

The Sophists were orators, public speakers, mouths for hire in an oral culture. They were gifted with speech. They were skilled in what becomes known as Rhetoric. They were respected, feared and hated. They had a gift and used it in a manner that aroused the ire of many. They challenged, questioned and did not care to arrive at the very best answers. They cared about winning public speaking contests, debates, and lawsuits and in charging fees to teach others how to do as they did. To be able to speak well meant a great deal at that time. As there was no real paper available, there were no written contracts or deeds and disputes that would be settled today with a set of documents as evidence back then they would need to be settled through a contest of words: one person's words against another's. Whoever presented the best oral case would often prevail. To speak well was very important. The Sophists were very good speakers. Indeed, they had reputations for being able to convince a crowd that up was down, that day was night, that the wrong answer could be the right answer, that good was bad and bad is good, even that injustice is justice and justice would be made to appear as injustice!

To support one's position in any matter, nothing better could be offered than a quotation from one of the works, which told of the gods and their actions. If an action of the gods could be found that was similar to that being taken by a party to a debate then that was evidence of the correctness of that action. Therefore, those who were the fastest and most accurate at being able to locate quotations and take them and apply them to a given situation would often win the debate, the contest, the lawsuit or discussion. The Sophists were very well versed in the epic tales and poems. They were able to find the most appropriate quotation to support any position. They regularly entered contests and those who won were given prizes, but no prize was greater than being the victor and able to charge the highest rates of tuition to instruct the sons of the wealthy in how to speak in public. This skill was needed to defend oneself against lawsuits even against the most frivolous of lawsuits brought by one who thought himself to be the better speaker.

The Sophists taught courses that might have been labeled with such current phrasings as:

- **How to win no matter how bad your case is.**
- **How to win friends and influence people**
- **How to succeed in business without really trying**

- **How to fall into a pigsty and come out smelling like a rose.**
- **How to succeed in life.**
- **How to play to win**

The Sophists held no values other than winning and succeeding. They were not true believers in the myths of the Greeks but would use references and quotations from the tales for their own purposes. They were secular atheists, relativists and cynical about religious beliefs and all traditions. They believed and taught that "might makes right". They were pragmatists trusting in whatever works to bring about the desired end at whatever the cost. They made a business of their own form of education as developing skills in rhetoric and profited from it.

Their concerns were not with truth but with practical knowledge. They practiced rhetoric in order to persuade and not to discover truth. Their art was to persuade the crowd and not to convince people of the truth. They moved thought from cosmology and cosmogony and theogony, stories of the gods and the universe, to a concern for humanity. Their focus was human civilization and human customs. Their theater was the ethical and political problems of immediate concern for humans. They put the individual human being at the center of all thought and value. They did not hold for any universals; not universal truths nor universal values. They sought and took payment for their lessons at speaking (and writing).

Here are some excerpts:

### **Protagoras:**

Man is the measure of all things

There is relative truth only

Everyone has his won truth

### **Gorgias**

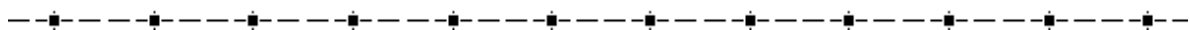
1. Nothing exists
2. If something does exist we can not know it
3. Even if we can know it we can not communicate it

**Callicles:** Might is right and accident and not fate nor the gods nor destiny makes might

**Thrasymachus:** Might makes right

The Sophists challenged and criticized and destroyed the foundations of traditions and the moral and social order and they put nothing in its place nor did they care to. While Socrates looked for objective and eternal truths the Sophists were promoting ideas of relativism and subjectivism, wherein each person decides for him or herself what the true and the good and the beautiful are. This appealed to the mob, the crowds, the unthinking horde but it is not an approach that serves as the foundation for a common life. Conflicts are resolved through the use of power. The Sophist held that might makes right. Society's demand for wisdom required more than what the Sophists offered. Socrates attempted another approach and in part due to the Sophists lost his life in his quest. Plato would be inspired by Socrates to take up the challenge and find answers to the questions that were most basic and most in need of answering in the quest after wisdom and the GOOD.

Socrates could debate with Sophists and do quite well. Socrates was skilled in the art of reasoning. In his exchanges with the Sophists Socrates developed his ability to think using a dialectical process. This methodology would be not only an important part of his legacy to Plato but to Western thought as well. There were other influences on both Socrates and Plato.



**Plato's Critique of the Sophists and The Art of Memory** by Twyla Gibson, Ph.D. Senior  
McLuhan Fellow at

"The poets were not the only target of Plato's attack. The sophists were criticized mercilessly by Socrates. These wandering teachers were the successors of the rhapsodes. Recently discovered fragments from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. prove that they were also heirs of the tradition started by the poet Simonides (556 - 468 B.C.E.). These few surviving documents have allowed scholars to trace the line of descent from poet to rhapsode to sophist as part of the transition from oral tradition to written record. When material from more than one source was put together, interpreters were needed to translate anachronistic expressions and foreign words. As the epics came to be preserved in written collections, a group of

rhapsodes became interpreters as well as presenters of poetry. Some of the earliest prose consists of their efforts to explain the meaning of traditional names and phrases in the old theogonies. Glosses, along with explanations of Homeric proper names and obscure words by "etymology," were developed, collected, and transmitted by the rhapsodes. Over time, they began to offer instruction in the interpretation of poetry, in the use of letters, as well as in the classifications and definitions laid down by their predecessors. They also taught techniques of oral presentation and public speaking in addition to the use of an "art of memory," which was said to have been invented by Simonides. At some point, the most prominent of their number became known as teachers of wisdom. The early sophists wandered all over the Greek-speaking world. Later, they converged on Athens, the leading democratic city-state, where they could establish themselves as professional educators and gather their best students around them. A number of Plato's dialogues bear the names of the major sophists in the tradition - Gorgias, Protagoras, Critias and Hippias. For instance, at *Protagoras* 339a, there begins an extended passage in which the sophist explains a lyric poem by Simonides so as to rationalize some of its contradictions. The Sophist offers a number of different definitions and classifies sophists themselves as "deceptive image makers." The *Gorgias* contains an extended critique of sophistic deceptions, and in the *Greater Hippias* 285b-286a and the *Lesser Hippias* 368c-369a, Socrates takes an ironic tone in praising Hippias's use of the memory "art." "

Socrates and Plato would criticize the Sophists for leading people away from the truth by calling up memorized passages and having the memory activated instead of reason. They would appeal to images and emotions rather than to reason. Socrates and Plato would use and advocate for the use of the dialectical process of inquiry over memorization and repetition and emotional appeals to persuade the crowds.

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"Yates also described a branch of the memory tradition that rejected the use of images and imagination, relying instead on the principles of division and orderly arrangement. This method, later called "dialectic," grew out of the observation that "thoughts" and certain "parts of speech," do not call up images in the same way as material things (Quintilian Institutio

Modern day Sophists as Lawyers Advertisers, etc....