



## The Sophists John Burnet

### Law and Nature

§ 86. We have now to consider a period of breakdown and reconstruction. Science had done all it could to make the world intelligible, and the result was a view of reality in flat contradiction to the evidence of the senses. Apparently it was not this world science explained but another one altogether. What, then, are we to say about this world? Why should we regard the world of science as truer than it? After all, that world is a product of human thinking, and how can we tell that thought is not as misleading as sense is said to be?

Science proceeds on the assumption that there is some fundamental reality which we can discover, but what guarantee have we for that? It is very plain that men's views of right and wrong, fair and foul, vary from people to people, and even from city to city, so there is no fundamental reality in them at any rate. In the same way the scientific schools only agree in one thing namely, that all other schools are wrong. It is surely just as unlikely that any of these schools should possess the truth as that any of the nations, Hellenic or barbarian, should have established among themselves the true law of nature. Such were the thoughts that must have kept suggesting themselves to cultivated men in the middle of the fifth century B.C.

It is very significant that the difficulties which were felt as to knowledge and conduct should both have been summed up in the same antithesis, that of nature and law, though the latter term has to do primarily with conduct and the former with knowledge. This shows that the two problems were felt to be the same. The use of the term Law was evidently due to the great legislative activity of the preceding centuries. In early days the regularity of human life had been far more clearly apprehended than the even course of nature. Man lived in a charmed circle of law and custom, but the world around him still seemed lawless. So much was this so that, when the regular course of nature began to be observed, no better name could be found for it than Right or Justice, a word which properly meant the unchanging custom that guided human life. We have seen that Anaximander spoke of the encroachment of one element on another as "injustice" (§ 6), and, according to Herakleitos, it is the Erinyes, the avenging handmaids of Right, that keep the sun from "overstepping his measures" (§ 42). But a code of laws drawn up by a human lawgiver whose name was known, a Zaleukos, or a Charondas, or a Solon, could not be accepted in the old way as part of the everlasting order of things. It was clearly something "made," and it might just as well have been made otherwise or not made at all. A generation that had seen laws in the making could hardly help asking itself whether the whole of customary morality had not after all been made in the same way. That is why we find the word which is properly applied to the legislator's activity used synonymously with law in this connection.

The best evidence of this state of feeling is the work of Herodotos. He must certainly have known Protagoras at Thourioi, and some have thought that they could detect the influence of Protagoras in his work. It may be so, but it is just as likely that he is the

mouthpiece of a feeling which was widely spread at the time, and to which Protagoras gave expression in another form. In any case, it is quite wrong to regard him as a representative of old-fashioned morality and religion. He is utterly skeptical, and his respect for conventions is due to his skepticism, just like that of Protagoras. The strongest proof he can give of the madness of King Cambyses is that he laughed at the rites and customs of other nations as if his own were a bit less artificial. "If we were to set before all men a choice, and bid them pick out the best uses from all the uses there are, each people, after examining them all, would choose those of their own nation." So "it is not likely that any one but a madman would laugh at such things," and Pindar was right in saying that "Law is king of all."

### The "Sophists"

§ 87. It is usual to speak of the men we have now to deal with as "the Sophists," and so they called themselves and were called by others. For us, however, the name Sophist is apt to be misleading in more ways than one. It is misleading if it is used to indicate a contrast between these men and the thinkers and teachers of an earlier generation. Herodotos calls Pythagoras a Sophist (iv. 95). It is still more misleading if it makes us think of them as forming in any sense a sect or school, or even as teachers with identical aims and methods. There is the further difficulty that, by the fourth century B.C., the word had already begun to acquire the meaning it still bears in ordinary language. This seems to have originated with Isokrates, who was anxious to keep what he called "philosophy" distinct from intellectual pursuits of another order. Plato, too, for reasons we shall have to consider, was anxious to distinguish the Sophist from the Philosopher, and in one of his later dialogues defines the former as a paid huntsman of rich and distinguished young men. Aristotle formulated all that, and defines the Sophist as one who makes money out of apparent wisdom.

Now we must observe that the Sophists here referred to are primarily contemporaries of Isokrates, Plato, and Aristotle themselves, not the distinguished teachers of the fifth century who commonly go by the name, and we have no right to transfer the polemics of a later generation to that of Protagoras and Gorgias. Aristotle's definition of the Sophist must, therefore, be left out of account altogether, and we shall see that the people Isokrates calls Sophists are certainly not those the word most naturally suggests to a modern reader. Plato is a safe guide when he is dealing by name with the great Sophists of the fifth century; his general discussion in the dialogue entitled *The Sophist* has, we shall see, another bearing.

We do learn from Plato, however, that, even in the fifth century, there was a prejudice against the name which made it possible for it to acquire the unfavorable sense it had in the fourth. That prejudice took two forms, an aristocratic and a democratic. From the democratic point of view, indeed, there was no blame attaching to the title that did not equally attach to the word itself. To be "too clever" was always an offence, and in the *Apology* it is just the charge of being a "wise man" that Sokrates is most eager to rebut. From the aristocratic point of view, the name was open to another objection. Its very form suggested professionalism, a thing the high-born Hellene shrank from instinctively. Above all, the fact that these distinguished men were foreigners made them unpopular at Athens. The Athenian public was full of prejudices, and that against "the foreigner" was particularly well developed. It was in part the cause and in part the effect of the growing stringency with which the privilege of citizenship was guarded. An Athenian orator or comic poet had no more effective weapon than the charge of foreign extraction. We know something of such nationalism in our own day, and in democratic Athens it was a very potent force indeed. Such considerations as these explain why Plato represents Protagoras as wearing the name of Sophist with a certain bravado.

This view is more or less common ground at the present day; but it can hardly be said

that all its consequences have been fully realized. German writers in particular continue to be much influenced by a superficial analogy between the “age of the Sophists” and the eighteenth century *Aufklärung*, with the result that the Sophists are represented either as subverters of religion and morality, or as champions of free thought, according to the personal predilections of the writer. The truth is rather that, so far as there is any parallel to the *Aufklärung* in the history of Greek thought at all, it occurs much earlier, and Xenophanes, not Protagoras, is its apostle. It is not to religion but to science that Protagoras and Gorgias take up a negative attitude, and we shall never understand them if we lose sight of that fundamental distinction. The “age of the Sophists” is, above all, an age of reaction against science.

§ 88. It has been pointed out that the Sophists did not constitute a school, but it is true for all that that their teaching had something in common. They all aim chiefly at practical ends. Their profession is that they teach “goodness” and that is explained to mean the power of directing states and families aright. In practice this was apt to work out in a curious way, especially in a democratic state like Athens. The Sophists quite naturally taught people who could pay them, and these were generally the well born and well-to-do, who were the natural prey of the democracy. To a large extent, then, what they taught was the art of succeeding in a democratic State when you do not yourself belong to the ruling democracy, and, in particular, the art of getting off when you are attacked in the courts of law. That is the questionable side of the Sophist’s work, but it is hardly fair to make it a ground of accusation against the men themselves; it was the natural outcome of the political conditions of Athens at the time. There is no reason to doubt that Protagoras was perfectly sincere in his profession that he was a teacher of “goodness”: only the goodness demanded by his clients was apt to be of a rather odd kind, and in practice his teaching became more and more confined to the arts of rhetoric and disputation. He would never have been entrusted by Perikles with the highly responsible task of framing a code of laws for Thourioi unless he had really possessed considerable skill in politics and jurisprudence; but the young men he was called on to train were more likely to be engaged in conspiracies against the State than in legislation. That was not his fault, and it will help us to understand the Sophists much better if we bear in mind that, from the nature of the case, they were compelled to depend mainly for their livelihood on the men who afterwards made the oligarchic revolutions. In that sense only were they the products of democracy; what a sincere though moderate democrat really thought of them we may gather from what Anytos is made to say in Plato’s *Meno* (91 c sqq.).

### Protagoras

§ 89. The earliest Sophist in the sense just explained was Protagoras of Abdera. In the dialogue called by his name, Plato has described his second visit to Athens. He had been there once before when Hippokrates the Athenian youth who asks Sokrates for an introduction to him, was still a boy. This time there is a great gathering of Sophists from all parts of the Hellenic world in the house of Kallias, son of Hipponikos, who was known to have spent more money on Sophists than any man of his day. It is obvious that such a gathering would have been impossible at any time during the first stage of the Peloponnesian War. Alkibiades is quite a lad, though he has a beard coming (309 a). Protagoras is represented as much older than Sokrates, and indeed he says (3170) there is no one in the company (which includes Hippias and Prodikos) whose father he might not be, and also that he has been engaged in his profession for many years. All through he addresses his hearers as men who belong to a younger generation. In the *Hippias maior* (282 e) Hippias is made to say that Protagoras was “far older” than he was. From the *Meno* we get further information.

That dialogue is supposed to take place before the expedition of Cyrus (401 B.C.) in which Meno took part, and Protagoras is spoken of (91 e) as having died some considerable time before, when he was seventy years old and had been forty years in practice, in which time he had made more money than Pheidias and any other ten sculptors put together. Lastly, in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue supposed to take place just before the trial of Sokrates, Protagoras is spoken of as one long dead.

Now all these statements are perfectly consistent with one another, and the total impression they make on us would not be affected by one or two minor anachronisms, if such there are. They mean that Protagoras was born not later than 500 B.C., that his second visit to Athens cannot have been later than 432 B.C., and may have been some years earlier, and that he died in the early years of the Peloponnesian War. These dates are perfectly consistent with the well-attested fact that he legislated for Thourioi in 444/3 B.C., and they are quite inconsistent with the statement that he was prosecuted and condemned for impiety in the time of the Four Hundred (411 B.C.). Indeed, Plato represents Sokrates as saying things which make it impossible to believe Protagoras was ever prosecuted for impiety at all. In the *Meno* a special point is made (91 e) of the fact that throughout his long life no one ever suggested that he had done any harm to his associates, and that his good name remained unsullied down to the supposed date of the dialogue, several years after his death. Further, there is no reference to any accusation of Protagoras in the *Apology*, though such a reference would have been almost inevitable if it had ever taken place. Sokrates has to go back to the trial of Anaxagoras to find a parallel to his own case. It is therefore safer to dismiss the story altogether.

The portrait Plato has drawn of Protagoras has been called a caricature, but there does not seem to be much ground for such a view. In the first place, we must observe that he does not speak of him in his own person. It is Sokrates that describes him, and he only applies to Protagoras the irony he habitually applied to himself. Such good-humored raillery as there is refers mainly to the enthusiastic admirers of the great man. Indeed, we are made to feel that Sokrates has a genuine respect for Protagoras himself. It is true that in the *Theaetetus* he does caricature his teaching, but he immediately confesses that it is a caricature, and goes on to give a much more sympathetic account of it.

§ 90. There is considerable uncertainty about the number and titles of the works of Protagoras, which is due, no doubt, to the fact that titles, in the modern sense, were unknown in the fifth century. The work Plato refers to as *The Truth* is probably identical with that elsewhere called *The Throwers* and was no doubt the most important. If we reject the story that Protagoras was accused of impiety, we must also, of course, reject that of the destruction of all copies of his work by public authority. In any case, it is absurd. The book is represented as widely read long after Protagoras died. In the *Theaetetus* of Plato (152 a) the lad from whom the dialogue takes its name says he has read it often, and in the *Helen* (10. 2) Isokrates says: "Who does not know that Protagoras and the Sophists of that time have written elaborate works and left them to us?" And even if the Athenians had been so silly as to burn all the copies they could find at Athens, there must have been many others scattered through the Greek world from Abdera to Sicily, and these would not be at the mercy of the Athenian authorities. It is clear, then, that the book was extant and widely read when Plato quoted it, and that it would have been impossible for him to interpret the doctrine of Protagoras in a sense not really suggested by it.

§ 91. That doctrine is the famous one that "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not." The meaning of this dictum has been much canvassed, but the curious use of the word "measure" has not been sufficiently remarked. We have become so accustomed to the phrase that it hardly strikes us as peculiar, and yet it is surely not the most obvious way of expressing any of the

meanings that have been attributed to Protagoras. Why “measure”? To understand this, we should probably start from the arithmetical meaning of the word. It is recorded that Protagoras attacked mathematics, and in particular the doctrine that the tangent touches the circle at a point. There must, he urged, be a stretch for which the straight line and the circle are in contact. It is probable, then, that his use of the word “measure” was due to the controversies about incommensurability which were so rife in the fifth century. The geometers tell us, he may have said, that the side and the diagonal of the square have no common measure, but in cases like that man is the measure, that is, they are commensurable for all practical purposes. Theories that set themselves in opposition to the commonsense of mankind may safely be ignored. We shall find that this is just the position Protagoras took up on other questions. In the great controversy about Law and Nature he is decidedly on the side of the former.

In this connexion it is interesting to note that tradition represents Protagoras as having met Zeno at Athens, which he may well have done, and there was a dialogue in which the two men were introduced discussing a question closely bound up with the problem of continuity. A quotation from it has been preserved, and its authenticity is guaranteed by a reference to it in Aristotle. “Tell me, Protagoras,” said Zeno, “does a single grain of millet make a noise in falling or the ten-thousandth part of a grain?” And when he said it did not, Zeno asked him, “Does a bushel of millet make a noise when it falls or not?” And, when he said it did, Zeno replied, “What then? Is there not a ratio of a bushel of millet to one grain and the ten-thousandth part of a grain?” When he said there was, Zeno replied, “Well, then, will not the ratios of the sounds to one another be the same? As the sounding objects are to one another, so will the sounds be to one another; and, if that is so, if the bushel of millet makes a noise, the single grain and the ten-thousandth part of a grain will make a noise.” This quotation proves at least that it was thought appropriate for Protagoras and Zeno to discuss questions of the kind, and so confirms the view that it really was the Eleatic dialectic which made men turn away from science. Moreover, Porphyry said he had come across a work of Protagoras containing arguments against those who introduced the doctrine that Being was one.

§ 92. But who is the “Man” who is thus “the measure of all things”? Plato more than once explains the meaning of the doctrine to be that things are to me as they appear to me, and to you as they appear to you. It is possible that this may not be a verbal quotation, but it is hard to believe that Plato could have ventured on such an interpretation if there was no ground for it. It also seems to me that the modern view which makes Protagoras refer, not to the individual man, but to “Man as such,” attributes to him a distinction he would not have understood, and would not have accepted if he had. The good faith of Plato is further confirmed by the hint he gives us, when he does go on in the *Theaetetus* to develop an elaborate sensationalist theory from the dictum of Protagoras, that it was not so developed by Protagoras himself. He says it was something he kept back from the common herd and only revealed to his disciples “in a mystery.” We could hardly be told more plainly that the theory in question was not to be found in the book of Protagoras itself.

Nor does Plato stand alone in his interpretation of this dictum. Demokritos, who was a younger fellow-citizen of Protagoras, understood it precisely in the same way. We learn from Plutarch that the Epicurean Kolotes had accused Demokritos of throwing human life into confusion by teaching that “nothing was such rather than such.” Plutarch (or rather his authority) replies that, so far from holding this view, Demokritos combated Protagoras who did hold it, and wrote many convincing arguments against him. It is impossible to ignore that, and the testimony of Demokritos is not only of the highest value in itself, but is, of course, quite independent of Plato’s.

The practical inference to be drawn from all this is that on every subject it is possible

to make two opposite statements, both of which are “true,” though one may be “weaker” and another “stronger.” It is the business of the disputant to make the weaker statement the stronger, and that is an art which can be taught. It is important to notice that this is not in itself an immoral doctrine. Plato distinctly tells us that though, according to Protagoras, all beliefs are equally true, one belief may nevertheless be better than another, and he seems to have regarded as “better” the beliefs which were most in accordance with those of the man in a normal condition of body and mind. People who have jaundice see all things yellow, and just so it is possible for a man to have his moral beliefs colored by some abnormal condition of soul. The things that appear yellow to the jaundiced eye really are yellow to it, but that does not alter the fact that it would be better for the sick man if they appeared different to him. His belief would not be truer, but it would be better. In the same way, then, as it is the business of the doctor to bring his patient’s body into such a condition that he may see normally, so it is the business of the Sophist to make the better statement, which may be the weaker in a given case, not only better but stronger.

§ 93. This explains further how it is that Plato represents Protagoras as a convinced champion of Law against all attempts to return to Nature for guidance. He was a strong believer in organized society, and he held that institutions and conventions were what raised men above the brutes. That, at any rate, is the meaning of the myth Plato puts into his mouth in the dialogue called by his name. So far from being a revolutionary, he was the champion of traditional morality, not from old-fashioned prejudice, but from a strong belief in the value of social conventions. In this sense, he not only professed to teach “goodness” himself, but he believed it was taught by the laws of the state and by public opinion, though not perhaps so well. He had a profound belief in the value of such teaching, and he considered that it begins in early childhood. The less he could admit anything to be truer than anything else, the more sure he felt that we must cleave to what is normal and generally recognized.

The attitude of Protagoras to religion is generally looked at in the light of the highly improbable story of his accusation for impiety. We still have a single sentence from his work *On the Gods*, and it is as follows: “With regard to the gods, I cannot feel sure either that they are or that they are not, nor what they are like in figure; for there are many things that hinder sure knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life.” There is surely nothing impious in these words from any point of view, and certainly there is none from the Greek. Speculative opinions on subjects like these were no part of Greek religion, which consisted entirely in worship and not in theological affirmations or negations. And, in any case, the sentence quoted might just as well be the prelude to a recommendation to worship according to the use of one’s native city as to anything else, and such a recommendation would be in complete harmony with the other views of Protagoras. If we cannot attain sure knowledge about the gods by ourselves, we shall do well to accept the recognized worship. That is what we should expect the champion of Law against Nature to say.

### **Hippias and Prodikos**

§ 94. The other Sophists mentioned as present in the house of Kallias are of no great importance for the history of philosophy, though they are of considerable interest as typical figures. Hippias of Elis is chiefly memorable for his efforts in the direction of universality. He was the enemy of all specialism, and appeared at Olympia gorgeously attired in a costume entirely of his own making down to the ring on his finger. He was prepared to lecture to anyone on anything, from astronomy to ancient history. Such a man had need of a good memory, and we know that he invented a system of mnemonics. There was a more

serious side to his character, however. This was the age when men were still sanguine of squaring the circle by a geometrical construction. The lunules of Hippocrates of Chios belong to it, and Hippias, the universal genius, could not be behindhand here. He invented the curve still known as the quadratrix, which would solve the problem if it could be mechanically described. Prodikos of Keos is chiefly known nowadays for the somewhat jejune apologue of the Choice of Herakles which Xenophon has preserved. We shall see presently how important the personality of Herakles was at the time. The chief work of Prodikos, however, seems to have been the discrimination of synonyms, a business which may possibly have been important in the infancy of grammar, Protagoras too contributed something to grammar. He called attention to the arbitrary character of certain grammatical genders, no doubt in illustration of the reign of Law or convention, and his classification of sentences into command, wish, etc. prepared the way for the distinction of the moods.

### Gorgias

§ 95. Gorgias of Leontinoi in Sicily came to Athens as ambassador from his native city in 427 B.C., when he was already advanced in years. His influence, therefore, belongs to a later generation than that of Protagoras, though he need not have been younger than Hippias and Prodikos. He had, it seems, been a disciple of Empedokles, and we learn incidentally from Plato's *Meno* (76 c) that he continued to teach that philosopher's doctrine of "effluences" even in his later days, when he had retired to Larissa in Thessaly. He is said to have lived to a great age, but no precise date can be given for his death. It is evident from Plato's account of him that he was not so much a teacher of politics, like Protagoras, as a teacher of rhetoric. That is accounted for by the change in the political situation brought about by the Peloponnesian War and the death of Perikles. The relations between the democracy and the well-to-do classes were becoming more and more strained, and the importance of forensic rhetoric was accordingly increased. What Gorgias did was to introduce to Athens the methods of persuasion by means of artistic prose which had been elaborated during the struggle of classes in Sicily. His influence on Athenian literature, and through it on the development of European prose style in general, was enormous. It does not concern us here, except incidentally, but it is worthwhile to note that the terms "figure" and "trope" which he applied to the rhetorical devices he taught, are apparently derived from Pythagorean musical theory (§ 32), and mean primarily the arrangement of words in certain patterns.

§ 96. Like Protagoras, Gorgias had been driven by the Eleatic dialectic to give up all belief in science. Protagoras, as we have seen, fell back on "common sense," but Gorgias proceeded in a much more radical fashion. If Protagoras taught that everything was true, Gorgias maintained there was no truth at all. In his work entitled *On Nature or the non-existent* he sought to prove (1) that there is nothing, (2) that, even if there is anything, we cannot know it, and (3) that, even if we could know it, we could not communicate our knowledge to anyone else. We have two apparently independent accounts of the arguments by which he established these positions; but, though they agree generally with one another, they are obviously paraphrases in the language of a later time. We can still see, however, that they were borrowed in the main from Zeno and Melissos, and that is a mark of their being in substance authentic. Isokrates, who had been a disciple of Gorgias, mentions his assertion that Nothing is in the Helen (10.3), and he couples his name with those of Zeno and Melissos, thus confirming in a general way the later accounts. The reasoning of Zeno and Melissos was of a kind that is apt to cut both ways, and that is what Gorgias showed. The argument given as peculiar to himself was to this effect. "What is not" is not, that is to say, it is just as much as "what is." The difficulty here raised is one that was not cleared up

till Plato wrote the Sophist. We shall consider it when we come to that.

§ 97. In the ethical sphere the counterpart of this nihilism would be the doctrine that there is no natural distinction between right and wrong. Plato, however, is very careful not to represent Gorgias as drawing this conclusion himself, and even his ardent disciple Polos shrinks from the extreme consequences of opposing natural to legal right. These are drawn by one Kallikles, who is introduced as an Athenian democratic statesman. We know nothing of him otherwise, but he impresses us as a real man of flesh and blood. He is still young in the dialogue, and he may very well have disappeared during the revolutionary period. It is not Plato's way to introduce fictitious characters, nor does he introduce living contemporaries, except where, as in the *Phaedo* that is made necessary by historical considerations. In any case, we have abundant evidence that the doctrine upheld by Kallikles, namely, that *Might is Right*, was current at

Athens towards the close of the fifth century. In the *Melian dialogue*, Thucydides has shown us how it might be used to justify the attitude of the imperial democracy to its subject allies, and the *Herakles* of Euripides is a study of the same problem. Its theme is that the "strong man" is not sufficient for himself, and is only safe so long as he uses his strength in the service of mankind. This conception of the "strong man" (of which Herakles was the regular type) was not in itself an ignoble one. It had its ideal side, and Pindar sings how Herakles took the oxen of Geryones without paying for them in virtue of that higher law, which "justifies even the most violent deed with a high hand," a passage duly quoted in Plato's *Gorgias* (484 b). Such theories are a natural reaction against that rooted jealousy of everything above the common which is apt to characterize democracy. In modern times Carlyle and Nietzsche represent the same point of view. The worship of the strong man or "hero" who can rise superior to all petty moral conventions in fact, of the "superman" seems to have been fostered in the fifth century B.C. by much the same influences as in the nineteenth century A.D. It is clear, then, that even the doctrine of Kallikles is not a complete ethical nihilism. *Might really is Right*. That is a very different thing from saying *Right is Might*.

In the *Republic* that is the doctrine maintained by Thrasymachos. According to him there is no *Right* at all, and what we call by that name is only "the interest of the stronger" which he is able to force the weaker to accept as lawful and binding on themselves in virtue of his strength. It is important to observe that Thrasymachos belongs to the generation we are now considering; for readers of the *Republic* are often led to suppose, by an illusion we shall have to note more than once, that Plato is there dealing with the controversies of his own day. It is well to remember, then, that Thrasymachos was mentioned as a celebrated teacher of Rhetoric in the earliest comedy of Aristophanes, which was produced in 427 B.C., the year Plato was born and Gorgias came to Athens. It is not to be supposed that he was still living when the *Republic* was written; he belonged to a generation that was past and gone. We can hardly imagine anyone maintaining such vigorous doctrine in Plato's day, but it was natural enough that it should find advocates in the second half of the fifth century. It is the real ethical counterpart to the cosmological nihilism of Gorgias.

Plato's final judgment on the Sophists (in the sense in which we have been using the word) is to be found in the *Laws* (889 e). It is that, by thus insisting on the opposition between Law and Nature, they tended to do away with the distinction between right and wrong. If that distinction is not rooted in nature, but depends solely on human laws and institutions, it is valid only so long as we choose to recognise it. On the other hand, if we appeal from human law to a supposed higher law, the law of Nature, all restraint is abolished. We are forbidden by Plato's own account of them to attribute immoral intentions of any kind to the great Sophists; but we can hardly dispute his estimate of the inevitable consequences of their teaching in a state of society such as existed at Athens in the closing



decades of the fifth century. It is an impartial historical judgment; for, in Plato's day, there were no longer any Sophists in the proper sense of the word.

### **Eclectics and Reactionaries**

§ 98. Besides these men there were a good many others, also called "Sophists" by their contemporaries, who attempted to carry on the traditions of the Ionian cosmological schools. They were not, certainly, men of the same distinction as Protagoras or Gorgias, but they have their place in history as the vehicles by which the ideas of Ionian science were conveyed to Sokrates and his circle. From this point of view the most important of them is Diogenes of Apollonia, whose date is roughly fixed for us by the statement of Theophrastos that he borrowed from Anaxagoras and Leukippos, which shows that he belonged to the latter part of the fifth century B.C.

We have considerable fragments of Diogenes, written in an Ionic prose similar to that of some of the Hippokratean writings. We find here the first explicit justification of the old Milesian doctrine that the primary substance must be one, an assumption which the rise of pluralism had made it necessary to defend. The action and reaction of things on one another, he says, can only be explained in this way. We may also trace the influence of Anaxagoras in another matter. Diogenes not only said the primary substance was a "god," which was nothing new, but also identified it with Mind. On the other hand, he follows Anaximenes in holding that this primary substance is air, and in deriving all things from it by rarefaction and condensation. It is possible to see the influence of Herakleitos in the close connexion he established between wisdom and the dryness of the air we breathe. "Damp hinders thought" was one of his dicta, and is burlesqued in the *Clouds* (232) accordingly. In one respect only does Diogenes appear to have shown some originality, and that was in his medical work. His account of the veins was celebrated, and bears witness to the influence of Empedokles.

Hippon of Samos is of less importance. He revived the doctrine of Thales that water was the primary substance, and defended it on physiological grounds. We now know from Menon's *latr'tka* that he was a medical writer and that he was a native of Kroton. He was, therefore, one of the men who brought Western medicine to Ionia, and that accounts for the character of the arguments with which he defended his thesis. It is probable that the reasoning conjecturally attributed to Thales by Aristotle is really his. We may be sure that Thales defended his theory on meteorological, not physiological, grounds. That is just the difference between the two periods.

Archelaos of Athens was a disciple of Anaxagoras, and the first Athenian to interest himself in science or philosophy. He deserves mention for this, since, with the exception of Sokrates and Plato a considerable exception certainly there are hardly any other Athenian philosophers. There is not the slightest reason to doubt the statement that he had Sokrates for a disciple. The contemporary tragic poet, Ion of Chios, said in his *Memoirs* that Sokrates came to Samos in the company of Archelaos as a young man. We know that Ion gave an account of the visit of Sophokles and Perikles on the occasion of the blockade of Samos in 441/0, and this statement will refer to the same occasion. Sokrates would be about twenty-eight at the time. Aristoxenos, as usual, repeats scandals about Archelaos and Sokrates. We are not bound to believe them, but they would have been pointless unless Sokrates had been generally known to have associated with Archelaos. Aristoxenos says that he was seventeen years old when this association began, and that it lasted many years. Though Plato does not mention Archelaos by name, he refers unmistakably to his doctrines as having occupied Sokrates in his early youth, and it is natural to suppose that the man who is mentioned as reading aloud the book of Anaxagoras was no other than his Athenian

disciple. It is, therefore, quite unjustifiable to discredit the statement that Sokrates was his follower. It rests on practically contemporary evidence, and Theophrastos accepted it.

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John Burnet. *Greek Philosophy*. Part 1: Thales to Plato. London: Macmillan and Co., 1920.

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