



## **The Sophists**

### **Alfred William Benn**

#### **1. Education at Athens**

Speculative freedom, complete everywhere else in the Hellenic world, was, as we have seen, not complete at Athens. But in that city which called herself the school of Greece, education always remained free, to this extent at least, that it was a matter of individual enterprise. Although in other ways sufficiently absorbing and despotic, the State neither provided the means of instruction nor did it attempt to prescribe what the course of instruction should be. Apparently any one that liked could open a school, and fathers could send their sons to any school they liked. The system seems to have worked well. Every Athenian citizen could read to some extent, and it was considered rather disreputable not to read well. Boys of the higher classes were also taught to write, to play on the lyre, and to repeat a good deal of poetry by heart.

In the best times of the republic they were also trained to be hardy, obedient, and pure. In later life some people continued to read literature besides hearing some of the greatest things that were ever written, in the theatre, and some of the greatest things that were ever spoken, in the public assemblies. Booksellers' shops existed, and there is reason to believe that even so abstruse a work as that of Anaxagoras could be bought for a drachma — a little under [a dollar]. Educated women are mentioned as a class by Plato in the fourth century B.C., and we are told that tragedies were their favourite reading, as indeed of most persons, which, considering the austerity of the Greek tragic drama, shows a considerable refinement of taste.

What we call the higher or University education was a creation of philosophy, and had only just begun to dawn in the age of Pericles. At first young men entering on public life learned what it was essential for them to know about the world and about great affairs from some older friend to whom they were attached by ties of affectionate intimacy. Sometimes they profited also by conversing with women of genius.

Under a free government the power of speech is the surest road to success. Hence in modern democracies lawyers command a disproportionate share of political influence. In old Athens there was no such profession: as prosecutor or as defendant every one had to plead his own cause before a large popular jury. Thus, even apart from any ambition to lead the State, every citizen was interested in mastering the arts both of cross-examination and of continuous delivery; while to men of high birth and wealth, being marked out as special objects of attack for political opponents and blackmailers, address in using the weapons of tongue-fence became even a matter of life and death. In course of time litigants made up to some extent for the want of counsel by employing a professional hand to write a speech for them which they then learned by heart and delivered in court as

if it had been their own composition. This practice, however, although it might relieve the mass of Athenian citizens from the necessity of studying rhetoric as an art, left the demand for a professional training in rhetoric unaffected, as the speech-writers themselves required to be educated for their work.

## **2. Philosophy and Rhetoric**

Philosophy as the study of things in themselves does not seem at first sight in any way related to rhetoric — at least not to the rhetoric of law-courts and deliberative assemblies where human interests are the subject of discussion, and appeals to human passion the means adopted by a skilful speaker for making his opinions prevail. It must, however, be borne in mind that Greek philosophy owed its origin to the schools of science, a circumstance which from the beginning brought it into connection with the practice of teaching; that it systematised the habit of taking wide views, so characteristic, even in Homer, of Greek eloquence; that the earliest sages had something to say about man as well as about nature, while their successors gave an ever greater place to the laws of life and conduct as the evolution of thought went on; and finally that a knowledge of the world's secrets, by raising its possessor above all petty cares, interests, and prejudices, surrounded him with a certain halo of intellectual and moral superiority well calculated to impose on a Greek audience. For these reasons the two seemingly independent spheres of rhetoric and philosophy — the study of words and the study of things — expanded until they met and overlapped, a wide range of subjects being either treated as common ground or hotly disputed between the rival teachers who regarded education from opposite points of view.

It was agreed that the youth of good family, after he had left school, needed some further training as a preparation for taking part in public or private business with credit to himself and his ancestry. In other words, there was a demand for the higher education. And just as now, it was a moot-point what that education should consist of, above all what place, if any, should be held in it by religion and morality; morality more particularly occupying the very centre of the ground shared or disputed between rhetoric and philosophy. Not that a contemporary of Aristophanes used such abstract terms as religion and morality to express his meaning; but he had consecrated traditions of belief and conduct which may conveniently be summed up under those two names, and which meant for him all that religion and morality mean for us.

## **3. The Sophists**

The demand for higher education called into existence a class of teachers known as Sophists. In modern language a sophist is one who uses fallacious arguments, knowing them to be such. When Aristotle wrote, the name bore a still more opprobrious significance, for he defines it as one who reasons falsely for the sake of gain. In earlier times, however, this was not so, for Pindar and Herodotus use sophist in an altogether creditable sense, as meaning a man of superior skill or wisdom, whether he happened to be a great philosopher or an ordinary intellectual craftsman. What seems to have first raised a prejudice against this originally honourable appellation was the emergence of certain persons who professed to teach wisdom and virtue in return for a substantial payment. Money-making as such was not thought disreputable in good Greek society, for even so haughtily aristocratic a poet as Pindar wrote odes to order. But then it must be remembered that a poem, like a picture or a

statue, seems to possess a certain tangible reality making it a more appropriate equivalent for so much hard cash than such purely ideal values as wisdom and virtue, which also are universally associated with a considerable indifference to this world's goods. And this feeling would be still further strengthened by the fact that no philosopher had ever exacted a fee from his pupils.

Again, for reasons already stated, that higher education which the sophists sold to rich young men always included a training in rhetoric. Now an Athenian who was used to hear rival statesmen supporting opposite policies in the Assembly and rival pleaders presenting mutually contradictory views of law and fact to the popular tribunals, must have had it strongly borne in on him that while one speaker was certainly wrong each in turn managed to make it seem that he was right — a clear proof that one of them at least knew the art of making the worse appear the better reason. From whom could they have learned this nefarious art but from their sophist teachers ; and was it not scandalous that a class of persons should exist who made it their profession, and a very lucrative profession also, to pervert the moral principles of the community?

Again, as all philosophers were popularly called sophists, and as all attempted to explain meteorological phenomena by other than divine agencies, besides expressing more or less paradoxical opinions about the nature of things in general, the paid teachers of wisdom got the credit of what the vulgar considered the impieties and absurdities of philosophy. And so much being certain, it was easy to believe, with or without evidence, that they taught their pupils to disregard every duty but the pursuit of their own private advantage.

#### **4. Protagoras**

The first and most famous of the Sophists was Protagoras of Abdera. Born in the year 480 B.C., he became a paid teacher at thirty, and pursued that calling for a period of forty years with brilliant success, traversing the whole breadth of the Hellenic world, and, if we may judge from what seems to be the typical instance of Athens, exciting immense enthusiasm among the more enlightened classes of Greek society. Pericles debated moral problems with him, and he was employed to make laws for the Athenian colony of Thurii. On the occasion of a later visit to the imperial city public attention was drawn to the fact that Protagoras was a declared agnostic. A book of his began with the words: 'As to the gods, I do not know whether they exist or not. Life is too short for such difficult enquiries.' The author was expelled from Athens : a herald was sent round demanding the surrender of the book from all private individuals who possessed it; and the copies collected were burnt in the market-place. Protagoras himself was lost at sea on his way to Sicily. He was then nearly seventy. It may be that the treatise which gave occasion to such an outbreak of inquisitorial fanaticism had only just been written, and that the words about the shortness of life refer to the very limited time during which the author might expect his own intellectual activity to continue.

#### **5. Humanism**

Judging from the scanty materials at our disposal Protagoras was not only a great educator but also a great and original thinker. His profession of agnosticism must be read in company with another celebrated sentence quoted from the beginning of his work on Truth; 'Man is the measure of all things, determining what does, and what does not, exist.' Plato in his old age opposed to this the principle that God and not man is the true measure. That is to

say, the standard of truth and good must be something ideal and beyond experience. And elsewhere he has tried to reduce the human test of reality to an absurdity by identifying it with the doctrine that when two people disagree they must both be right. It seems likely enough that Protagoras attached great importance to individual experience and conviction, to what we now call 'the point of view.' But, as Plato himself suggests, this was not inconsistent with discriminating between one person's opinion and another's with due regard to their respective authorities. And the Sophist's object would be to make his pupils better judges than they were before, the ultimate test of Tightness being reference to human interests rather than to the oracles of problematic gods.

While the standard varies from man to man, but with an appeal from the stupid and ignorant to the educated and intelligent, it also varies between ages and nations, involving a similar appeal from barbarism to civilisation, from a less to a more advanced stage of social progress. Protagoras seems to have first discovered the doctrine of human development, viewing it as above all a moral growth. Perhaps the evolutionism of early Greek science suggested this view. According to a speech put into his mouth

by Plato morality is the very foundation of human life, the condition of every other art, the essential distinction between brutes and men, between savages and civilised communities. Some are born with more, and some with less capacity for acquiring virtue; but that it is an acquisition is proved, among other ways, by the existence of penal law. For punishment can only be justified as a deterrent from wrong-doing — in other words as a moralising agency.

It would appear that the method followed by Protagoras as a teacher was quite in harmony with his Humanist philosophy. While the other Sophists gave young men the sort of scientific education that age afforded, i.e., a course of arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, he took them straight to ethics and politics, interspersing his lectures with literary illustrations from the poets. According to him, the absolutely straight lines and perfect circles of geometry are fictions to which nothing in reality corresponds; nor do the celestial movements exhibit that exact uniformity assumed by the astronomers.

## **6. Hippias the Naturalist**

That system of scientific education from which Protagoras so markedly separated himself found its most typical representative in Hippias of Elis. This very remarkable man seems to have originated the idea of natural law as the foundation of morality, distinguishing nature from the arbitrary conventions or fashions, differing according to the different times or regions in which they arise, imposed by arbitrary human enactment, and often unwillingly obeyed. He held that there is an element of right common to the laws of all countries and constituting their essential basis. He held also that the good and wise of all countries are naturally akin and should regard one another as citizens of a single state. This idea was subsequently developed by the Cynic and still more by the Stoic schools, passing from the latter to the jurists, in whose hands it became the great instrument for converting Roman law into a legislation for all mankind.

Hippias set a high value on truth as a virtue, preferring Achilles to Ulysses on account of his superior veracity. Perhaps it was as an exercise in pure truth that he inculcated the study of mathematics. And seeing how large a part equality plays in that study also, some Greeks cherished it as a lesson in justice. Euripides may have had the method of Hippias in view when he wrote the noble lines :

Honour Equality who binds together  
Both friends and cities and confederates;  
For equity is law, law equity,  
The lesser is the greater enemy,  
And disadvantaged aye begins the strife.  
From her our measures, weights, and numbers come,  
Defined and ordered by Equality.  
So do the night's blind eye and sun's bright orb  
Walk equal courses in their yearly round,  
And neither is embittered by defeat.

## **7. Prodicus**

We sometimes find the name of Prodicus associated with that of Hippias, as like him a somewhat younger contemporary of Protagoras. Both taught at Athens, and both seem to have represented the same naturalistic tendency of thought. Plato, it is true, satirises Prodicus as a rather pedantic lecturer on the niceties of language; but in this instance we probably get a juster idea of his importance from Aristophanes, who describes him as the most remarkable of the natural philosophers for wisdom and character, and who elsewhere playfully broaches a new theory of evolution which is to send Prodicus away howling. We also hear of this Sophist as having explained the origin of religion by the personification of natural objects; and Xenophon quotes a famous apologue of his, called 'The Choice of Heracles/ breathing the very spirit of naturalistic ethics. In particular it harmonises admirably with the lines quoted above from Euripides, by showing that pleasure must either be purchased by toil or paid for by premature exhaustion.

## **8. Natural Law as the right of the Stronger.**

...Heracleitus brought the laws of the State into connection with the great cosmic law as the source whence their energy is derived,. This idea was afterwards taken up and developed by the Stoics, who also adopted the physical philosophy of Heracleitus as the foundation of their system. Now, as the central precept of Stoicism is 'follow Nature' — an obvious summary of what Hippias and Prodicus taught — we may legitimately regard these two Sophists as worthy successors in the ethical field to the great Ephesian master.

Their appeal to nature was not, however, to pass unchallenged. If, as seems more than possible, Protagoras first turned author in his later years, his proscription of physical studies and his theory of morality as a purely human product may well be interpreted as a criticism of the attempt made by his younger rivals to found morality on natural law, more especially as their ethical method was soon twisted, in a way that must have revolted them, into a justification of the claim put forward on behalf of the stronger, whether as states or as individuals, to plunder and destroy the weaker. Thucydides represents the Athenians as openly basing their foreign policy on the law of brute force; and it has been supposed that their cynical declarations in this respect, as well as the private demoralisation described in their own literature, was the result of Sophistic teaching. Only since the last hundred years has it been made clear, chiefly by the labours of English scholars, that neither as humanists nor as naturalists can the Sophists be justly charged with any such corrupting influence. Their principles were liable to be misrepresented or misapplied, as are the principles of any

philosophy, and, we may add, of any religion; but to no greater extent than has happened, for instance, with the lessons of their great opponent, Plato. On the whole, the new ideas they put in currency were distinctly a gain to Greece and to the world.

## 9. Gorgias the Anti-Naturalist

Gorgias of Leontini, a Sicilian teacher of rhetoric, counts among the great Sophists, while occupying a place somewhat apart from the three above considered. His principal contribution to philosophy, however, seems to associate him more nearly with Protagoras than with the naturalist couple. It is, in fact, a bold attempt to get rid of the idea of nature altogether by showing that there is no such thing. Gorgias conducts his campaign against objective reality in the paradoxical Greek style by establishing three propositions: (1) nothing is; (2) if anything existed it could not be known; (3) if it could be known the knowledge could not be communicated. For what contradicts itself cannot exist; and the philosophers have proved with equal cogency that nature is one and many, finite and infinite, with and without change. To be known, reality should be identified with thought, whereas some thoughts evidently represent nothing real. Nor can knowledge be communicated unless words are identified with the sensations they signify, which is not the fact.

As regards virtue, Gorgias taught that it is relative to the age and social position of the person concerned, a principle that reminds us of the short modern formula for conduct — ‘My station and its duties.’

## 10. Abolitionism

It was quite in consonance with the humanist spirit that Agathon, a disciple of Gorgias, should make justice a result of mutual agreement among men rather than an image of mathematical equality; and that another of his disciples, Alcidas, should call the laws ‘the bulwark of the city/ and philosophy ‘the bulwark of the laws.’ Yet this reverence for human law, which all over the ancient world upheld slavery as a permanent social institution, did not prevent the same Alcidas from declaring slavery illegitimate.’ God, according to him, ‘sent all men to be free; Nature made none a slave.’ That is the greatest, most pregnant word of Greek practical philosophy. Plato and Aristotle never got so far; Aristotle even explicitly denied that for one man to treat another as an animated tool was wrong. To accomplish so great an effort of thought it seems to have been necessary that the two principles which the two rival schools of Sophisticism had opposed to one another should be combined — that the ideal of nature should be recognised in the completed humanity of man.

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