

Abstract

The Sophists on the canonizing power of “convention”

Keywords: canon, criterion, identity, conventions, Sophists

In Classical Age and beyond, conventions and laws are frequently understood as a way of establishing and preserving human identity from situations of risky turmoil and upset. For Protagoras, for example, knowledge is ultimately nothing but a messy plot of unrelated perceptions and judgments. If so, then the criterion for knowing and acting turns out to be fully humanised: “man is the measure of all things” (DK 80 B1), as Protagoras puts it. At a more general level, the Protagorean view reflects the human awareness of the inaccessibility to knowledge of reality and the consequent need of a new philosophical criterion in a time of existential crisis.

This paper aims to explore and assess the ways by which the Sophists endorse or, by contrast, discard the function of social and political conventions as driving forces in the process of canonization and formation of human identity. In particular, it will be chiefly concerned with an attempt to address and elucidate what are the advantages and the problems of assuming the νόμοι as canonising factors that allow for the preservation of human identity. Critics of traditional morality will argue that since morality is just a human invention it thereby “lacks genuine authority”, downgrading the role of conventions and laws. In regard to this, it is productive to examine the arguments with which Antiphon and Callicles put forward vitriolic criticisms against the role usually ascribed to social conventions. For example, for Callicles, convention is a contrivance devised by the weak people in order to refrain the strong from doing what he is entitled to do by nature. By contrast, just to quote a very well-known example, in the *Protagoras* the homonymous Sophist narrates a myth, where the νόμοι play a fundamental role in enabling the social and communitarian life of men.

To conclude, the pay-off of my discussion will be a historical and philosophical assessment of the arguments in favour of the adoption of “convention” as a canon and a criterion in the framework of the Sophistic debate: to what extent can the νόμος as a canon create cultural and social coherence? Moreover, I will also address the counterarguments and objections purported by the opponents to these attempts of grounding the criterion of human existence on a conventional basis. In this way, I hope to unravel and display some of the most threatening challenges to the constitution of a canon (i.e. a general law, rule, principle, or criterion by which something is judged) in relation to the problem of identity and self-preservation.

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