

AN OVERVIEW OF NEO-PROTAGOREAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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What does the teacher need to know about neo-Protagorean epistemology? In a nutshell, there are four related principles or tenets to keep in mind:

1. human knowledge is relative to knowing subjects and their place in culture and history;
2. because individual knowing subjects are all “placed” somewhat differently, questions of knowledge arise within a field of competing options;
3. moreover, because all knowledge claims issue from distinct subject positions, no single claim can assume authority as universal and absolute;
4. nonetheless, competing claims can be negotiated and collective agreements achieved by appeal to mutual patterns of understanding and practice and practical standards arrived at through argument.

The first of these “principles” is a modern variant of the Protagorean dictum that “humanity is the measure of all things.” At once famous and neglected, this gnomic maxim can be cast as both a theoretical hypothesis regarding the production of human knowledge and an empirical observation on the way knowledge operates in actual practice. The nucleus of the doctrine posits human cognition as the “precondition” of any claim we make about the world; or, to reverse the terms, what we claim as knowledge follows from and is structured by the cognitive practice of knowing subjects.

Accordingly, our knowledge of the world is not an immediate reflection of things as they are in themselves; rather, our diverse “ways of knowing” invariably leave their impression on what we take to be real and true. Consequently, when we claim *knowledge* of this experience or that phenomenon, such a claim is also and unavoidably a matter of *knowledge from* a particular human perspective. Seen in these simple, unqualified terms, the human-measure doctrine may seem almost too obvious to many modern readers or, alternatively, too relativistic for those with a stake in objective certainty. Nonetheless, the human-measure persists, not simply because it is the *fons et origio*, the base and origin of Western humanism but, more importantly, because it articulates so succinctly a basic theory of what happens when human beings “understand” their world.

As a theory of knowledge, the initial Protagorean proposition is relatively straight forward: the human-measure doctrine argues that what we know is contingent on the cognitive operations of the knowing subject. However, the basic notion of the human-measure doctrine quickly becomes more subtle when modified by the historical/social caveat that fills out the text of tenet #1. For if the world appears to us as structured by human agency, and if individual agents are all placed somewhat differently along the axis of culture and within the flux of history, then each agent is likely to know the world in somewhat different ways. As a result, what counts as knowledge will in most cases find expression as a plurality of positions, a range of approximations that reflect the deep contingency of all human efforts to “measure” or interpret the world.

To expand slightly, each individual is immersed in a network of specific relations (familial, social, political, economic, linguistic, etc.) which—despite certain commonalities across time and within communities—are unique to that person. Or, more exactly, we come into self-consciousness amidst a mass of conventions, distinctions, and interpretive strategies available at a particular time and place, and we draw on these “availabilities” in our own attempts to understand the world. The knowing subject is really, then, a social subject whose cognitive practice emerges from the collective resources of time and place. Even among contemporaries and colleagues, however, we all exist in somewhat different relation to the constellation of possibilities that characterize a particular historical moment. All of which means that we are likely to develop patterns of hermeneutical practice, or ways of knowing that are distinct in varying degrees from those of others around us.

In accordance, therefore, with tenet #2 above, what we refer to as human knowledge will manifest itself as an expansive spectrum of historical, cultural, and individual differences. Put another way, what counts as knowledge in this time or that place, for this or that individual, will be calculated according to varied canons of judgment. The heavens are viewed differently by professors at MIT and the priests of Chichen Itza, questions of social justice take different forms for Georgetown attorneys and scholars of the Koran; indeed, as we all know, scientists, scholars, and attorneys with similar backgrounds can have very dissimilar perspectives on the same subject of study. In sum, the human-measure doctrine assumes that what we know is in large part a product of human interpretive practice and that, at a deeper level, such practice is an ontological feature of human experience, something we do *by nature*. And yet, according to the caveat (i.e., according to Protagorean doctrine in contemporary form), that nature is always and already historicized, always located within a network of particular relations. So, while human-measure in its original form posits only that what we know is relative to how we measure, a growing sense of historical and cultural difference asks us now to consider how we measure as relative to when and where we are.

Of course, such relativism stands in direct opposition to the master tradition of Western philosophy. To cite a single example: the Cartesian *cogito* posits the cognitive self as potentially free from attitude and belief, outside of history and culture, and devoted solely to reason. Thus purged of subjective bias, the rational self operates by invoking formally consistent methods that stand in fixed relation to “objective” reality and reveal that reality as a timeless, universal structure. In turn, this transparent, invariant structure serves as an unimpeachable foundation for knowledge claims and, by inference, a warrant for justified action. By contrast, the human-measure doctrine emphasizes the role of human agency in the epistemological process rather than the transcendent authority of a knowable reality. More specifically, neo-Protagorean theory assumes that individual interpretive strategies condition the form and content of what we know, that such strategies vary according to the “location” of the knowing subject, and that different constructions of the known world will arise accordingly. Under such conditions, the Cartesian claim to certain knowledge is simply unavailable because there is no foundational structure to operate as an absolute guarantee. Instead, what counts as human knowledge for the neo-

Protagorean relativist is a matter of human conjecture—which means, of course, that it is also subject to argument.

The concept of a foundational structure or overarching framework of universal truths is at issue in tenet #3. Protagoras himself addresses this concept in another surviving fragment, the *peri theon*, in which he declares that “concerning the gods, I am unable to know whether they exist or whether they do not exist, or what they are like in form” (see Ch. 1, sec. 1). The gods may be non-existent, or they may simply be unavailable; the fragment does not directly challenge the presence of a fixed and transcendent reality. Rather, it argues that ultimate authority is unknowable as such by humanity. And, without recourse to an unconditional foundation on which to ground our claims about the world, what we know must remain sublunary, below the level of the absolute, conditioned by contingency and multiplicity rather than permanence and universality. From the perspective of its critics, the absence of foundational principles forces the relativist to approach knowledge in ways that are at best subjective, at worst nihilistic, incoherent, and immoral. Indeed, how are we to winnow truth from falsehood if ultimate principles are unavailable and if we accept as valid different epistemic standards from different times, places, and people? Yet, from the Protagorean perspective, we simply have no purchase on indubitable standards and must learn to grapple with the “irreducible pluralism” of human interpretive positions. Or to paraphrase Jane Austen, “we have no talent for certainty.” Nonetheless, the absence of absolutes to which our knowledge claims can be anchored does not leave us entirely without epistemic resources. Indeed, tenet #4 expresses confidence in the availability of useful knowledge, a confidence based, in particular, on our capacity for argument.

The reasoning here is detailed (see Chs. 1–3); but in sum, we know from the first two tenets that human knowledge is relative to the place and person of the knowing subject and that in the absence of a consolidating authority knowledge claims are likely to proliferate in an array of interpretive options. However, even if knowledge at root is “knowledge for A,” there is no corresponding reason to assume that all knowledge claims are necessarily equal; nor, in the absence of a neutral standard, is there cause for despair over the subjectivity of judgment. Protagoras addresses these important issues directly: though each of us is the measure of what is or is not the case, and though one argument or logos may not be “truer” than another by any absolute standard, one logos may still be “stronger” in the sense of more advantageous or useful (*Theaetetus* 166c-68c). Accordingly, the Sophist or wise person is someone who is able to distinguish among opposing arguments and discern that which will prove most beneficial under prevailing circumstances. So, while it originates in an irreducible pluralism, Protagorean reasoning is oriented toward practical benefits and requires the ability to juxtapose alternatives in preparation for making choices. In practice, the search for useful knowledge relies upon the operations of argument. Put briefly, antilogical exchange immerses us in the dialogue of competing claims (anti-logoi) and, in the process, works to extend our conceptual horizons. In turn, the dialogue of antilogoi creates opportunities for new arguments at the same time it provides a comparative context for reasoned judgment. The knowledge that issues from this intersubjective exchange will be neither certain nor final because other arguments will inevitably arise to challenge the status of an ascendant logos.

Nonetheless, understandings achieved through the consideration of all options and the authority generated through the process of dialogical exchange provide a reasonable standard for human judgment, a practical framework for collective agreement, and ample authority for justified action, even amidst the flux of opinion.

To distill this reasoning yet further: knowledge is something we accomplish by submitting the many sides in controversy (*multiplex ratio disputandi*) to the challenge of well-conducted argument or—more exactly—to the collective search for the strongest possible logos within and through the dialogue of opposing parties. Seen thus, argument is an affirmative act that transforms the clash of opinion into justifiable commitments by forging relationships amidst difference. As such, Protagorean theory achieves its pragmatic fulfillment in antilogical practice, a practice that imagines hermeneutics and rhetoric, measuring and arguing as inseparable features of a single process. Naturally, there are qualifications that attend the Protagorean epistemic. In the first place, I should clarify the extent to which what we know is contingent upon human cognitive practice. To its critics, relativism traps us in an inescapable solipsism, divorced from the world, confined to a cell of private opinions. And yet, there is nothing in neo-Protagorean theory to suggest that the materiality of the world is unavailable for analysis and understanding. Indeed, as modern relativists have pointed out, the world itself not only provides raw data for observation, it also limits the range of acceptable interpretations. “I cannot,” writes Lorraine Code, “choose to experience sunshine when it is cold and snowing” (1982,168). Moreover, given the pragmatic nature of Protagorean knowledge, any view which does not conform to the raw data of the world adequately enough to be useful will eventually be rejected as unpersuasive. Consequently, while the known world remains contingent on the conceptual practices of the knowing subject, the extent of the subject’s influence is bounded by the presence of knowable data and the collective agreements we make about this data.

A second qualification follows from the first: i.e., relativism is not equally at play in all sectors of knowledge. In the arena of “technical” knowledge, strict inquiry procedures seek to circumscribe the constitutive power of the individual subject and comprehend the state of affairs which obtains outside subjective influence. Of course, once translated into any symbol system, technical data are reconceived in a framework of human construction. Nonetheless, technical inquiry works to minimize the extent to which subjective intervention can alter the object of study. The case is obviously different with “social” knowledge, where data are ambiguous and alterable according to the practice and perspective of the subject. It is only fair to acknowledge, then, that relativism will be more fully in force in the latter category than in the former though, as noted, human interpretive influence is never reduced to zero.

Even with qualifiers, however, the basic proposition of Protagorean thought remains intact: humanity is the measure of all things because knowledge about the world proceeds from the cognitive operations of active human agents. In the ancient Greek world, the human-measure doctrine marked a shift from an ontological concern with the cosmos as the origin of abstract, foundational principles to a hermeneutical interest in human practice as the source of both diverse interpretations and defensible belief. This

humanism has found diverse expression over the ages; but, as Joseph Margolis puts it, “there has never been such a Protagorean age as our own” (1991, 119). For example, human-measure now finds expression in the growing recognition that historical placement conditions perception and that cultural positions confer tacit prejudice, in the rejection of foundational principles that claim invariant status and the bivalent truth values that attend them, in the corresponding endorsement of multiple ways of knowing and the acknowledgement that reason itself can take many forms, and in the admission that—in the context of many, local, conflicting beliefs—the truth is a matter of discourse and a topic for argument. From the perspective of the dominant Western philosophical tradition, these Protagorean developments mark an epistemic tragedy, a falling away from the certainty conferred by absolute, universal, and invariant ideas. But for the neo-Protagorean, an historicized relativism enables the proliferation of *petits recits*, of many sides and *multiplex ratio*, all of which have something to contribute to comprehensive understanding. Of course, we must still seek convergence and make judgments, but we do so by invoking the flexibility of contingent standards rather than by submitting to the prescribed methods of formal reasoning. Consequently, in a Protagorean world, the way we measure is no small matter.

From *Many Sides*:

A Protagorean Approach to the Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy of Argument
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