EXCESS AND DEFICIENCY AT *STATESMAN* 283C-285C

I

Having just concluded at 283A what he suggests might appear to be an overly long definition of weaving, the Stranger recommends to Young Socrates that they undertake an inquiry into “the art of measurement” (ἡ . . . μετρητική: 283D1) before returning to the interrupted account of statesmanship. The form to be taken by this inquiry is described as an examination of “excess and deficiency in general” (πάσαν τήν τε ύπερβολήν καὶ τήν ἔλλειψιν: 283C3-4). This examination centers around a distinction between two ways in which excess and deficiency can be measured. In the course of the section under discussion (283C-285C), this distinction is formulated in several different ways, some of which bear little surface resemblance to the others. My task in the present study is to show how these disparate formulations, despite their apparent divergences, all refer to the same distinction between types of measurement.

A translation of the section in question is provided below, with six separate formulations of the distinction marked off in the left-hand margin.

283C3  
So let us begin by examining excess and deficiency in general, in order that we may reasonably praise what is said on a given occasion in discussions like this, or else censure it for being longer than it should be or just the opposite.

Then let’s do so.

It would turn out auspiciously, I think, if we began by talking about these things.

What things?

About length and brevity, and excess and deficiency in general. I suppose the art of measurement pertains to all these.

Yes.

Then let us divide it into two parts. For this is what our present task requires.

Do say how the division goes.

(1)  
Like this: on the one hand according to the association of greatness and smallness with each other, on the other according to the being [that is] necessary for generation (τὴν τῆς γενέσεως ἀναγκαίαν οὐσίαν).
What do you mean?

Undoubtedly it seems to you that the greater ought to be termed greater in comparison with nothing other than the smaller, and the smaller in turn smaller than nothing other than the greater?

It does.

But what of this? Wouldn’t we say, rather, that there are things exceeding the condition of due measure (τῆς τοῦ μετρίου φύσεως), or exceeded by it, whether in word or in deed, and that the chief difference between bad and good among us lies in this?

So it seems.

Then we must lay it down that the Great and the Small both have being and are judged in these two ways, not just in relation to each other as we said a moment ago. As was said just now, we should speak rather of their existing relative to each other on the one hand and relative to due measure on the other. Would you like to know why?

Yes, why?

If someone admits the greater in relation to none other than something smaller by nature, it will never relate to due measure. Agreed?

That’s so.

But with this account, wouldn’t we destroy the arts themselves and all their products; and in particular wouldn’t we obliterate the art of statesmanship we are now seeking and the art of weaving just mentioned? For it seems to me that all such arts guard against exceeding due measure or falling short of it, not as something nonexistent but as something hard to deal with in their practice. It is by preserving measure (μετρον) in this way that everything good and fair is produced.

What then?

Well, if we obliterate the art of statesmanship, the search for the knowledge of kingship from then on will be impracticable.

Very much so.

So just as in the case of the sophist we proved it necessary for non-Being to exist, lest the argument elude us on this issue, what alternative is there now to rendering it necessary that the larger and smaller be