

2. “Man is the measure of all things”.

Plato. *The Theaetetus and Philebus of Plato. Sophist*. Translated by H. F. Carill. Edinburgh: The Riverside Press Limited, 109, p.25.

Man: the determining factor or just another variable?

Plato wrote that “Man is the measure of all things”, which is an intriguing thought that can make one wonder. Does this mean that if not for man, nothing would exist? Or does it mean that humans make things worthy and not just things? It also raises the questions of why Plato has decided that “Man” of all things is the measure. In this essay I will explore the complications of this statement and answer some of the questions it raises.

To explore this thesis further, we must first establish the true meaning of “Man”, “measure” and “things”. One can presume that “Man” refers to not just men, but all humans. It is a simple term used to describe the whole human-race. This I assume only involve actual humans, homo sapiens, and not animals of any sort. Of course, one can argue that humans are just an extension of animals, but for this thesis we will distinguish the two. “Measure”, in the traditional sense, is ways to determine amount of something. In simple terms this can be various ways to define and organize statistics, such as kg, metres and decibel. In Plato’s statement one can assume that he is not referring to these simple kinds of trivial measures, but rather something less measurable. Presumably he means “measure” as in confirming something’s existence or worth. To fully understand the statement and its regard to “measure”, one must determine what “things” really mean. I would like to distinguish between two different definitions of “things”. The first is physical things, objects, that we touch, feel, taste, see or hear. Observable events that we can acknowledge through our senses, also fall under this category. This could for example be seeing clouds in the sky or hearing a twig snapping. The second definition of things are abstract ideas and values that we can not feel or observe with our senses. This includes concepts such as peace, beauty and goodness. Now that we have defined these three words, we can revisit Plato’s thesis and review it considering our definitions. “Man is the measure of all things” means that the human race is what gives observable objects or incidents, as well as unsensible ideas, its existence and worth.

The premise of this thesis is that humans are the only measurers, but can this really be said to be true? Of course, Plato does not say so explicitly, but why make such a statement if it applies to all things and not just man? Then it would serve no meaning and lose all its

interesting appeals, which I doubt Plato would even bother to write. Undoubtedly humans can verify the existence of things, which could make them real. We have also invented systems and moral constructs that adds different amount of worth to these things. Therefore, I would agree with Plato that man to some degree can measure things. However, who is to say that man is the only species able to measure things? Most people would agree that animals also have a conscience mind and can express preferences. It is evidently not as developed as the human mind, but still, it exists. They are also able to observe things and therefore validate their existence. For example, if a herd of sheep make their way over a river, they know for sure that the river was flowing, perhaps the water was cold, and maybe a fish swam by them. Even tough no human was present to witness this, it happened, right? Since animals, like humans, are able to express preferences, they also add worth to different things. For example, a lion is more likely to eat an antelope-steak than a big Greek salad. By doing so it has determined that the antelope is more delicious and therefore more worthy to them, than the salad. Therefore, one can argue that animals are equally equipped to be the “measure of all things”. However, this is only in regard to the first definition of “things”. Even though animals have a good ability to observe and witness things, they don’t spend too much time dwelling over peace and moral values, at least to the extent of my knowledge. Therefore, Plato is probably right to diminish the measurers to only humans. Even though I do think the statement overlooks animals and their merit, I will continue to explore Plato’s thesis on the premiss of man being the only species able to properly fulfil the role of measurers.

Plato’s statement raises the question of whether or not things exist if not for humans. If there is no human around to witness an incident or see an object, was it actually real? To man it makes no difference whether it was or not. Since no one was around it had no effect and made no difference or lasting impressions whatsoever. Still, I find it hard to wrap my mind around the idea that something did not happen, just because no one witnessed it. It is mindboggling to figure out a probable explanation. In accordance with the way I interpret Plato’s thesis, he implies that things do not exist if man does not decide so. When it comes to physical objects, I believe this statement to be false. I also think that animals and dinosaurs before me would agree. It sounds to self-centred to say that in the eyes of the beholder, things become real, but only if those eyes belong to a human. Perhaps if there was a God, he would also disagree that “man is the measure of all things”. He might even be offended that humans claim to make things real, when he created everything and made it an existing reality. God would probably say that the things he invented are just are real and do in fact exist, even though humans are

not around to bear witness. On another note, he may agree with Plato that humans make things worthy, but not real. Or perhaps I am pushing my own thoughts on God, but I will revisit this idea later. To conclude, Plato's idea, the way I interpret it, is that things do not exist without humans. However, there are lots of weak points about this, which makes it hard to agree with his notion. Personally, I would disagree about humans making things existent, when it comes to the first definition of "things", which are physical objects and observable incidents.

Can the same be said for the second definition of "things", are they also able to exist without humans? The short answer is no. These "things" are far more complex and since they cannot be sensed, it is harder to determine their existence. Ideas and concepts, such as love and moral, can only truly exist in the mind. You might say that love is something you are able to feel, but is it not just in your mind? Let's say my mom actually disliked me, but since she is my parent, she has to pretend she loves me. Every act of love she has ever done for me was just a falsified image meant to make me feel loved, but to me it was completely real. Yes, I felt like I felt it, and its effect was perhaps just as good as if the love had been real. But how can I feel love when it was never given and is just a false lie? I would rather say that love is not a feeling, but more so an idea that exist in our mind. We have an idea of love, and when someone fulfils those criteria we experience love, even though the love was fake. That is because our mind ticks of all the boxes for love and tells us it is. In the same way that love only exist in our mind, every nonsensible idea only exists in our mind. With the presumption that animals are far from as complex thinkers as humans, Plato is right about this aspect. The second definition of "things" can in fact only exist because of humans. Since it exists solely in our minds, it would disappear if we did. Therefore, I also agree with Plato's statement. It just depends on whether you use the first or second definition of "things".

Now we have discussed whether or not things exist without man, but how about the things' worth? If humans are the measure of all things, it would imply that humans also make things worthy and decides the amount of worth. Furthermore, this is fundamentally important to decide, because if things are able to exist without man, but have no worth, their existence does not really matter, does it? When talking about physical things and observable events, we have already established that both humans and animals can express preferences. Therefore, one can argue that not only do humans create a hierarchy in worth, but so does animals, and therefore Plato's thesis saying that only man can be the measure is false (given my presumption that Plato is separating humans from every other species in his statement). Even though I quite

agree with this conclusion, it is interesting to explore another proposition. To do so I will continue with my godly view, cause if there is in fact a God, his opinion on this is crucial. As previously mentioned, if God is real, he probably believes physical things exist even if humans do not. On one hand, since he created them, he might also say they have an indefinite worth unaltered by any involvement of man. On the other hand, God created humans as his last and greatest accomplishment. Sculpted in the image of God himself, maybe humans were set on earth to give his creation meaning. God saw that the world was good, but that does not mean it had any worth. If so, the animals' ability to have preferences will have to be overlooked or deemed as not important enough to create worth. Perhaps God would agree with Plato on the notion that things do not have any worth without humans, and therefore "man is the measure of all things". This argument is however in danger of sounding to man-loving and, again, self-centred, but I believe it is a plausible option. Of course, this argumentation would only appeal to believers and agnostics would not be convinced.

As for man being essential for the worth of abstract ideas and concepts, it is pretty self-evident that we are. Given of course that my prior conclusion is correct. If this definition of "things" only exists in the mind of man, it cannot exist without humans. If the thing cannot even exist without humans, it certainly will not have any worth without them. Since this seems so evident, I do not see any point in elaborating further. However, a possible counterargument could be that animals can give these constructs worth, just like they might be able to with physical things. Sure, it is plausible, but I think this reasoning gives animals too much credit. Even though they are somewhat smart, their minds are not as developed as the human mind. Maybe because they are more so driven by instincts or maybe because they are primitive versions of us. I do not know exactly why, but I would assume that animals are not capable of sophisticatedly decide that peace exists and is better than war, or that evil is real and a worse virtue than goodness. They may have a faint idea of what these things are, but are not insightful enough to determine give it worth the way humans do. This brings me back to the point of this paragraph, which is that Plato is right that the second type of "things" are measured by humans and worthy because of man.

All this considered, I would say that Plato's statement is probably true in the view of man. Even though there are many good arguments against man being determinative of things' existence and worth, humans have a tendency to put themselves on a pedestal above everyone and everything else. Apologies it this sounds like I have no faith in humanity, but I think most humans are very selfish, myself included. We believe that man is the centre of the universe

and therefore are likely to agree with this quote. The question of whether most humans would be correct in agreeing with Plato's thesis is way more difficult to determine. It is easy for man to say that we measure all things. Because in a way we do. We decide what is real to us and what is not. We decide what virtues are good and bad. And what is considered beautiful and what is not. If man is not around to measure both physical things and ideas, it might as well not exist. It sure could, but there is no way for us to know. If we do not know about or acknowledge its existence, it might as well not be real or worth anything. With this thought process, "man is the measure of all things". Measure whether they exist, what they are worth and so on. It is in accordance with man that things become. However plausible this might sound; I still cannot fathom the idea of humans being the only species that can make things real. Furthermore, how there even needs to be a living witness for things to exist. Then it all becomes a question of definitions. How you define what it means to exist and so on. Personally, I do not think humans, or any other animal for that matter, needs to verify something physical for it to exist. But when it comes to ideas and values, I do think humans are necessary. Considering the fact that Plato's thesis says "all things" and not just some, I cannot fully agree with him. If he truly means "things", only as ideas I would agree. But if he meant that, he should have been more specific. Instead, I am left to wonder what he really means by "things" and this statement as a whole. I could probably go back and forth forever. Because even if my immediate thought is to disagree partly, there is something to it and after further dwelling I might agree fully. Who knows?