
SOPHISTRY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates

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INTRODUCTION

Political philosophy appears to have been supplanted in our time by the study of the history of political philosophy, on the one hand, and by self-described sophistry, on the other.¹ The laborious cataloguing of the thought of past masters or the creation of new discourses ("narratives") that support a given moral-political agenda but expressly reject any claim to have discovered the eternal truth or to rest on any rock-solid "metaphysical" foundation—these seem to be the only serious alternatives available at present to a student of political thought. And sophistry may well be the weightier of them, for its practitioners—antifoundationalists, postmodernists of various stripes—are still sufficiently moved by their concern for the eternal truth to acknowledge fully and frankly that they can discern no such thing in the world. As for the historians, while understandably absorbed by the task of arriving at accurate interpretations of the books under study, they too often fail to ask whether those books are, as they claim to be, true.

The presence, and the challenge, of sophistry in our time indicates the need to understand it as precisely as possible. This difficult task is made somewhat easier by the fact that it is hardly a newcomer to the world. In addition to its appearance at the senescence of political philosophy, sophistry was also present at its birth or in its youth. This is so at least inasmuch as Socrates is famous, in the pages of Xenophon and Plato, for his confrontations with the sophists; and it is Socrates who is credited with founding what has come to be called "political philosophy," because he was the first to "have called philosophy down from the heaven and placed it in the cities and introduced it also into households and compelled it to inquire into life and mores and things good and bad" (Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10–11). What is more, sophistry was subjected in the time of Socrates to painstaking analysis, above all by Plato; the peculiar accomplishment of Socrates, his altogether

new approach to understanding moral and political life, is contrasted in the dialogues of Plato not least with the activity of the sophists. Since Plato chose never to present the mature Socrates in conversation with another philosopher, Socrates' encounters with the sophists are the closest thing we have to his engagement with his equals or peers, as distinguished from more or less promising youths. To begin to grapple with the phenomenon of sophistry, then, we put ourselves entirely under Plato's tutelage. This means, among other things, that we do not seek to uncover the "real" or "historical" practice of sophistry apart from the information Plato himself thought it fit for us to have. For even if Plato should prove to have an ax to grind against sophistry or to be "biased," we could not judge the worth of his case, for or against, without first seeing it as he intended it.

There are six Platonic writings that most obviously investigate sophists or sophistry and that would have to be treated in a comprehensive account of Plato's understanding of sophistry: *Protagoras*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Euthydemus*. Because a complete interpretation of all of these dialogues is well beyond the scope of the present study, which is necessarily introductory, some principle of selection is needed. A survey of the evidence suggests that, according to Plato, Protagoras is *the* sophist, at once the greatest and the most revealing embodiment of the type. The *Euthydemus* presents the comic displays of the brothers Dionysodorus and Euthydemus that are so outrageous as to be, at least to begin with, an obstacle rather than an aid to taking sophistry seriously. As for Hippias, who compares himself—favorably—to Protagoras as a sophist (*Greater Hippias* 282d6–e8), he proves to be a much less serious thinker than Protagoras; he is in his own way a comic figure. The *Sophist* is by no means a comedy, but it presents the Eleatic Stranger's thoughts on the matter of sophistry, as distinguished from those of Socrates, and no sophist properly speaking appears there. The *Sophist* is in any event the sequel to the *Theaetetus* and so requires prior knowledge of it. The *Theaetetus* does deserve our attention, for it turns out that approximately half of it is devoted to Protagoras' understanding of knowledge. It is thus of fundamental importance. But it too is a sort of sequel: it is set well after and presupposes familiarity with the *Protagoras*, which one may call *the* Platonic dialogue treating *the* sophist.

The present study, then, offers an exegesis of the whole of the *Protagoras*² before turning to consider the *Theaetetus*,³ from the beginning of it through to the conclusion of its extended consideration of the thought, the *logos*, of Protagoras (*Theaetetus* 142a1–183c7). Hence the present study is itself an exercise in the history of political philosophy. Yet it is undertaken in the hope that it may contribute not only to an adequate assessment of

ancient sophistry but also, and by way of contrast, to a correct understanding of the achievement of Socrates or of the meaning of “political philosophy” as founded by him. Only once we achieve such an understanding could we consider eventually the possibility of political philosophy today. Perhaps the greatest observer of modern times, Friedrich Nietzsche, has discerned a kinship between the radical sophistry of antiquity and the moral-epistemological relativism so characteristic of our era, which has evidently rendered impossible the practice of political philosophy understood as the attempt to grasp the (eternal) truths of moral-political life or its permanent questions. Nietzsche has discerned, in other words, a link between our reigning categories of thought and ancient sophistry as exemplified especially by Protagoras: “Our contemporary way of thinking is to a great extent Heraclitean, Democritean, and Protagorean: it suffices to say it is Protagorean, because Protagoras represented a synthesis of Heraclitus and Democritus” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power* #428 = Nietzsche 1968, 233).

Because we are not in a position to grasp this kinship fully, the present study is limited to analyzing, as a necessary preliminary thereto, the evidence judged by Plato to be most important concerning Protagoras, “[b]y far the most famous” sophist of antiquity (Kerferd 1981, 42) and “the senior and most celebrated member of the profession” (Barney 2006, 78).⁴ This preliminary task is essential in part because the evidence in question has generally been treated either condescendingly or naïvely. It is not enough to say, for example, that sophistic teaching aimed, “[b]y its very principle,” at “practical success” or at opening “careers in public speaking” to all; we suspect that we are not yet at the heart of things if the “intellectual content” of ancient sophistry is understood to have consisted in “a wisdom and experience born of the art of properly conducting one’s thoughts”—that is, of “knowing how, by means of arguments, to analyze a situation” (Romilly 1988, 23–24). More helpful, once again, is the trenchant observation of Nietzsche in opposition to the scholar most responsible for the modern rehabilitation of sophistry, George Grote: “[T]he sophists verge upon the first *critique of morality*, the first *insight* into morality:—they juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value judgments;—they let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified; i.e., they divine that all attempts to give reasons for morality are necessarily *sophistical*” (*Will to Power* #428, emphasis in original).⁵

This study seeks to uncover what lies at the heart of Protagoras’ teaching in both its moral-political and its theoretical concerns. It seeks to uncover also what Socrates, in responding to that teaching, begins to reveal of his own understanding and characteristic activity. However much respect

each man proves to have for the other—and they clearly do respect one another—they lead manifestly different lives. In the case of thinkers of so high a rank, the difference in ways of life is a sure indication of a difference also in the understanding of things of fundamental importance (consider Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1004b24–25 and context). Our inquiry into sophistry, then, may help us begin to understand the phenomenon of philosophy as Socrates lived it.



Portions of the interpretation offered here found their first expression in two previously published writings: “Political Philosophy and Sophistry: An Introduction to Plato’s *Protagoras*” (in *American Journal of Political Science* 47 [4; October 2003]: 612–24) and “Sophistry as a Way of Life” (in *Political Philosophy Cross-Examined*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013], pp. 5–16). I am grateful to the Earhart Foundation and its officers, especially Montgomery Brown, for a summer research grant that permitted me the freedom to complete this study. I am indebted to my colleagues at Boston College—among them Alice Behnegar, Nasser Behnegar, Robert Faulkner, Christopher Kelly, and Susan Shell—for their invaluable aid and encouragement. With his customary good grace and generosity, Eric Buzzetti read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions. Finally, I thank the Behrakis family for their philanthropic generosity that has made it possible for me to hold the Behrakis Professorship in Hellenic Political Studies at Boston College.