* and *Truth*. The latter was cited by Plato, and was known alternatively as *The Throws* (a wrestling term referring to the attempt to floor an opponent). It began with the "man centered proposition" pronouncement. One of the main tasks of this paper is to find meaning beyond the protagorian proposition which strengthened his resolve to make the proposition about the value and essence of man in the scheme of things

3. The Socratic Philosophy

The Delphi Oracle is said to have confirmed "*pronounced*" Socrates as the wisest man on earth. The proclamation of the oracle at Delphi, studies reveal, had immeasurable influence on the life of Socrates. Confirmed to be the wisest man that was living on the face of the earth, Socrates spent the rest of his life with one mission in focus; which was to confirm or refute the proclamation by the gods. Consequently, Socrates went out, armed with the dialectic method as one of the major tools for achieving his assignment. Socrates did not merely engage in sophistry, he was not interested in arguing for the sake of arguing; rather he was poised to discover the essential nature of Knowledge, Justice, Beauty, Goodness, and especially, the traits of a good character such as Courage.

Burrell describes "The Socratic Methods" as a methodology which have been classified as a dialogue of search, "it is a straightforward but unsuccessful discussion as to how knowledge should be defined, for though it shows what knowledge is not, it fails to discover what knowledge is. But though in the characteristic Socratic fashion, it reaches only a negative result," (Burrell1932:27-41) the argument is conducted with such skill that, as Professor Taylor puts it: "It is not too much to say that after more than two thousand years, the ultimate issues in "Epistemology" are still those which are expounded with unequalled simplicity in the Theaetetus, the best general introduction to the problem of knowledge ever composed." (Taylo, 1974:56) This is high praise, but it would be underrating its value to regard it merely as an epistemological essay in the conventional sense: for it is something much more important than the review and refutation of certain inadequate theories of knowledge or than the positive suggestions which are thrown out in the discussion. It is concerned with an issue simpler and more profound - an issue which interests the man in the street just as much as the student of philosophy. It is more suitably expressed in Pilate's question: "What is truth?" or, perhaps, in the question: "Is there any such thing as Truth?" than in the sort of questions formulated in the schools, e.g. how is experience possible? Or what is "the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge"

The Philosophy that guides Socrates is seen to emanate from the major Influences he had during his life time as a youth, an adult and even as an elder statesman. These influences can be identified in virtually all his teachings, doctrines, methods, etc. The influences include his family background: (1) The life of a sculptor, a trade he learnt from his father. (2) The life of a mid wife, an experience he got from his mother. (3) The life of a guard fly, an experience he got from the market place. All these experiences put together, studies show, are responsible for what we now know as the "Socratic Method".

"The Socratic Method" is perhaps, the most important contribution of Socrates to Western thought. This method of thought and enquiry has also been known as the method of "*elenchus*," which largely is applied to the examination of key moral concepts such as Good and Justice. It was first described by Plato in the Socratic Dialogues. The method basically requires that when one wishes to solve a problem, one first simply brakes down the issue at stake into a series of questions, the answers to which gradually distill the answer you seek. The influence of this approach is most strongly felt today in the use of the Scientific Method, in which hypothesis is the first stage. The development and practice of this method is one of Socrates' most enduring contributions, and it is a key factor in learning his mantle as the father of political philosophy, ethics or moral philosophy, and as a figurehead of all the central themes in Western philosophy.

The Socratic Method is a negative method of hypothesis elimination, in that, better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those which lead to contradictions. It was designed to force one to examine one's own beliefs and the validity of such beliefs. In other words, The Socratic dialectic method is the search for the proper definition of a thing, a definition that will not permit refutation under the Socratic questioning. It was for this purpose that we choose to examine the proposition made by Protagoras with the Socratic Method. Let us note that the method does not imply that the questioner knows the essential nature of knowledge. Rather it only

demonstrates that the questioner is skilled at detecting misconceptions and is revealing them by asking the right questions.

4. Man Is The Measure Of All Things; A Critical Reflection

Man's quest to interpret man in the best possible way continues to reveal that most thinkers who undertake this task do so in terms of already accepted views of the nature of man. Others base their interpretation of man on certain theories of nature already adopted by men as a result of certain inclinations or orientation which is often tied to a particular school of thought. It is therefore not necessary to argue that there is a relation, for to those who, like the Sophists of Greece, holds that "Of all things, The Measure is Man" (Jean,2004:56-65) either in ethics or epistemology; and to those like the Marxists who make economic struggle the key to human history; or even to those who like Plato conceive of a world of Ideas to which the theory of man must conform; the pragmatist Dewey, speaking in terms of biological adjustment, defines history and knowledge in terms that make central his concept of man. Louis Kattsoff corroborates this idea when he noted that:

> the galactic system in which moves our solar system and includes the tiny planet known as Earth, on which men for a brief period have been writing philosophy, may not be anthropocentric; but the philosophy which is written is certainly so in the definite sense that it seeks to find man's place in the universe or to descry man's very existence as meaningless to man (Kattsoff, 1953:452).

To further buttress this point, De La Mettrie was known to have conceived man as a machine. Descartes could not quite bring himself to do so even though he felt tempted and compromised by seeing animals as automata and man as an insoluble duality. In recent years the machine has turned into a physico-chemical plant or a set of protein molecules with peculiar types of innate drives resulting from the chemistry of protein molecules. But it is difficult to conceive of a protein molecule reflecting on its conception of protein molecules; and even more difficult to understand how the self-reflection of machines or chemical plants can distort their conceptions of themselves. Here lies the most peculiar paradox of man - he not only reflects upon his own nature, but allows these reflections to influence his conception of himself and his world. Is it possible for him to arrive at an adequate conception of himself, or is man doomed to see himself only as he desires others to see him? Even more interesting is the fact, as clinical psychologists tell us, that men are more concerned with threats to themselves - for a threat to oneself may be met by overt action, while a threat to one's conception of oneself is met by the development of neurotic behavior. For this reason, Louis K. O. argued that "men project their conceptions of themselves into all they do or so the clinician believes. So Sartre's view of reality is but a projection of his view of himself, as the views of Kant project his personality, and the views of William James project his" (Kattsoff, 1953:453).

Anyone acquainted with the history of western thought would know that to speak of Greek philosophy and the theory of man is to recall at once the *homo-mensura* doctrine of the Sophists. In fact the dictum "man is the measure of all things" is commonly assumed to be the result of the recognition of wide divergence of moral principles and the elevation of this divergence into a universal maxim. The doctrine has also been known to comprises a view of the nature of man from which is derived this relativism. Plato's Theaetetus notes that the Sophist Protagoras was given the honor of having propounded the *homomensura* doctrine from where his dictum was formed. Socrates begins his refutation not with considerations of moral questions but with an attack on the interpretation of the maxim as one which identifies appearance as perception. By this, Protagoras must have insisted that "all that men can possibly know are things as they appear to him. However, this view, studies shows, foreshadows Kant philosophy which also believes that human knowledge is limited by the senses of man. They hold that these senses alone can be appealed to in a final contest or debate. Katsoff corroborates this view when he said that:

> It is not man's willfulness or arbitrariness that makes him the ultimate judge of "things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not." How else can you judge that things are except by human experience and knowledge? Kattsoff, 1953:454). [16]

The truth about the above position is further brought to light when Laszlo Versenyi declared that "The brevity of the fragment and the absence of direct elaboration by Protagoras about the meaning of the postulate gave rise to endless controversy about its meaning" (Versenyi, 1962).

5. The Socratic Attack Of The Protagoras' Theory

One of the Socratic doctrines consider *Philosophy* as an activity that administers the proper amount of purge to the soul - a more effective purge than any special science or sciences could offer. It becomes very necessary and natural of Socrates to want to purge the theory by Protagoras. For Socrates, it was his natural business or put more correctly, it was his divinely appointed task to go about to administer this purge to people who thought they knew better, in this case; *Protagoras*. Let us also add at this point that Protagoras was, in fact, the most formidable opponent that Socrates ever had. In the Theaetetus, or at least in the first and larger part of it, Socrates made his counter-attack, and scored a complete triumph. In fact, he did his work so well that it was done once and for all. That is why, since Protagoras' anarchical principle is always breaking out afresh, never perhaps more seriously than at the present day, when all standards are called in question, it is well worth while to study carefully the manner in which Socrates proved the Truth of Protagoras to be untrue. That however will be the subject of another paper. What we are most interested in here are the direct criticism which Socrates offered to Protagoras' maxim

5.1. Criticism of the Theory

Burrell (1932) identified three simple criticisms that we find quite interesting in a study he made on the Greek sophists. We shall be adopting these theses criticism for the discussion we wish to make in this part of the study. (1). The Fist argument we wish to consider here is of the nature of *argumentum ad hominem*. It is surprising that so clever a man as Protagoras did not see that he proved more than he intended, for according to his theory, not only are all men - the wise and the foolish - reduced to the same level, but on the plane of sentient experience, it is just as true therefore to say that a pig or a tadpole is the measure of all things.

(2). A critical look at the maxim reveals that the life of Protagoras has to a large extent, systematically violated his own very creed. If what he preached was "true", then he had no right to preach, since his doctrines showed that his disciples, without any instruction from him, were as wise as himself. He had fooled them into believing that he could make them wiser than they were, and therefore had taken their fees under false pretences. It looks, indeed, as if he had been talking with his tongue in his cheek, and while flattering people that they were equal to the gods, to whom the maxim applies no less than to men. By implication, he really made them out to be no higher than tadpoles.

(3). Another careful look at the maxim seem to completely stultifies Socrates' arts of midwifery and the whole practice of dialectics, for in Socrates opinion, it is utter nonsense to investigate and try to refute another's opinion, when every man's opinion is correct. The question that we can't help asking therefore is, "Is the "Truth" of Protagoras truth, or is it only a sort of solemn jest"?

5.2. Knowledge Is Perception

The Protagorian perspectives about the gods and their existence; to a large extent, have not helped his cause in the 'man measure' maxim... which is considered a major proponent of agnosticism, he was known to have been of the opinion that: "Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life" (TIEP, 2008). This position about the god and the limitations of man punctures his claims about the place of man in the *'man measure'* maxim. This further gives us reasons to equate the entire maxim by Protagoras alongside the famous theorem in philosophy which holds that: "*Knowledge is Perception*".

Taking Protagoras strictly by his words in the maxim, in the light of this theorem 'knowledge is perception,' Socrates attacks the theorem with the view to showing how false this maxim could be by mere appealing to facts of experience. "If we have not learned a foreign language for instance, do we know it by merely hearing it spoken or seeing the script"? (Burrell, 1932:196) Socrates asked. If that be the case, we must deny that we hear the words or see the writing, which we do not understand. If we have learnt it, then we know its meaning, that is, what we cannot see or hear. Invariably, we can infer that knowledge and perception are therefore, not identical in learning a language.

In another example Socrates uses the case of memory to further buttress his points. He argued that if you know what you remember to have seen, you must at least know what you have just seen when you shut your eyes. Hence you know what you do not see, unless you forget everything you see as soon as you cease to see it. This,

however, is not the case for the scenario in question. Once again therefore, knowledge is not and cannot be equated directly to be inferred from perception as Protagoras has proposed in his theory.

From the examples enumerated above, Burrell yet identifies a great absurdity that is inferred in the case in point; "the absurdity of knowing and not knowing the same thing at the same time" [21]. This is because if you cover one eyes, you see (i.e. know) with one eye and do not see (i.e. do not know) with the other. The hypothesis therefore is: "I know what I see" and "I see what I know". But there is the case of "I do not know what I see" and "I see what I do not know". Socrates further argued.

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In a similar instance, we may ask: "Is my knowledge of a thing just the same whenever I see it a yard or a mile away, does it matter whether I see it dimly or clearly, and so on. Obviously, these above instances seem to knock the base out of the theory and to prove that the theorem which invariably declared error to be impossible is itself erroneous.

Now bearing in mind the position of Protagoras which is that " that which appears to each man is real to him to whom it appears", Protagoras messed up his own case when he admitted that certain persons, 'the wise and the good', the Doctors and the husbandman excel others in respect to what is better and worse. This sadly implies their belief that both wisdom and ignorance exist amongst them and by wisdom and ignorance, they mean true and false opinions respectively. Now according to the doctrine of Protagoras, this opinion is true. Such the conception invariably leads to a dilemma. Contemporary thinkers can't help wondering whether the opinion of men are sometimes true and sometimes false, or whether we should assume that they are always true. It follows in either case that their opinions are not always true, but may be either true or false. One simple inference we can deduce from this position is that Protagoras opinion is true to himself but false to thousands of others.

Protagoras we know from his profession of teaching others and his admission that some men are wiser than others about better and worse, then it must follow that his "truth" is truth to no one else. This conclusion brings us to another smart result and position which Burrell identifies:

> In admitting the truth of the opinions of those who think that his opinion is false, he admits that his own opinion is false. And as the others refuse to admit that they are in error in thinking his opinion false, while Protagoras, by virtue of his dictum, has to admit that their refusal to acknowledge themselves in error is true, therefore all men, beginning with Protagoras, admit that "neither a dog nor any casual man" is a measure of anything whatsoever that he has not learned (Burrell, 1932:137).

So it follows that the "Truth" of Protagoras is true, not only to nobody else, but not even to himself. Put simply, the opinion which acknowledges the truth of its denial cannot be true.

The presupposition of the theory that "knowledge is perception" is that perception is always of reality, and that there is an exact correspondence between what is perceived and perception. Plato's (Theaetetus 1974:512) It is always true and incapable of error. That is, it is always in possession of the truth, because it is always perception of the reality, and is therefore knowledge. Knowledge is apprehending the truth of the reality, which perception apprehends. It follows that you can never know anything the truth of which you fail to attain (Plato, 1974:186). But the preceding argument has shown conclusively that reality is not to be found in the impressions of sense, e.g. the hardness of the hard, etc., through touch with which the soul is affected, through the body, and therefore the soul never reaches the truth of the reality through that channel. It is, therefore, impossible to find knowledge there either. Reality is only to be found in the reasoning about the impressions, i.e. in observation, comparison, and reflection on the common or universal aspects of things, which the soul observes by its own powers independently of the senses. These processes are quite different from sense perception.

Therefore we argue that knowledge or the attainment of the truth about reality is not the same thing as perception, in which it is impossible to find either truth or reality, the attainment of which is the indispensable condition of knowledge. This whole idea makes a mess of the conception of truth as proposed by Protagoras, the conception of the universal flux by Heraclitus, the definition of truth by Theaetetus. By implication, while the truth of Protagoras stultifies the dialectic of Socrates, it invariably stultifies itself. In order to upset the sophism that "all opinions are true," Socrates had to demonstrate the existence of falsehood, and he did it in the most piquant way by proving the error of the denial of error. Protagoras, too, denied the difference between appearance and reality, because all appearances are real; but in his own person he produced the most startling evidence that some appearances are *unreal*; for what *appeared* to him proved to be a misrepresentation of reality.

Thus Socrates somewhat paradoxically establishes the existence of truth on the certain fact of error (Burrell, 1932:162).

In closing, we in identifying the degree of success achieved by Socrates in the attack on Protagoras' 'man measure' theory, we can note that his argument against Protagoras could be described in modern terms as a triumphant exposure of subjectivism, relativism, pragmatism, or whatever be the fashionable name for plausible and shallow skepticism. In the Platonic language, it might be described as a duel between dialectic and rhetoric, appearance and reality, being and becoming or between sophistry and philosophy. In Socrates' own language, it is a demonstration that the "truth" of Protagoras is untrue. Perhaps it might be appropriately described as the most brilliant exhibition in the Platonic dialogues of the Socratic Method in the act of vindicating its own validity. Aristotle, with his customary penetration, has analyzed it into its elements as contained in his well-known passage (Plato's Metaphysics, 1978:24) he says that "two things may fairly be ascribed to Socrates-inductive arguments and universal definition, both of which are concerned with the starting-point of knowledge."

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