

THE SOPHISTS

An Introduction

Edited by
Patricia O'Grady

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Introduction

Patricia O'Grady

The impetus for this book came from the realisation that there is no available book on the sophists written in a straightforward uncomplicated style suitable for students and non-specialists studying fifth- to fourth-century BC Greece. Study of the politics, society and education of Athens in the fifth to fourth century would be shallow and incomplete without knowledge and understanding of the sophists.

This book is an introduction to certain unique individuals who influenced the political and social structure of Greece, particularly Athens, to such a marked degree that they stand out from the traditional more general category of sophists (wise men, poets and teachers), becoming a topic of study on their own account.

The period under discussion was vibrant with activity in literature, architecture, music, poetry, sculpture, politics, and philosophy. At the same time the Athenian empire was being established and expanded. We know of many notable and talented men, and a few women, from this time. We hear of the playwrights Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes, of the philosophers Anaxagoras, Socrates and Democritus, of the politicians Aristides, Cimon, Themistocles, Alcibiades, Pericles and his mistress, perhaps wife, Aspasia, to mention just a few of the outstanding figures of the time. Plato was born in about 429 and Xenophon a year or two later; they both attained distinction early in the following century. Glorification of Athens following destruction during the Persian Wars was under way: construction of the Parthenon began in 447, directed by the brilliant architect Ictinus and the sculptor Phidias. And we add to this illustrious list the names of the sophists who form the subjects of this book.

Our story of the sophists commences in about 450, when Athenians were still basking in the euphoria of their victory over the Persians, almost to a point of hubris. The first chapter is devoted to defining the word 'sophist', and shows how, in the literature and orally, and especially in the works of playwrights, it became a derogatory term, a usage which it retains, to some extent, to this day.

Chapter 2 outlines the background and sets the scene for the advent of the sophists. The early kings did not exercise total control. It would be a foolhardy king who failed to heed the shouts of opinion from his men in the assembly. Freedom of speech was no longer the birthright of the privi-

leged. The world's most famous democracy was evolving, and the theatre and the market place became important meeting places for conversation and debate, just as in the courts and the assembly.

A slight digression may be permitted here while we ask, 'Why were the sophists so successful, and so sought after?' The answer lies partly in the sum of just two obols. It seems extraordinary that the course of western civilisation could be so affected by the payment of two obols a day. Let us establish how this came about.

Pericles, the incorruptible statesman, who was selected by the people fifteen times to be chief archon (the most powerful judicial and executive position) of Athens was, by about 450, the most powerful person in Athenian politics. In his attempt to broaden democratic government and curry favour with the lower classes of citizens, Pericles introduced a payment of two obols a day¹ as compensation to enable farmers and tradesmen to attend the law courts and participate in the business of government. This payment was enough to enable poorer citizens to leave their work to attend to the business of government. It was not the recipients of the two obols who were the clients of the major sophists – their fees were too large for an ordinary workman to afford – but their attendance at the courts and assemblies brought them into close contact with people and events in Athens. They might be very good farmers, but they were inexperienced, and lacked the ability to take part efficiently in the management of the affairs of state; they were untrained in the processes of government. If a man sought success, that is wealth, power and authority, he needed skills in communication, especially in persuasive speech. He needed to be able to participate effectively in debate, to prepare a speech, and to defend or attack a proposal. A citizen could not be represented by an advocate, meaning that he needed to learn to protect himself against possible charges. Words became a very powerful tool, and skill in the art of persuasion held the prospect of success. A citizen could attract authority, approval and admiration, but also envy and malice.

Enter the sophists, most of whom came from other city-states where they had already developed the necessary skills that were now much sought in Athens, a city of ever-increasing opportunity. The sophists would happily teach these desirable skills to others for a fee, often a very high fee. The Athenians were ripe for the picking. Non-Athenians were metics, that is Greeks but not Athenians, so therefore foreigners, and while this debarred them from participating in the business of the assemblies and the law courts, they were immensely influential in training Athenians to embrace their new-found roles in politics, society and education and as speech writers to those who needed to acquire such expertise. Words became a valuable commodity; well chosen words were powerful, and learning the technique of choosing the right words, the persuasive words, was costly.

The chapters on the sophists commence with Chapter 3 on Protagoras,

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perhaps the most famous of them all, and continue with eleven named sophists and a chapter on the minor sophists. The date of Protagoras' arrival in Athens is not known, but he heralded the advent of the sophists. We know that he was already well known because the young Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus, sought to become one of his pupils in order to learn how to become a sophist (Plato, *Protagoras* 310b-312a). Protagoras is most famous for his declaration, 'man is the measure of all things'; with that profound statement he unleashed one of the most constant debates in the history of ideas. He also held a view about the gods, another weighty statement that is open to different interpretations. And he professed to make his students better, day by day, in this way declaring his intent.

Gorgias is the subject of Chapter 4 and, as we shall see, one of the most controversial of the sophists. From Diodorus Siculus (XII.53.2-3; Sprague 1972, 32), we learn that he was highly regarded as a most powerful speaker. He represented his city, Leontini, as an ambassador to Athens, and 'by his style he amazed the Athenians' (Diodorus Siculus XII.53.2-3; Sprague 1972, 32).

In Chapter 5 we read about the multi-talented Hippias, the most versatile of the sophists and probably the richest. We will see that he certainly knew the value of a well-prepared speech and it seems that he certainly knew the value of a well-prepared speech and it seems that he deprecated foolish talk – he regarded discussions such as he and Socrates had engaged in as 'petty arguments', 'mere words' which could make one appear a 'fool' (Plato, *Hippias Major* 304a-b). It comes as no surprise to learn that he represented Elis as an ambassador. Hippias is credited with discovering the quadratrix, an outstanding advance in geometry. He promoted his view that all citizens should regard themselves as a brotherhood of mankind and act accordingly. This was a fine ideal, but it came to nothing.

Prodicus, the subject of Chapter 6, appears in *Protagoras* in the company of Hippias, and numerous other followers of Protagoras. Prodicus is one of several sophists also to address the public assembly (Plato, *Hippias Major* 282b-c). He appears as a character in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (361), where the chorus listen to him because of his wisdom. Prodicus is noted as a grammarian, who insisted on precision in the language, and considered as most important 'the truth about the correctness of words' (Plato, *Cratylus* 384b; Sprague 1972, 75), and is reported to have said 'first one must learn about correctness of words' (Plato, *Euthydemus* 277e; Sprague 1972, 77).

In Chapter 7 we come to Antiphon, whoever he may be and whether he is one person or an amalgam of the several Antiphons of the time. Almost as if to compensate for that lack of knowledge, we are most fortunate in having some fragments of papyri, retrieved from the dry preserving sands of Egypt at Oxyrhynchus. (Part of the papyrus of Antiphon adorns the cover of this book.) In the chapter, Antiphon's ideas are analysed, but they are not fully developed; they were new and the sources are meagre.

Thrasymachus, the subject of Chapter 8, is a major figure in Plato's

Republic, in which he and Socrates disagree, almost coming to violence. Thrasymachus is defending his thesis about justice in conflict with Socrates' own views. In a particularly disputatious episode at the beginning of the *Republic* (336b) Plato has the 'frightened' Socrates describe how Thrasymachus 'hurled himself upon us as if he would tear us to pieces'. Thrasymachus believed that the gods had no concern for the affairs of mankind. He is also important for his contributions to the theory of rhetoric.

Chapter 9: Callicles is known only through Plato's depiction of him in *Gorgias*. Some regard him as an imaginary figure, but Plato certainly portrays him as very real. He is a sophist of a different class; he was rich and had no need to charge fees. He saw the power of persuasion as most important. This places him far from the pursuits of philosophy. Callicles was outspoken, without restraint and believed that he was reflecting human values, but was he evil? It seems that in 'creating' Callicles, Plato aimed to bring to notice the evil traits that Callicles embodied, perhaps expecting that they would then be rejected. However, far from obliterating them, he promoted them, later influencing immoralists such as Nietzsche and others.

Critias, the topic of Chapter 10, was an Athenian of a privileged family that traced its ancestry back to the time of Solon. He was well educated in the traditional manner, and surely destined to become a distinguished politician in Athenian life. He is one of the speakers in Plato's *Protagoras* and this placed him in the company of sophists as well as with Socrates and Alcibiades. Following a difference with Socrates, he formed a close bond with the notorious Alcibiades: together they caused great harm to Athens. As history records, he became the brutal, merciless despot of the reign of terror of the Thirty Tyrants.

In Chapter 11, we reach another low point in the history of the sophists, with the two elderly brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Plato's dialogue, *Euthydemus*, depicts the brothers delivering an exhibition of verbal trickery. They consider themselves to be 'the finest and speediest teachers on human excellence in the world' (*Euthydemus* 272e-273d). Their purposes were in total contrast to those of Socrates, whose pursuit of the definition and attainment of virtue had engaged much of his life. He knew that virtue was a quality neither easily nor quickly acquired.

In Chapter 12 we meet Isocrates (436-338) who lived to a great age, encompassing the life of Plato. Isocrates gained his fame as an orator, being acclaimed as one of the Ten Attic Orators, excelling in display (epideictic) speeches which may have provided amusement, but also illustrated his skill in oratory. Isocrates was critical of the sophists, believing that they made excessive claims which were unachievable. He was an accomplished rhetor who does not fit comfortably into the category of philosopher or entirely into that of sophist.

Chapter 13 discusses *The Anonymus Iamblichii* and *The Double Argu-*

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ments. *The Anonymus Iamblichi* was compiled in the fifth or early fourth century by an anonymous writer from sources who are not identified. It is a guide book to living a good life as distinct from a life of pure enjoyment. Prominent in the treatise is that wide-ranging word, virtue, a quality not easily or hurriedly attained. Anonymus lists the qualities that are essential attributes in the effort to reach a virtuous state. The attainment of virtue requires hard, consistent work over a long period. The longest section is the discussion on law – not how to evade it but of the value to be gained by upholding the law, both for individuals and for the polis. Anonymus acknowledges that the necessary characteristics are supreme and matchless and really beyond the capacity of men.

The Double Arguments is another anonymous work named after the two words with which it begins, *dissoi logoi*. The anonymous author is interested in giving both sides of a debate. The examples of double arguments that the anonymous writer recorded are uncomplicated, indeed simplistic, but they conceal the complexity and importance of double arguments that are inherent in them. So to the final sentences of the chapter: ‘The sophist is proven to be the wise man who is capable of navigating the cultural norms so as to know the right way to act in any given situation (*Dbl. Arg.* VIII.1-2). As the author of this chapter writes: ‘With knowledge of all things, the sophist is the one best equipped to advise both individuals and cities.’ The words, ‘knowledge of all things’ would guarantee total involvement in endless seminars. *Double Arguments* warrants careful study, certainly very much more than it now receives.

Chapter 14 focuses on ‘Minor Sophists’, regarded as ‘minor’ because there is so little preserved about them. To retrieve them from the literature, the author of the chapter has delved deeply into the ancient literature, frequently with scant rewards. Often the information is so inadequate that it is difficult to know whether a named person was a sophist or not. Two of the earliest sophists are The Sicilians Corax and Tisias. Also hailing from Sicily was Polus who was a pupil of both Gorgias and Licymnius. Some of these names are mentioned in earlier essays, but who is Licymnius? He may have been a pupil of Gorgias, but it may have been that Gorgias was the pupil of Licymnius. We do not have sufficient information to be able to say. The writer of this chapter resurrects many men about whom we know almost nothing apart from their names. We are unlikely ever to learn more about them or their contributions, but they receive some slight acknowledgement in having their names recorded again, regardless of their place in the history of the sophists.

The next seven chapters are devoted to discussion and analysis of issues that arise naturally from the chapters on the named sophists. They develop questions which even today generate lively debate between academics in various fields, notably philosophy, politics and law. Most of the topics were crucial issues of the times, such as ‘Can Virtue be Taught?’ and

'The Case against Teaching Virtue for Pay'. One chapter title asks the question, 'Was Socrates a Sophist?' another is a statement, 'Plato the Sophist'. Law versus nature was a perennial concern of the sophists. In 'The Sophists and Natural Theology' we find interesting and original ideas about religious phenomena. And the question is asked: 'Were the Sophists Philosophers?'

The final chapter discusses the relevance of the sophists today. What is their legacy to us? The sophists generated intellectual ferment in Athens. Without their influence Socrates may not have realised his mission, and Plato would have had no need to defend Socrates. Plato, and through him, Socrates, remain of immeasurable influence. It was once thought that excellence was the birthright of the aristocracy, an inborn quality that was therefore unteachable, but the sophists claimed to be able to teach this virtue and set about trying to do so. Virtue – excellence, goodness – was a topic of general interest. Socrates sought to define the nature or essence of virtue. It whipped up lively debate then, and continues to do so now. The sophists were the first professional teachers. The progress made in the dissemination of knowledge springs from advances in education, and these rely on professional teachers. It is true, as the author of the chapter states, that 'we live, in this quite pragmatic sense, in a world created by the sophists'.

The sophists practised rhetoric, the art of making a convincing case, of presenting a winning argument. It is the art of persuasive speech for which they charged a fee. Plato displayed marked hostility to the sophists. He scorned them, ridiculed them and, almost certainly, maligned them. By writing dialogues in their names, Plato immortalised numbers of sophists whom we now consider, on his authority, to be the most prominent, richest, destructive, fraudulent, false and dishonest of men: *Protagoras*, *Hippias*, *Gorgias*, *Euthydemus*. Other sophists about whom chapters have been written for this book figure prominently, as we shall see, in these and other dialogues.

The sophists were the catalyst that drove Socrates on his mission and activated debates which Plato 'recorded' in his dialogues. It is paradoxical that the entire works of Plato remain available to us today – paradoxical because Plato was the most vehement critic of the sophists and also our major source. Was Plato right when he criticised and derided the sophists so intensely?

Plato's purpose was to praise Socrates, his beloved mentor, for his wisdom, courage and honesty, his untiring devotion to establishing the nature of virtue for mankind's well being. It is mainly owing to the writings of Plato that Socrates is immortalised. For this he deserves our unending gratitude.

The sophists initiated a 'new intellectual ferment' (Guthrie 1969, 4). They raised unusual controversial questions, many of which are still

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zealously discussed and argued about today. The sophists were the learned men of their time, but were they smart rather than wise?

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Apart from the chapters I have written I do not claim responsibility for the views expressed by the other contributors. Although I have edited the work I have tried to avoid imposing my own views. The sophists were so controversial, and remain so in modern times, that opinions of them are likely to vary. Those expressed in this book may not necessarily be my views, or yours. That is part of the appeal of studying the sophists. They were individuals, not a school of common thought, and they varied considerably in their theories and interests, which, as we shall see, were wide-ranging. One of their primary interests was linguistics, the development of language, perhaps because this was their stock in trade. In a general comment, Cole (1967, 70) remarked that 'Language provides the essential medium through which the formation and consolidation of society takes place'. The sophists would have agreed.

The contributors to this book share my desire to introduce the sophists to a broader range of readers. Presenting complex arguments in an uncomplicated style requires special skills. Not everyone has those necessary skills, but the contributors to this book have acquired them and implemented them to attain the desired result.

Our aim is to inform and delight. If we are able also to inspire readers to delve more deeply into a particular sophist or theory that they may have found intriguing, or puzzling, that will be an added bonus.

Note

1. The date of this innovation is not known. It may have been any time between 465 and 450 BC. Cimon was ostracised in 461 and Ephialtes died in 462, leaving Pericles the most powerful man in Athens. The sum was raised from two to three obols in 425 (see Roberts 1984, 60-1) after the death of Pericles. An obol was a reasonable amount, being about one third of a drachma, and was 'a good day's pay for a skilled workman in fifth century Athens'. Commodities were then cheap but luxuries, such as payment to a sophist, were costly and out of reach of wage earners (Dillon and Gergel 2003, 339n.1).

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What is a Sophist?

Patricia O'Grady

'Words, words, words. Is there no end to the tricks you can make them perform?' (Harris 2006, 402). The sophists pushed this question to the limit and were condemned for their alleged trickery. Let us examine the use of the word 'sophist' from its early beginnings to the time when it was used to describe those Greeks who developed certain trends of thought which set them apart. Our discussion will show how the meaning of the word changed as it accommodated the new breed of sophists.¹

The word 'sophist' (*sophistês*) is derived from the Ancient Greek *sophos* meaning 'wise', 'skilful', 'clever'. The associated noun, *sophia*, indicates 'wisdom', 'skill' and 'knowledge'.² In an unqualified meaning, a sophist is a person who has wisdom, skill and perhaps knowledge, a person who is wise, skilful and clever. But there are degrees of such qualities as wisdom and skill and cleverness, and a wide range of purposes to which such capabilities may be applied, from the most worthy to the utterly despicable. In the following chapters we will recognise sophists who used their wisdom and cleverness in commendable teaching and activities, and sophists whose behaviour was contemptible and whose purposes were morally dissolute. Even so, the line between the two is not always clear. A despicable person may have some fine qualities, and the most admirable people invariably lack some quality or another. There are many sophists about whom we know so little that it is not possible assess their qualities.

In the earliest Greek literature a sophist was a teacher, poet and wise man. This is the way 'sophist' was used by Homer and Hesiod, who were writing their poetry in the eighth/seventh centuries BC. It comes as no surprise to locate the earliest use of the word in their writings. They were the first sophists: poets, teachers, and men of wisdom. From these early writers the Greeks learnt their history, genealogy, social customs and ethics. They also learnt their place in relation to the gods and in society. In the *Iliad* (IX.432-43) we read of Achilles who had been sent to Phoenix to be taught 'to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds'.

The word 'sophist' could convey skill or expertise in a craft or practical art. This is what Homer intends when he writes of a 'cunning workman' (*Iliad* XV.412). When Homer and Hesiod used the word to describe a person, it was a complimentary term. When it was used of the Seven Wise Men of Ancient Greece it was an accolade.

We refer to Solon, the statesman who was a wise man, a poet and teacher, a sophist in the best, that is, the traditional sense of the word. In about 594 BC Solon, being considered to be 'the justest and the wisest (*phronimôtaton*) of all', and because he was aware of the hardships suffered by the oppressed classes, was chosen as chief archon (chief magistrate) and commissioned to alleviate the privation of the underprivileged classes, to 'set free the condemned debtors, divide the land anew, and make an entire change in the form of government' (Plutarch, *Solon* XIV). He was doomed to failure: for the disadvantaged he did not go far enough while the landed classes felt he had gone too far.

We turn to Pindar, the acclaimed lyric poet, who was born in about 518 BC, still in the archaic period. His odes are specifically written to extol the victors and celebrate their victories at the Games. He makes frequent use of *sophos* to highlight their skills and cleverness. He wrote a victory ode to a certain Arcesilas of Cyrene, who won the Pythian chariot-race of 462 BC. Pindar praises Arcesilas as a skilful (*sophos*) charioteer (Pindar, *Pythian Ode* V.115). This high praise was the appropriate honour for the victor of the race. Winners at the Games were honoured and indulged as heroes, just as they are today. In similar vein Pindar wrote of the true poet who 'knoweth much by gift of nature' in contrast with those who have only learnt the lore of song, and chatter like intemperate crows (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* II.86). Here we see the early recognition of a sophist in comparison to a philosopher.

The main involvement in this work is with the sophists of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. As we proceed into the chapters, the areas in which a sophist of the fifth century differed from a sophist to whom the word was applied in the traditional sense will become clearer, but it is likely that different readers will glean different views from the authors of the chapters.

With Herodotus (c. 490-425/420 BC), we move into the Presocratic period. Herodotus employed 'sophist' to mean 'teacher' (Herodotus 1.29.1; 2.49.1; 4.95). Diogenes Laertius writes that a philosopher was a lover of wisdom, and a professor, one who had attained a state of 'mental perfection; sophists was another name for the wise men, and not only for philosophers but for the poets also. And so Cratinus [c. 484-c. 419 BC] when praising Homer and Hesiod in his *Archilochi*, gives them the title of sophist' (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* I.12).

Euripides (c. 480-460) has the Muse Terpsichore apply the word 'sophist' unfavourably to Thamyris, a Thracian bard, who 'full oft had mocked our [the Muses'] skill', a most unwise thing to do, for which the Muses blinded him (*Rhesus* 924). The word was already developing a fine nuance of a pejorative sense.

In a general sense the noun 'sophist' denoted wisdom and skill, and was usually a term of praise. So how did this once complimentary term acquire the pejorative connotations that it developed and even now, to a considerable extent, still carries?

1. *What is a Sophist?*

In the early 1870s Henry Sidgwick described the sophists as:

... a set of charlatans who appeared in Greece in the fifth century, and earned an ample livelihood by imposing on public credulity: professing to teach virtue, they really taught the art of fallacious discourse, and meanwhile propagated immoral practical doctrines ... they were there met and overthrown by Socrates, who exposed the hollowness of their rhetoric, and triumphantly defended sound ethical principles against their pernicious sophistries.³

Just fifteen years later, in 1888, Friedrich Nietzsche expressed a totally opposing opinion: '... every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the sophists' (Nietzsche 1964, 348). George Grote (1904, ch. LXVII), the respected philosopher/historian, was another influential commentator who provided more realistic analyses of the sophists.

What is one to make of such differing views? Who is right? And who were the sophists? What did these professors profess? Why not call them philosophers? Could a sophist also be a philosopher, and could a philosopher be a sophist? What distinguishes a sophist from a philosopher?

Many eminent scholars have attempted to define and explain the word 'sophist', with varying success.⁴ Of the most well-known sophists, who can or should be classified as a sophist? Is it desirable to be so designated? Is Protagoras a philosopher at the same time as he is a sophist? How should we designate Gorgias and, indeed, is Socrates a sophist?

As our most prolific source for the sophists, Plato must be given careful attention. At the same time it is necessary to bear in mind that he is a hostile witness who is frequently unfair to the sophists. He was not the first to pillory the sophists, but he was the most influential and all his works survive. They are readily available and constantly read and analysed. Later chapters will show the extent to which Plato influenced judgements about the sophists, but we will not be able to judge the degree to which Plato relied on original writings of the sophists, how much was anecdotal, or how much he was exercising his fertile powers of imagination, exaggerating the inadequacies of the sophists for his own purposes and depicting them as unprincipled opportunists.

In his dialogue entitled *Sophist*, Plato has the Elean Stranger (from Elea in Italy)⁵ concede that the word 'sophist' is difficult to define, 'troublesome and hard to catch' (*Sophist* 218c). A sophist 'demands its pay in cash' (223a). A sophist is an entertainer, a juggler, an imitator of realities (235a), in 'a baffling classification where it is hard to track him' (236d). A sophist 'is very far from being wise, although his name implies wisdom' (221d). Again, the Stranger states that a sophist hunts 'for pay, is paid in cash' by 'rich and promising youths' (223b). '[Sophists] promise to educate men to enable them to argue about laws and public affairs' (232d). Plato has the Stranger utter an all-embracing condemnation of the sophists:

'The sophist is nothing else, apparently, than the money-making class of the disputatious, argumentative, controversial, pugnacious, combative, acquisitive art, as our argument has again stated' (226a). Despite the concession of the Elean Stranger that the word is hard to define, Plato finds no difficulty in denouncing the sophists at length, putting into the mouth of the Elean Stranger explicit pejorative language.

A very simple definition of sophists, and one that is devoid of Plato's dogmatism and malevolence, is this: sophists were freelance, mostly non-Athenian, independent teachers who travelled throughout Ancient Greece from city to city making their living out of the new demand for education. This demand in Athens came about mainly as a result of changing social circumstances.

This brings us the great Athenian statesman, Pericles, who was born in 495 BC. By about 450 he was the most powerful man in Athens. He was an empire builder, and under his control an Athenian Empire grew in size, wealth and power. Pericles increased the number who could attend the assembly and, as was shown in the Introduction, made a daily payment which enabled the poorer citizens to leave their fields and trades and take part in the business of state. Every citizen, and that meant every free man born in Athens, had an opportunity to participate in the political life of the city and, indeed, was expected to take part in this famous democracy. It therefore became necessary for a man to be able to compose a speech, to deliver it effectively and persuasively, to mount a case, to support or denounce a proposal, to be able to defend himself against charges and to build and maintain the standing of his family. There was no avenue for appeal and, except for a very brief period, no laws against libel (see slander, pp. 64-5 below).

Most of the sophists were foreigners, Greeks but not Athenians, so they could not be involved directly in the affairs of the assembly and the law courts, but this motley, controversial set of men had a dynamic influence on the character, culture, politics, literature and education of the city.

Athens at the time was an exciting place. Culture was flowering. Arts and science blossomed. There existed an unprecedented level of intellectual curiosity, a questioning of superstitions and conventions, and a belief in progress. All of the arts, particularly the literary arts, oration and rhetoric reached their zenith as the masters in the various disciplines competed for fame and honour (Usher 2005, 113).

It was onto this scene that the sophists emerged. The first of the early sophists dealt with here – that is, the sophists of the mid-fifth century BC, men who introduced new curricula which they taught in a new style, sought to develop rhetoric or skills in argumentation, could persuade or convince, and brought new meaning to the word 'sophist', changing it forever – was Protagoras, who hailed from Abdera in Thrace in Northern

1. What is a Sophist?

Greece. In his dialogue *Protagoras*, Plato⁶ has Protagoras acknowledge that:

A man has to be careful when he visits powerful cities as a foreigner, and induces their most promising young men to forsake the company of others, relatives or acquaintances, older or younger, and consort with him on the grounds that his conversation will improve them (*Protagoras* 316d).

Born in Abdera, Protagoras was a foreigner. He is visiting the powerful city of Athens and realises that his teaching will arouse resentment and hostility. He 'admits to being a sophist and an educator' (*Protagoras* 317b), explaining that he found admission rather than denial to be a better precaution against being regarded as a rogue who tries to hide his occupation. This passage indicates that being considered a sophist already incited resentment, perhaps a hint of danger even before such well known figures as Protagoras appeared on the scene.

Protagoras was a wordsmith who seemed to think that more was better: we find him chided by Hippias: '... and Protagoras should refrain from shaking out every reef and running before the wind, launching out on a sea of words till he is out of sight of land' (*Protagoras* 338a). Protagoras lived to a great age, and spent many years in Athens. He knew the value of words, and his skill rewarded him with great wealth.

Some of the other sophists also amassed fortunes through charging high fees for their instruction, whereas Plato and others regarded teaching for money as insupportable. It was one of the practices of the sophists that so inflamed Plato that he referred to the earnings of the sophists on at least thirty-one occasions.⁷

Plato also derided the sophists for claiming to be able to teach virtue, but he identified as one of their worst aspects the fact that they showed no discrimination. They would teach anyone who had the money to pay. Plato and the privileged aristocrats believed that education was for the upper classes and that an educated citizenry was a danger to the very foundations of the aristocracy on which Athens had been built. Plato came from a wealthy, privileged family; from such an elite position it is all too easy to be critical of lesser mortals who need to work for their living.

The word 'sophist' implies skill and wisdom. Skill entails ability or aptitude in crafts, the making of things, such as boat-making or sculpture, or of performance such as horsemanship or public-speaking. The sophists were skilful. They were teachers of higher education, and this might commence at the age of about fourteen.⁸ Between them they provided instruction in a wide range of subjects, including history, genealogy, mathematics, geometry, linguistics, grammar, and the correct usage of words and names.

The sophists delivered lectures, seminars and demonstration speeches known as '*epideixeis*', which were exhibitions or displays presented both

to the general public and privately (Plato, *Hippias Major* 282b-c). The *Protagoras* is set in the house of the rich Athenian Callias, who was a considerable financial supporter of the sophists (Plato, *Apology* 20a). In addition, Callias was well connected, being related to Pericles through marriage. Listed among those present are the names of a significant number of men, including Prodicus of Ceos (*Protagoras* 314c), who follow Protagoras as he walks in the portico. Another group of Athenians sits around Hippias of Elis, who occupies a 'seat of honour' (315c), and also in the crowd (315d) are a number of foreign followers. Two days after the meeting in the house of Callias, Hippias was to present a display in 'Pheidostratus' schoolroom' (*Hippias Major* 286b).

The tragedian Aeschylus (c. 525-c. 456 BC) notes the demarcation between wisdom and knowledge when he writes that a wise person is one who knows useful things, rather than many things (Aeschylus, fr. 218). One should accept that the sophists were knowledgeable. Although they knew many things, they also knew useful things. The sophists were skilful and learned but, apart from Hippias of Elis, they were not described as wise.⁹ They practised and taught speech-making or rhetoric, the art of clever speech, designed to sway an argument or convince an opponent. A sophist is a 'master of the art of making clever speakers' (Plato, *Protagoras* 312d). The goal of the sophists was winning: philosophers are seekers of the truth.

A man might be described as a sophist, meaning that he was wise. Plutarch tells us that Damon, a teacher of Pericles, was a consummate sophist who concealed his real power from public knowledge by posing as a teacher of the lyre. Under the teaching of Damon,¹⁰ Pericles' great natural talent as a speaker flourished. Further, Plutarch tells us that Damon was ostracised for being a great schemer and a friend of tyranny. In reference to tyranny, it is interesting to note that in a play, *Chirones*, the comic playwright Cratinus (c. 484-c. 419) described Pericles as 'a tyrant exceedingly great'. These may be the extravagant words of a poet, but Pericles did wield exceptional power, being voted archon for fifteen years (Plutarch, *Pericles* 161). He was a fine orator, as one may perceive by reading, in particular, the funeral oration which is reported by the historian Thucydides (II.35-46). We will never know precisely what Pericles said, but Thucydides attributes to him a powerful, impassioned and eloquent funeral oration glorifying Athens, and those Athenians who died in 431 in the first campaign of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). Pericles was a persuasive orator, enthraling his audience by heaping honour upon the mothers of sons who died in battle and speaking to the dead heroes who proved their manly courage and stood stoutly to their task.

A new discipline was established by the sophists when they gave instruction on learning how to assess situations and how to argue, but they were condemned for making weaker arguments stronger, regardless of the

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merit of the argument. Rich fathers were prepared, and indeed quite willing, to pay large amounts of money to have their sons taught the art of making clever speeches, in order that they would become successful, i.e. rich and influential. Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* opens with a young man, Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus, knocking on Socrates' door before day-break. He has heard that Protagoras is in town and wants Socrates to take him to meet the great sophist so that he can learn how to become a sophist (310b).

Antagonism towards the sophists developed when their skills were put to winning, rather than to discovering truth. Even the porter at the home of Callias, where Protagoras and other sophists are staying, refuses entry to Socrates and Hippocrates, thinking them to be sophists. There are already so many sophists and visitors in the house that the porter is irritated with them. It is not until Socrates refutes the accusation that the porter allows them to enter (*Protagoras* 314d).

It was claimed of Protagoras that he could make the weak argument the stronger. Aristotle writes of 'making the worse appear the better argument' adding that 'men were justly disgusted with [this] promise of Protagoras' (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a). Aristotle lived from 384-322 and wrote *Rhetoric* in about 330 BC, but he is describing a view of the sophists that was commonly held in Athens a century earlier. The once complimentary term came to be applied in a derogatory way, a usage which it retains to a considerable extent to this day.

Our earliest remaining written reference to making the weaker argument the stronger is in Aristophanes' play, *Clouds*, which was presented in 423. Other references to making the weaker argument the stronger appear in reports written later. Aristophanes was born in about 457 BC to a well-to-do family whose interest was in maintaining the status quo. Perhaps no one describes Athenian feelings towards the sophists and their methods better than he does in *Clouds*.

When analysing *Clouds*, it is necessary to keep in mind that Socrates was regarded as a sophist, and any Athenian who was asked to name a sophist would almost surely name Socrates. He was an aggravating man, asking all and sundry tricky, 'unanswerable' questions, such as 'What is virtue?' and 'What is justice?' and humiliating those who could not answer. They could name a virtuous person, or describe an act of justice or injustice, but they could not define virtue or justice; they did not know the *essence* of virtue or justice. These are ideals, almost impossible to attain, being in the nature of the divine. So Socrates showed them to be ignorant when they thought that they were knowledgeable.¹¹ *Clouds* heaps ridicule upon Socrates as a sophist, regarding him as a corrupt teacher of rhetoric. Obviously the references must have had meaning to the audience: that was how the playwright got his laughs.

Clouds involves a spoilt young Athenian, Pheidippides, the son of a farmer, Strepsiades, and of a wealthy mother who indulges him. However,

he has incurred debts for which his father is liable. The father wants his son to go off to join a school in Athens where he can be taught how to make the weaker argument the stronger, and how to outwit his creditors, to defraud them and evade payment. But Pheidippides will have none of this: 'I know them. Those rank pedants, those pale-faced, bare-footed vagabonds.'¹² That Socrates, poor wretch, and Chaerephon' (*Clouds* 111). He will never be able to face his friends again after associating with such people. Socrates is portrayed as a sophist, and any stick will do to beat him.

There is a lot of hilarious discussion about getting a witch to swing on the moon to hold it in place so that it cannot advance to being a new moon which is the time for paying accounts. Also discussed are such 'crucial' questions as how far a flea can jump and which end of a mosquito makes the buzz, questions which are brought in to ridicule the sophists and, of course, to make the audience laugh, because the play, after all, was an entry in a competition. Now the Clouds, who are goddesses, promise to make Strepsiades the best speaker in all Greece, so that he will be able to prevail in the Assembly (*Clouds* 432). This is more ambitious than Strepsiades desires. 'But I wish to succeed, just enough for my need. And to slip through the clutches of law.' He wants only to find the solution to his predicament, that is, to defeat his creditors. Aristophanes may be pointing here to Strepsiades' grasping of this new skill and his lack of any intention of applying it for anything but his own dishonest purposes. This is a reference to making the weaker argument the stronger, developing the art of persuasion for immoral purposes, and is associated with the teachings of the sophists, with whom Socrates did associate, and is associated. Strepsiades implores Socrates to take Pheidippides in hand and Socrates agrees to turn Pheidippides into a 'splendid sophist' (*Clouds* 1111).

In *Clouds* all the prejudices held against the sophists are rolled into this one character, Socrates, one of the best known men in Athens. He was everywhere, asking his interminable questions, an unattractive fat man with a snub nose and bulging eyes. *Clouds* reflects the general conception of the sophists, presented in a slapstick, exaggerated and boisterous way. It is interesting to note that it won only third prize in the City Dionysia. Today it is still hilarious, a 'laugh out loud' play, but it is iniquitous and defamatory. Aristophanes was a superb playwright, a weaver of words, a trickster who certainly knew how to make a winner out of a weak argument.

Because Socrates, through Plato, recognised the influence that Aristophanes brought to bear by his mockery, it is important to mention Plato's *Apology* (*Defence of Socrates*) in which Socrates defends himself against charges of impiety and of misleading the youth of Athens. Plato has Socrates refer to his accusers as dangerous men:

... who gained your belief since they got hold of most of you in childhood, and accuse me without any truth, saying: There is a certain Socrates, a wise man, a ponderer over the things in the air and one who has investigated the things

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beneath the earth and who makes the weaker argument the stronger. These, men of Athens, who have spread abroad this report, are my dangerous enemies (*Apology* 18b).

Socrates is unable to name these men ‘unless one of them happens to be a playwright’ (*Apology* 18d). The trial of Socrates took place in 399 BC, twenty-four years after *Clouds* was first presented, but it is clear to Plato that the influence of the play was forceful and compelling. Plato was present at the trial of Socrates (*Apology* 38b) and was thirty years old when Socrates was executed. Aristophanes had some fourteen years to live, dying in about 385 BC.

In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates use the word wisdom many times, ‘What kind of wisdom is this? Just that which is perhaps human wisdom? For perhaps I really am wise in this wisdom’ (20d). Socrates equates human wisdom with the ‘gift of nature’ about which Pindar had written fifty years earlier. Socrates, this most moral of men, was a true wise man. His name and spirit are immortal and his teachings are of endless influence.

Were the sophists charlatans, as Sidgwick claimed? And were they guilty of everything that Plato heaped upon them? Certainly, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who could argue both ways relentlessly and effectively, and Thrasymachus with his belief that justice is rightly for the stronger, held dangerous views and taught their students their insidious ideas.

Most of the sophists were engaged in the development of language, of vocabulary, of gender in nouns, and of speech in general. This, of course, enhanced their exhibition speeches and their teaching, but had more lasting benefits. Several of them acted as ambassadors for their states, no doubt because of their expertise in rhetoric and their knowledge of language. A number of them discussed justice and argued the virtues of natural law as compared with man-made law. This is a topic which engaged sophists and philosophers alike.

The sophists were mainly foreigners, itinerants who plied their trade where the opportunities were greatest, the pickings the highest and this was primarily Athens. Being itinerant, they seemed to have no allegiance to any city. This would be viewed most unfavourably by Athenians who were euphorically proud of their city-state, more so since their magnificent victories against the Persians and the peace of 449/8 BC.

The sophists were the earliest public educators, initiating methods that were the precursor of modern education. They questioned the long established ingrained institutions and, in doing so, they shook Athens. A number of the sophists were certainly philosophers, and while some of them practised dubious rhetoric, perhaps taking advantage of gullible youth, it is not true to state, as Henry Sidgwick did, that they were all charlatans. These are big claims which cannot justly be made against the sophists in general. The passage from Sidgwick quoted above reads as a furious exaggeration and cannot reasonably be imposed on a movement of

independent professional men holding individual beliefs and practising different methods.

The sophists were much acclaimed, much maligned, eagerly sought after and tremendously influential with many of them amassing excessive wealth. They were teachers, and they were rhetoricians, practised and successful in the art of persuasive speech, of presenting a winning argument. They developed language skills, and incorporated the most descriptive, convincing words into their speeches for the purpose of persuasion. There is nothing wrong with persuasive speech as long as one does not use tricks that are planned to deceive, but some of the sophists were expert in making words perform tricks. Plato has Socrates explain that 'the man whose rhetorical teaching is a real art will explain accurately the nature of that to which his words are to be addressed, and that is the soul, is it not?' (Plato, *Phaedrus* 270e). The welfare of the soul was not a concern of the sophists. Although they claimed to be able to teach virtue, they did not see Socrates' mission as their course. If they did in fact see, that is perceive and comprehend, Socrates' mission, they would discard it as useless, time-wasting nonsense. They aimed to win arguments, to make the weak argument the stronger and to teach gullible followers how to prevail in the courts, how to outsmart their creditors and to confound and belittle their detractors.

When I claim that the sophists were clever rather than wise, smart rather than genuine, deceitful rather than honest, I am making a generalisation. None of them was entirely bad, though it is difficult to find redeeming aspects in such sophists as Thrasymachus, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

Totally opposite to Sidgwick, Nietzsche praised the sophists, but may be seen to extol too much. But did he? Because each word in his quotation warrants careful thought, I repeat it: '... every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the sophists'. As we progress through the book, it will be fruitful to dwell on that clause and consider how far it is true in relation to the sophists who are discussed here. In chapter LXVII of *A History of Greece*, George Grote presents an analysis of the sophists that is rational, insightful and meaningful. The chapter is deservedly famous. It is highly recommended and worthy of attention (Grote 1904, especially pp. 28-80).

The sophists followed a profession, but they were never a school or a guild. They taught their students how to succeed in public affairs, in politics, in business, in their personal lives. Their method was to pour information into their students, like milk into a jug. Although he claimed never to teach anyone, Socrates led his students to recognise virtue, that is, to value the fine and honourable qualities of character, by leading them to resurrect the innate knowledge that he believed all people held within themselves. He harried, teased and debated. While Socrates would never defy the law, the sophists instructed their students in the art of rhetoric, how to get around the law, how to construct and present a winning argument regardless of the rightness of an opinion or an action.

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The sophists were good and they were bad. In their diversity, they ranged from the worthy to the depraved. There is no typical sophist.

In ensuring the immortality of Socrates, Plato also ensured the immortality of the sophists, so why did he write about them? His writings provided the vehicle through which he could applaud Socrates and preserve and propagate his ideals. He lauded the goodness of Socrates and, while he extolled his hero, he brought to the world, not only the philosophy of Socrates, but the legacy of the sophists, even though he reviled most of them and their opinions and teaching. He could well be saying 'this is what happens when unprincipled people of poor breeding are allowed rights beyond their standing. They denigrate and destroy the tried and true traditions of the polis. This is what should be avoided.'

Without the advent of the sophists, Socrates would have found less to condemn and may not have recognised his mission. Plato would have had no need to defend Socrates as he did. Athenian and western philosophy, society, politics, democracy, and learning in general, would have taken a vastly different path.

The subjects that the sophists taught and the topics that made up Socrates' mission are issues that are as relevant today as they were in ancient Greece. They are still passionately debated. It may be argued that this is the greatest gift from the sophists.

You, the reader, may develop a different view.

Notes

1. Originally, it was planned to follow Guthrie (vol. III, 9n.2; 33n.2) and others, and use the word 'Sophist' with a capital S for the particular sophists who are the main topic of this book. Lower case was to apply to sophists in general. However, it became obvious that the dividing line between the two is often fine and frequently indistinguishable. In some instances it was impossible to decide. It seemed desirable and less confusing to abandon the original idea and use only 'sophist' with a small s.

2. Venturesome students may care to seek the evidence for the use and meaning of *sophia*, *sophos*, and *sophistes* in the comprehensive *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell and Scott (1940). It is quite useful to anyone who wishes to trace the development of the usage of the word by the earliest Greek writers and commentators. The 1980 impression of *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, founded upon the 7th edition of Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), is worthwhile, simpler and generally adequate.

3. Henry Sidgwick, 'The Sophists', *Journal of Philology* (1872), 288-307 and (1873), 66-80.

4. See especially Plato, *Sophist*; Grote 1904, 31-4; Guthrie 1969, 27-54; Kerferd 1981, 24-41.

5. Apart from 221d which is spoken by Theaetetus, the other lines quoted in this paragraph are delivered by the Elean Stranger.

6. It needs to be borne in mind that Plato was born in 429 or 427 BC, and was writing in the fourth century when the earliest sophists, apart from Gorgias, were already dead. To what extent Plato's dialogues were imaginary or historical is

much debated. Even so, it may be feasible to accept that he was writing of affairs with which he had familiarised himself, but also that he was extremely biased against the sophists.

7. Guthrie 1969, 36n.2.

8. The education of younger boys consisted of lessons in language, literature (mainly Homer) and athletics (see Aristotle, *History of Animals* 581a12ff.).

9. It seems that Hippias of Elis was the only sophist called a 'sage' by the Greeks (Pausanias, *Elis* I.XXV.4).

10. Pindar was the teacher of Damon who was the teacher of Pericles.

11. It is of interest to note Aristotle's view: 'The object of our inquiry is not to know what virtue is, but to become good men' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b27).

12. This is an allusion to Socrates, who was the bane of sandal-makers, apparently never wearing shoes but going barefoot in summer and in winter.

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