



## The Sophists Frederick Mayer

### THE ENVIRONMENT

The Sophists of the 5th century b.c. represent a new stage in Greek philosophy. They arose in a period almost comparable with the Enlightenment of the 18th century. As during the Enlightenment, the main interests of society were secular and realistic, and there was an almost universal reaction against the superstitions and darkness of the past.

The 5th century in Athens marked the rise of a rich merchant class, and thus there was more leisure to speculate than in earlier times. A different type of education arose, which, independent of the ancient traditions, included the new sciences as well as rhetoric. The opulent merchants and aristocrats wanted their sons to have the best education. Willing to pay a high price for this privilege, they turned to the Sophists, whose fame was established throughout Greece.

The 5th century was an age of political instability, with great conflict between aristocracy and democracy. Pericles ruled with wisdom and foresight, trying to unite the warring factions; but following his death, the conflict between democracy and oligarchy became more pronounced. In times of stress, the masses frequently turned to the demagogues and, on other occasions, to opportunists like Alcibiades.

The balance of power shifted. At the beginning of the century, the Persian danger had given the Greeks a sense of unity, for they realized that they had to unite if they were to remain independent. The victories over the Persians at Marathon and at Salamis were celebrated as a triumph of the Greeks over the barbarians. However, victory proved to be indecisive and caused immense discontent. Athens became progressively more imperialistic and began to use power politics in its relations with the other city-states. This is well described by Thucydides in his account of the Athenian expedition against Melos:

The Melians are colonists of the Lacedaemonians, who would not submit to Athens like the other islanders. At first they were neutral and took no part. But when the Athenians tried to coerce them by ravaging their lands, they were driven into open hostilities. The generals encamped with the Athenian forces on the island. But before they did the country any harm they sent envoys to negotiate with the Melians. Instead of bringing these envoys before the people, the Melians desired them to explain their errand to the magistrates and to the chief men (Thucydides, v. 84).

The Athenians explained that they would not use fine words since they realized, in the discussion of human affairs, the question of justice “enters only between equals, and the powerful exact what they can.”

The Melians believed that if they put up a fight, they would still have a chance, since wars are not always determined by superior numbers.

The Athenians replied: “Hope is a good comforter in the hour of danger, and when men have something else to depend upon, although hurtful, she is not ruinous. But when her

spendthrift nature has induced them to stake their all, they see her as she is in the moment of their fall, and not till then. While the knowledge of her might enable them to beware of her, she never fails. You are weak, and a single turn of the scale might be your ruin. Do not you be thus deluded; avoid the error of which so many are guilty, who, although they might still be saved if they would take the natural means, when visible grounds of confidence forsake them, have recourse to the invisible, to prophecies and oracles and the like, which ruin men by the hopes which they inspire in them” (ibid).

Nevertheless, the Melians appealed to the favor of heaven, because:

. . . we are righteous, and you against whom we contend are unrighteous; and we are satisfied that our deficiency in power will be compensated by the aid of our allies the Lacedaemonians; they cannot refuse to help us, if only because we are their kinsmen, and for the sake of their own honor. And therefore our confidence is not so utterly blind as you suppose.

Athenians: As for the gods, we expect to have quite as much of their favor as you: for we are not doing or claiming anything which goes beyond common opinion about divine or men’s desires about human things. For of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule they will. This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do (ibid).

The Melians refused to surrender, but their resistance proved to be in vain, for treachery prevailed among the citizens. When the Athenians conquered the Melians, they killed all the men of military age and sold the women and children into slavery. This is an example of power politics which reminds us of our own period. Is it surprising that some Sophists distrusted empty moralization and accepted the standard that “might makes right”? Power politics, however, did not prove to be a complete boon to the Athenians, who experienced a humiliating defeat by the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War, which lasted from 431 to 404 b.c.

The balance of power was constantly shifting; no nation could be completely secure. The more powerful a nation became, the more arrogant were its dealings with its neighbors. Far-sighted thinkers spoke of a Pan-Hellenic Union, but this proved to be an empty dream, for hatred prevailed among the individual city-states.

A more positive result of this incessant conflict was the contact of Athens with new ideas. New concepts of philosophy, brought in by visitors, were especially noticeable in the philosophies of Protagoras and Anaxagoras, both of whom were not regarded with favor by the conservatives. Still, their influence was widely spread and had a powerful impact on the development of Athenian philosophy.

## **THE STATUS OF THE SOPHISTS**

Traditionally, the Sophists have been regarded with disfavor by philosophers. This attitude is mainly due to the sharp attacks leveled against them by Plato and Socrates. With the name itself, there arises in our mind the connotation of trickery, hypocrisy, and profound cynicism. We are led to believe that they degraded education and philosophy; that they were men who sold their wisdom for material gain; and that they were ready to help any side regardless of the justice of its arguments. Some of us view them as charlatans who merely popularized ideas without showing any originality. No wonder that many philosophers

devoted much time to attacking the Sophist way of life!

However, these views are extremely one-sided and quite unjustified. Actually, the Sophists represented many divergent viewpoints. Some believed in complete ethical relativity, while others thought morals had a more sublime meaning. Some, like Callicles, preached a Machiavellian doctrine— that might makes right; others, like Hippias, upheld a belief in absolute justice. We find them not only bold innovators but also supporters of the established way of life. In short, no generalization of the Sophists is possible.

One reason why they were so bitterly attacked by ancient philosophers was their incredible popularity. A Sophist coming to Athens was received with acclaim; admiring disciples gathered around him and regarded his words as infallible and divine. It became quite fashionable to listen to the teachings of Protagoras and Gorgias, and what they said was debated assiduously by the educated classes of Athens. The stir caused by the Sophists in Athens is comparable to the reverberations made by the Existentialists in 20th-century France.

Some philosophers attacked the Sophists because they accepted money for their teachings. Ancient philosophers, like Plato, who had private means of their own, regarded money payment as a degradation of philosophy. Such a view should not deceive us. Many of the Sophists came from a lower economic class, and hence the money they received was necessary for their livelihood. Some thinkers will say that philosophy is to be loved for its own sake and not for any material gain. This sounds better in theory than in practice.

We find in history that philosophy has flourished most when prosperity prevailed: for example, in 5th-century Athens, 16th-century Italy, and 18th-century France. On the other hand, periods of poverty have done very little for the development and stimulation of philosophy.

The Sophists were not callous materialists who sold ideas as a merchant sells goods. The most prominent of them, like Protagoras, had a high concept of the nature and function of philosophy and a strong faith in the moral capacities of man.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SOPHISTS**

The Sophists were interested, above all, in the science of rhetoric and thereby stimulated the development of Athenian law. Previously the law courts had been poorly organized, and litigants pleaded their own cases. Now they hired experts. Rhetoric, to the Sophists, not merely involved the study of speech; it also necessitated a knowledge of literature, grammar, and even logic. The art of rhetoric was refined by the Sophists, who realized that in an argument reason very seldom prevails. They taught the orators to manipulate the emotions of their listeners, to appeal to their biases, to win sympathy, and to sway the judges.

In education, the Sophists popularized new scientific ideas. They introduced the physical sciences, especially astronomy and mathematics, into the Athenian curriculum. They gave lectures on the poets, whose works they interpreted not only from the standpoint of grammar but also from the viewpoint of esthetics and morality. By their arguments they stimulated a more insistent concern with logic. Much of the best work of Plato and Aristotle was done in opposition to the logical theory of the Sophists.

The Sophists' services to social philosophy should not be underestimated. Previously, social institutions had been regarded with indifference by most philosophers. Now the problem of democracy, totalitarianism, and tyranny became increasingly significant in philosophical disputes. Politics was no longer an amateur sport open to all. The Sophists saw to it that many politicians received special training, which, however, was not always

for the best interests of the masses.

In general, the Sophists reversed the emphasis of philosophy. Previous to them it had been on the universe; now it was on man. Thus they stimulated ethics. They tore down many of the cherished beliefs of the Greeks, it is true, and they were more destructive than creative. Still, they promoted vigorous discussion and frequently a healthy skepticism regarding the existence of absolute ethical ideals.

Unlike the cosmologists, the Sophists made no attempt to explain the fundamental nature of the universe. They were not interested in the basic world-stuff. They felt that their predecessors had been naive in occupying themselves with such abstruse problems, for their own interests were empirical and down-to-earth. In their outlook on life they were pragmatic, concerned with consequences and with functional results rather than with absolute maxims and absolute standards.

This outlook created skepticism, not only in metaphysics but also in religion, morals, and ethics. The attitude of the Sophists did not long prevail, for Socrates again emphasized absolute laws and gave a more moralistic interpretation of life.

## **PROTAGORAS**

The outstanding Sophist was Protagoras, who came from Abdera, the native city of Democritus. We are not certain about the exact dates of his life, although we do know that he lived in the 5th century B.C. In his youth he was a porter and received no formal education, but he was so eager for knowledge that he taught himself to read and write. He traveled a great deal, and wherever he went he was received as a master of knowledge. In Athens he won the friendship of Pericles and accumulated a fortune through the high fees which he charged for teaching.

There is a story that Protagoras was accused of impiety because of his religious views and that he was condemned by an Athenian court. He preferred exile, it is said, but some historians have challenged this account and state that he never suffered the enmity of the Athenians.

Only a few fragments of his works remain. One of them concerns religion and is entitled *On the gods*. It asserts that we cannot know definitely what the gods are like. "We are hindered in our knowledge by the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life." What does this imply? First of all, a denial of popular theology. Protagoras, like Xenophanes, did not accept the common concept of the gods, and he was not a proponent of fanaticism in religion. The attitude which he advocated was suspension of judgment.

This attitude, however, does not imply complete atheism but, rather, agnosticism. We have an impression of Protagoras as a man who conformed outwardly to the ritual but inwardly was indifferent to religion. Thus he reminds us of the 18th-century philosophers of France. They, too, regarded religion with indifference; they, too, were humanists and interested in man rather than in supernatural matters.

Another statement of Protagoras, that man is the measure of all things, expresses fully his humanism. The question arises as to whether he meant the individual or mankind. No definite answer is forthcoming. Apparently he believed that truth is purely private and changing; consequently, there can be no absolute standards in ethics, metaphysics, or religion. The standard of truth is what works for the individual and what satisfies him. This standard allows no ground for coercion; no one can force an individual to believe in certain dogmas. In this manner he fought for freedom of thought.

Like other Sophists, Protagoras was very much interested in education. Like John Dewey, he held that education should start in early youth. Progressive in his concept of

punishment, he did not think it should be used as a means of vengeance but as a tool for improvement.

His skepticism was also apparent in his concept of mathematics. The theorems of geometry, he claimed, do not have absolute validity. Like Hume, he thought they apply only to an ideal realm.

As a humanist, Protagoras felt that man could be perfected and that he is distinguished from animals by his mental powers. The task of education, he held, is to cultivate man's intellectual capacities. Traditionalism he abhorred in every form, for he thought that all institutions change and are in an unending state of flux. The political and moral systems of mankind, Protagoras taught, were not invented by the gods but can be explained naturalistically as the products of civilization.

## **GORGIAS**

Gorgias came to Athens in 427 b.c, when he was sent to plead the cause of his native city, Leontini. He spent many years in Athens, where he became famous and gathered around himself many disciples. His ideal was to unify Greece and to spread the gospel of Pan-Hellenism, for he thought the Greek states were dissipating their energies by internal wars. In his youth he occupied himself with natural science but later turned away from it and concentrated on the problem of man.

Gorgias' conclusions were skeptical. Three of his propositions have come down to us: First, he asserted, nothing exists, meaning thereby that there is no reality. Had not Zeno pointed out that thought inevitably arrives at paradoxes? Must we not think of reality as both one and many, finite and infinite, created and uncreated? Since contradictions cannot be accepted, Gorgias thought it better to assert that reality does not exist.

His second proposition was: If anything exists, it cannot be known. Here again he turned to the previous philosophers, who already had indicated that the senses are not reliable and are a source of illusion. But reason, according to Gorgias, is just as untrustworthy and cannot give us a key to the cosmic stuff, for we are caught by the subjective dilemma. We reason from our own desires, ideals, and wants, which *M<sup>e</sup>* apply to objective phenomena. This process, however, does not establish truth.

Gorgias' third proposition was: Even if reality could be known, such knowledge cannot be shared and communicated to others. In this assertion, he raised the problem of language. Modern semantics tells us that words do not have an absolute meaning but are purely relative. Gorgias anticipated this conclusion, for he thought every word has a different meaning to each individual. For example, my concept of goodness is different from that of a Japanese or a Chinese. When I have a sensation of love it is purely subjective, and it is quite different from the sensation of love felt by a different individual. Words, thus, never fully convey human emotions and ideals.

## **HIPPIAS**

Among the Sophists Hippias had the most encyclopedic knowledge, which included the sciences, literature, rhetoric, and history. His classroom was the market place and, like Socrates, he was indefatigable in asking questions. Ethically, he believed in inner self-sufficiency and taught that man should be independent of external things. Hippias' views were generally far-advanced for his time. He looked beyond the city-state to the universe, for he realized that all men have common desires and common aspirations. In many ways he was a world citizen with no fatherland of his own.

## **PRODICUS**

Prodicus exemplified the skeptical strain of the Sophists. He was not interested in popular religion, and he thought prayer to the gods utterly superfluous. For these views he was regarded with suspicion by the Athenian authorities.

Around him Prodicus saw the enervating influence of luxury. Consequently he taught young people to shun pleasure and to search for a heroic way of life. Materialistic values, according to him, are extremely inadequate. The best way of life is one in which man becomes emancipated from a reliance on external goods and attempts to realize his creative, intellectual capacities.

## **THRASYMACHUS**

Thrasymachus, who is pictured vividly in Plato's Republic, appears as a prototype of Machiavelli. He believed that justice can only exist when might supports it, and he advocated that the world be ruled by the strong. Emancipated religiously, he did not accept the concept of Providence or the belief in divine powers.

It may be asked. Did Thrasymachus accept any absolute moral principles? The answer is in the negative, for Thrasymachus thought morality purely conventional. Thus a clever statesman would know how to be immoral, while the masses would follow conventional ideals.

## **CALLICLES**

Callicles was less extreme in his views than Thrasymachus, although he also opposed the conventional views of morality. To some extent his views remind us of Nietzsche. He stressed the fact that most laws had been designed by the weak, thereby thwarting true greatness in politics. He appealed to a new type of leader who would remold mankind and not be held back by moral scruples.

Callicles regarded nature as an aristocratic force which aids the strong and limits the weak. The moralist, he held, must take nature as his guide, shunning all hypocrisy and sentimentality.

## **ALCIDAMAS**

Alcidamas arrived at conclusions opposite to those of Callicles. Kingship, itself, is an evil, he asserted, and the state is an agency for oppression. Like Rousseau, he taught that man in nature is free, but that society has enchained him. He demanded the abolition of slavery, a step which was regarded as extremely audacious in the 5th century b.c. Almost communistic, he believed in a natural law which makes all men equal and negates all class barriers.

## **ANTIPHON**

Antiphon continued the same strain of radical thinking. There can be no distinction, he declared, between the citizen and the foreigner, and the best attitude is one of internationalism. The gods he regarded from a rationalistic standpoint; thus, he believed that real progress can only come about through education, not through religion.

Antiphon developed a social-contract theory in politics. The state, he taught, represents a contract between the ruler and the subjects. Such a contract does not imply that the ruler

has all the power, for there are natural laws of justice and equality. Like Alcidas, he negated the barriers of race and nationality and looked forward to the establishment of a Pan-Hellenic Union.

## **INFLUENCE OF THE SOPHISTS**

The influence of the Sophists was not merely felt in philosophy but extended to literature and historical writings. Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides felt the impact of the movement, especially Thucydides, who gave a scientific account of history and was conscious of the importance of power in human affairs. Sophism influenced to some extent the dramas of Sophocles; but it had an even more important impact on Euripides, who frequently challenged the existence of the gods. In Hippolytus, for example, he wrote that man cannot know anything for certain about the nature of the gods:

*Chorus.* Surely the thought of the gods, when it comes over my mind, lifts the burden of sorrows; but while I hope in the darkness for some understanding, I faint and fail, when I compare the deeds of men with their fortunes. All is change, to and fro; the life of men shifts in endless wandering.

*Nurse.* The life of man is all suffering, and there is no rest from pain and trouble. There may be something better than this life; but whatever it be, it is hidden in mists of darkness. So we are sick of love for this life on earth and any gleam it shows, because we know nothing of another. What lies beyond is not revealed, and we drift on a sea of idle tales.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOPHISTS**

As can be seen, the Sophists invigorated the spirit of philosophy. They made philosophic disputes more realistic and more functional. They taught a lesson, not only to Greece but to succeeding ages: the fundamental problem of thinking is not nature but man. In them the spirit of humanism was triumphant. They did not pretend to know the final answers in ethics, religion, or metaphysics.

The Sophists prominently raised the problem of social ethics. The questions they asked relating to the value of social institutions, laws, and progress were repeated by succeeding philosophers. Certainly it must be acknowledged that the Sophists made philosophy an exciting and sparkling occupation. They enriched the educational curriculum of Athens and intensified an interest in rhetoric. As brilliant teachers they made knowledge more practical and more concrete.

The questions they asked are still being asked today. We, too, discuss the relativity of moral standards, and we, too, debate the problem of ends vs. means in ethics. In the Sophists we find the seeds of many modern philosophical movements, such as utilitarianism, pragmatism, positivism, and existentialism.

## **QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What were the social circumstances which produced the Sophist philosophy?
2. Why have the Sophists been misunderstood?
3. Describe the ethics views of the Sophists.

4. Discuss the statement of Protagoras. “Man is the measure of all things.”
5. Explain the skepticism of Gorgias.
6. In what way did Thrasymachus reflect the doctrines of totalitarianism
7. Explain the contributions of Callicles.
8. How did the Sophists change the Athenian educational curriculum?
9. How did die Sophists view religion? Do you agree with their attitude? Explain.
10. What were the weaknesses of the Sophist view of life?
11. Why did the Sophists neglect cosmological problems?
12. In what ways were the Sophists radical? In what ways were they conservative?

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