



## The Sophists

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A certain analogy may perhaps be discerned between the progression of philosophic thought in Greece as we have traced it, and the political development which had its course in almost every Greek state during the same period. The Ionic philosophy may be regarded as corresponding with the *kingly* era in Greek politics. Philosophy sits upon the heights and utters its authoritative dicta for the resolution of the seeming contradictions of things. One principle is master, but the testimony of the senses is not denied; a harmony of thought and sensation is sought in the interpretation of appearances by the light of a ruling idea. In Pythagoras and his order we have an *aristocratic* organisation of philosophy. Its truths are for the few, the best men are the teachers, equal as initiated partakers in the mysteries, supreme over all outside their society. A reasoned and reasonable order and method are symbolised by their theory of Number; their philosophy is political, their politics oligarchic. In the Eleatic school we have a succession of personal attempts to construct a *domination* in the theory of Nature; some ideal conception is attempted to be so elevated above the data of sensation as to override them altogether, and the general result we are now to see throughout the philosophic world, as it was seen also throughout the world of politics, in a total collapse of the principle of forced authority, and a development, of successively nearer approaches to anarchic individualism and doubt. The notion of an ultimately true and real, whatever form it might assume in various theorists' hands, being in its essence apart from and even antagonistic to the perceptions of sense, was at last definitely cast aside as a delusion; what remained were the individual perceptions, admittedly separate, unreasoned, unrelated; Reason was dethroned, Chaos was king. In other words, what *seemed* to any individual sentient being at any moment to be, that for him was, and nothing else was. The distinction between the real and the apparent was definitely attempted to be abolished, not as hitherto by rejecting the sensually apparent in favour of the rationally conceived real, but by the denial of any such real altogether.

The individualistic revolution in philosophy not only, however, had analogies with the similar revolution contemporaneously going on in Greek politics, it was greatly facilitated by it. Each, in short, acted and reacted on the other. Just as the sceptical philosophy of the Encyclopaedists in France promoted the Revolution, and the Revolution in its turn developed and confirmed the philosophic scepticism, so also the collapse of contending philosophies in Greece promoted the collapse of contending systems of political authority, and the collapse of political authority facilitated the growth of that individualism in thought with which the name of the Sophists is associated.

Cicero (*Brut.* 12) definitely connects the rise of these teachers with the expulsion of the tyrants and the establishment of democratic republics in Sicily. From 466 to 406 B.C. Syracuse was democratically governed, and a 'free career to talents,' as in revolutionary France, so also in revolutionary Greece, began to be promoted by the elaboration of a system of persuasive argument. Devices of method called 'commonplaces' were constructed, whereby, irrespective of the truth or falsehood of the subject-matter, a favourable vote in the public assemblies, a

successful verdict in the public courts, might more readily be procured. Thus by skill of verbal rhetoric, the worse might be made to appear the better reason; and philosophy, so far as it continued its functions, became a search, not for the real amidst the confusions of the seeming and unreal, but a search for the seeming and the plausible, to the detriment, or at least to the ignoring, of any reality at all.

The end of philosophy then was no longer universal truth, but individual success; and consistently enough, the philosopher himself professed the individualism of his own point of view, by teaching only those who were prepared to pay him for his teaching. All over Greece, with the growth of democracy, this philosophy of persuasion became popular; but it was to Athens, under Pericles at this time the centre of all that was most vivid and splendid in Greek life and thought, that the chief teachers of the new philosophy flocked from every part of the Greek world.

## 1. Protagoras

The first great leader of the Sophists was *Protagoras*. He, it is said, was the first to teach for pay; he also was the first to adopt the name of Sophist. In the word Sophist there was indeed latent the idea which subsequently attached to it, but as first used it seems to have implied this only, that *skill* was the object of the teaching rather than *truth*; the new teachers professed themselves 'practical men,' not mere theorists.

The Greek word, in short, meant an able cultivated man in any branch of the arts; and the development of practical capacity was doubtless what Protagoras intended to indicate as the purpose of his teaching, when he called himself a Sophist. But the ability he really undertook to cultivate was ability to *persuade*, for Greece at this time was nothing if not political; and persuasive oratory was the one road to political success. And as Athens was the great centre of Greek politics, as well as of Greek intellect, to Athens Protagoras came as a teacher.

He was born at Abdera, in Thrace (birthplace also of Democritus), in 480 B.C., began to teach at Athens about 451 B.C., and soon acquired great influence with Pericles, the distinguished leader of the Athenian democracy at this time. It is even alleged that when in 445 the Athenians were preparing to establish a colony at Thurii in Italy, Protagoras was requested to draw up a code of laws for the new state, and personally to superintend its execution.

After spending some time in Italy he returned to Athens, and taught there with great success for a number of years. Afterwards he taught for some time in Sicily, and died at the age of seventy, after about forty years of professional activity. He does not seem to have contented himself with the merely practical task of teaching rhetoric, but in a work which he, perhaps ironically, entitled *Truth*, he enunciated the principles on which he based his teaching. Those principles were summed up in the sentence, "Man (by which he meant *each* man) is the measure of all things, whether of their existence when they do exist, or of their non-existence when they do not." In the development of this doctrine Protagoras starts from a somewhat similar analysis of things to that of Heraclitus and others. Everything is in continual flux, and the apparently real objects in nature are the mere temporary and illusory result of the in themselves invisible movements and minglings of the elements of which they are composed; and not only is it a delusion to attempt to give a factitious reality to the things which appear, it is equally a delusion to attempt to separate the (supposed) thing perceived from the perception itself. A thing is only as and when it is perceived. And a third delusion is to attempt to separate a supposed perceiving mind from the perception; all three exist only in and through the momentary perception; the supposed reality behind this, whether external in the object or internal in the mind, is a mere imagination. Thus the Heraclitean flux in Nature was extended to Mind also; only the sensation

exists, and that only at the moment of its occurrence; this alone is truth, this alone is reality; all else is delusion.

It followed from this that as a man felt a thing to be, so for him it veritably was. Thus abstract truth or falsity could not be; the same statements could be indifferently true or false—to different individuals at the same time, to the same individual at different times. It followed that all appearances were equally true: what seemed to be to any man, that was alone the true for him. The relation of such a doctrine as this to politics and to morals is not far to seek. Every man's opinion was as good as another's; if by persuasion you succeeded in altering a man's opinion, you had not deceived the man, his new opinion was as true (to him) as the old one. Persuasiveness, therefore, was the only wisdom. Thus if a man is ill what he eats and drinks seems bitter to him, and it is so; when he is well it seems the opposite, and is so. He is not a wiser man in the second state than in the first, but the second state is pleasanter. If then you can persuade him that what he thinks bitter is really sweet, you have done him good. This is what the physician tries to do by his drugs; this is what the Sophist tries to do by his words. Virtue then is teachable in so far as it is possible to persuade a boy or a man by rhetoric that that course of conduct which pleases others is a pleasant course for him. But if any one happens not to be persuaded of this, and continues to prefer his own particular course of conduct, this *is* for him the good course. You cannot blame him; you cannot say he is wrong. If you punish him you simply endeavour to supply the dose of unpleasantness which may be needed to put the balance in his case on the same side as it already occupies in the case of other people.

It may be worth while to anticipate a little, and insert here in summary the refutation of this position put into the mouth of Socrates by Plato in the *Theaetetus*: “But I ought not to conceal from you that there is a serious objection which may be urged against this doctrine of Protagoras. For there are states, such as madness and dreaming, in which perception is false; and half our life is spent in dreaming; and who can say that at this instant we are not dreaming? Even the fancies of madmen are real at the time. But if knowledge is perception, how can we distinguish between the true and the false in such cases? . . . Shall I tell you what amazes me in your friend Protagoras? ‘What may that be?’ I like his doctrine that what appears is; but I wonder that he did not begin his great work on truth with a declaration that a pig, or a dog-faced baboon, or any other monster which has sensation, is a measure of all things; then while we were reverencing him as a god he might have produced a magnificent effect by expounding to us that he was no wiser than a tadpole. For if truth is only sensation, and one man's discernment is as good as another's, and every man is his own judge, and everything that he judges is right and true, then what need of Protagoras to be our instructor at a high figure; and why should we be less knowing than he is, or have to go to him, if every man is the measure of all things?” . . . Socrates now resumes the argument. As he is very desirous of doing justice to Protagoras, he insists on citing his own words: ‘What appears to each man is to him.’ “And how,” asks Socrates, “are these words reconcilable with the fact that all mankind are agreed in thinking themselves wiser than others in some respects, and inferior to them in others? In the hour of danger they are ready to fall down and worship any one who is their superior in wisdom as if he were a god. And the world is full of men who are asking to be taught and willing to be ruled, and of other men who are willing to rule and teach them. All which implies that men do judge of one another's impressions, and think some wise and others foolish. How will Protagoras answer this argument? For he cannot say that no one deems another ignorant or mistaken. If you form a judgment, thousands and tens of thousands are ready to maintain the opposite. The multitude may not and do not agree in Protagoras' own thesis, ‘that man is the measure of all things,’ and then who is to decide? Upon his own showing must not his ‘truth’ depend on the number of suffrages, and be more or less true in proportion as he has more or fewer of them? And [the

majority being against him] he will be bound to acknowledge that they speak truly who deny him to speak truly, which is a famous jest. And if he admits that they speak truly who deny him to speak truly, he must admit that he himself does not speak truly. But his opponents will refuse to admit this as regards themselves, and he must admit that they are right in their refusal. The conclusion is, that all mankind, including Protagoras himself, will deny that he speaks truly; and his truth will be true neither to himself nor to anybody else.”

The refutation seems tolerably complete, but a good deal had to happen before Greece was ready to accept or Plato to offer such a refutation.

## 2. Gorgias

Gorgias was perhaps even more eminent a Sophist than Protagoras. He was a native of Leontini in Sicily, and came to Athens in the year 427 B.C. on a public embassy from his native city. The splendid reputation for political and rhetorical ability, which preceded him to Athens, he fully justified both by his public appearances before the Athenian assembly, and by the success of his private instructions to the crowds of wealthy young men who resorted to him. He dressed in magnificent style, and affected a lofty and poetical manner of speech, which offended the more critical, but which pleased the crowd.

He also, like Protagoras, published a treatise in which he expounded his fundamental principles, and like Protagoras, he preceded it with a striking if somewhat ironical title, and an apophthegm in which he summarised his doctrine. The title of his work was *Of the Non-Existent*, that is, *Of Nature*, and his dictum, “Nothing exists, or if anything exists, it cannot be apprehended by man, and even if it could be apprehended, the man who apprehended it could not expound or explain it to his neighbour.” In support of this strange doctrine, Gorgias adopted the quibbling method of argument which had been applied with some success to dialectical purposes by Zeno, Melissus, and others.

His chief argument to prove the first position laid down by him depended on a double and ambiguous use of the word *is*; “That which is not, *is* the non-existent: the word *is* must, therefore, be applicable to it as truly as when we say That which is, *is*; therefore, being is predicable of that which is not.” So conversely he proved not-being to be predicable of that which is. And in like manner he made away with any possible assertions as to the finite or infinite, the eternal or created, nature of that which is. Logic could supply him with alternative arguments from whatever point he started, such as would seem to land the question in absurdity. Hence his first position was (he claimed) established, that ‘Nothing is.’

To prove the second, that even if anything is, it cannot be known to man, he argued thus: “If what a man thinks is not identical with what is, plainly what is cannot be thought. And that what a man thinks is not identical with what is can be shown from the fact that thinking does not affect the facts. You may imagine a man flying, or a chariot coursing over the deep, but you do not find these things to occur because you imagine them. Again, if we assume that what we think is identical with what is, then it must be impossible to think of what is not. But this is absurd; for we can think of such admittedly imaginary beings as Scylla and Chimaera, and multitudes of others. There is therefore no necessary relation between our thoughts and any realities; we may believe, but we cannot prove, which (if any) of our conceptions have relation to an external fact and which have not.”

Nor thirdly, supposing any man had obtained an apprehension of what is real, could he possibly communicate it to any one else. If a man saw anything, he could not possibly by verbal description make clear what it is he sees to a man who has never seen. And so if a man has not himself the apprehension of reality, mere words from another cannot possibly give him any

idea of it. He may imagine he has the same idea as the speaker, but where is he going to get the common test by which to establish the identity?

Without attempting to follow Gorgias further, we can see plainly enough the object and purport of the whole doctrine. Its main result is to *isolate*. It isolates each man from his fellows; he cannot tell what they know or think, they cannot reach any common ground with him. It isolates him from nature; he cannot tell what nature is, he cannot tell whether he knows anything of nature or reality at all. It isolates him from himself; he cannot tell for certain what relation exists (if any) between what he imagines he perceives at any moment and any remembered or imagined previous experiences; he cannot be sure that there ever were any such experiences, or what that self was (if anything) which had them, or whether there was or is any self perceiving anything.

Let us imagine the moral effect on the minds of the ablest youth of Greece of such an absolute collapse of belief. The philosophic scepticism did not deprive them of their appetites or passions; it did not in the least alter their estimate of the prizes of success, or the desirability of wealth and power. All it did was to shatter the invisible social bonds of reverence and honour and truth and justice, which in greater or less degree act as a restraining force upon the purely selfish appetites of men. Not only belief in divine government disappeared, but belief in any government external or internal; justice became a cheating device to deprive a man of what was ready to his grasp; good-faith was stupidity when it was not a more subtle form of deceit; morality was at best a mere convention which a man might cancel if he pleased; the one reality was the appetite of the moment, the one thing needful its gratification; society, therefore, was universal war, only with subtler weapons.

Of course Protagoras and Gorgias were only notable types of a whole horde of able men who in various ways, and with probably less clear notions than these men of the drift or philosophic significance of their activity, helped all over Greece in the promulgation of this new gospel of self-interest. Many Sophists no doubt troubled themselves very little with philosophical questions; they were 'agnostics,' know-nothings; all they professed to do was to teach some practical skill of a verbal or rhetorical character. They had nothing to do with the nature or value of ideals; they did not profess to say whether any end or aim was in itself good or bad, but given an end or aim, they were prepared to help those who hired them to acquire a skill which would be useful towards attaining it.

But whether a philosophy or ultimate theory of life be expressly stated or realised by a nation or an individual, or be simply ignored by them, there always is some such philosophy or theory underlying their action, and that philosophy or theory tends to work itself out to its logical issue in action, whether men openly profess it or no. And the theory of negation of law in nature or in man which underlay the sophistic practice had its logical and necessary effect on the social structure throughout Greece, in a loosening of the bonds of religion, of family reverence and affection, of patriotism, of law, of honour. Thucydides in a well-known passage thus describes the prevalent condition of thought in his own time, which was distinctively that of the sophistic teaching: "The common meaning of words was turned about at men's pleasure; the most reckless bravo was deemed the most desirable friend; a man of prudence and moderation was styled a coward; a man who listened to reason was a good-for-nothing simpleton. People were trusted exactly in proportion to their violence and unscrupulousness, and no one was so popular as the successful conspirator, except perhaps one who had been clever enough to outwit him at his own trade, but any one who honestly attempted to remove the causes of such treacheries was considered a traitor to his party. As for oaths, no one imagined they were to be kept a moment longer than occasion required; it was, in fact, an added pleasure to destroy your enemy if you had managed to catch him through his trusting to your word."

These are the words not of Plato, who is supposed often enough to allow his imagination to carry him beyond his facts about the Sophists as about others, nor are they the words of a satiric poet such as Aristophanes. They are the words of the most sober and philosophic of Greek historians, and they illustrate very strikingly the tendency, nay, the absolute necessity, whereby the theories of philosophers in the closet extend themselves into the market-place and the home, and find an ultimate realisation of themselves for good or for evil in the 'business and bosoms' of the common crowd.

It is not to be said that the individualistic and iconoclastic movement which the Sophists represented was wholly bad, or wholly unnecessary, any more (to again quote a modern instance) than that the French Revolution was. There was much, no doubt, in the traditional religion and morality of Greece at that time which represented obsolete and antiquated conditions, when every city lived apart from its neighbours with its own narrow interests and local cults and ceremonials. Greece was ceasing to be an unconnected crowd of little separate communities; unconsciously it was preparing itself for a larger destiny, that of conqueror and civiliser of East and West. This scepticism, utterly untenable and unworkable on the lines extravagantly laid down by its leading teachers, represented the birth of new conditions of thought and action adapted to the new conditions of things. On the surface, and accepted literally, it seemed to deny the possibility of knowledge; it threatened to destroy humanity and civilisation. But its strength lay latent in an implied denial only of what was merely traditional; it denied the finality of purely Greek preconceptions; it was laying the foundations of a broader humanity. It represented the claim of a new generation to have no dogma or assumption thrust on it by mere force, physical or moral. "I too am a man," it said; "I have rights; *my* reason must be convinced." This is the fundamental thought at the root of most revolutions and reformations and revivals, and the thought is therefore a necessary and a just one.

Unfortunately it seems to be an inevitable condition of human affairs that nothing new, however necessary or good can come into being out of the old, without much sorrow and many a birth-pang. The extravagant, the impetuous, the narrow-minded on both sides seize on their points of difference, raise them into battle-cries, and make what might be a peaceful regeneration a horrid battlefield of contending hates. The Christ when He comes brings not peace into the world, but a sword. And men of evil passions and selfish ambitions are quick on both sides to make the struggle of old and new ideals a handle for their own indulgence or their own advancement; the Pharisees and the Judases between them make the Advent in some of its aspects a sorry spectacle.

A reconciler was wanted who should wed what was true in the new doctrine of individualism with what was valuable in the old doctrine of universal and necessary truth; who should be able to say, "Yes, I acknowledge that your individual view of things must be reckoned with, and mine, and everybody else's; and for that very reason do I argue for a universal and necessary truth, because the very truth for you as an individual is just this universal." The union and identification of the Individual and Universal,—this paradox of philosophy is the doctrine of Socrates.

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John Marshall. *A Short History of Greek Philosophy*. Chapters 9-10. London: Percival and Co., 1891.

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