MEASURE AND THE ARTS IN PLATO’S STATESMAN

The section on measure in Plato’s Statesman has given rise to a large and sometimes strange literature. Scholars have seen in it an unnecessary detour in the argument of the dialogue, a personal riposte by Plato to his critics concerning the length of the section on weaving; a foreshadowing of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean; a teaching completely different from Aristotle’s; or even the key to the whole dialogue, given its central location. Great amounts of energy have been expended connecting various pronouncements of the Eleatic Stranger (Plato’s philosophical spokesman in the dialogue) with various supposed unwritten doctrines of Plato. In sum, scholarly consensus on its meaning has proven elusive.

In this paper, I propose an interpretation of the basic argument of the section on measure that attempts to bring out its plain meaning. My purpose is not to draw out the connections of this section with the rest of the dialogue (except incidentally), or to connect its arguments with other Platonic positions (written or unwritten), but merely to clarify the sense of an opaque passage. It is my contention that Plato’s argument is in fact both less obscure and more philosophically interesting than a variety of commentators have made it seem.

I argue that the two types of measure of which the Eleatic Stranger speaks are not specifically Platonic concepts depending on obscure and unacceptable Platonic doctrines, but (sometimes opaquely expressed) formulations of a real insight into the way in which we measure things. This insight is then developed by the Stranger into a claim about the dependence of all human know-how on the possibility of measuring things in a specific way, namely, according to what he sometimes calls the “mean.” I attempt to show below that this claim rests on certain presuppositions regarding the regularity of nature, but that it is not connected to any specifically teleological conception of nature, and in particular that the mean is not itself the good.

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