The Sophists

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The period of pre-Socratic Philosophy ended with the Sophists. Neither the Philosophy of Nature nor the Idealism of the Eleatics could satisfy the human intellect; both would appear to have helped it along the way to Scepticism. The seeds of the sceptical doctrines were sown in the earlier philosophies. The teaching of Heraclitus which denied persistent, enduring being —I n which alone knowledge can find its object, the Eleatic theory that everything represented in experience is only delusive appearance, and the fallacies employed to combat the truths irresistibly forced upon our natural consciousness: all this must have misled the human mind with regard to truth, must have suggested the view that there is no knowledge of truth, and consequently no truth at all, and that the sceptical attitude of mind towards what claims to be such is alone reasonable and safe.

This was the view professed by the Sophists. Their philosophical teaching is nothing else than a Scepticism which at first hesitates to believe in the possibility of truth, and at length boldly denies it. Under the influence of this Scepticism the Sophists not only made profession of not having attained to knowledge themselves, but furthermore denied to the human mind the power to attain to it. The difference between them and the later Sceptics seems to lie chiefly in this — that they selected their formulae with less caution, and were not careful to hide their real assumptions behind a pretence of speaking only for themselves. They boldly proclaimed that there is no such thing as truth, and they endeavoured to impart this conviction to others to save them a useless expenditure of labour in the search after it. When truth ceases to be a reality, Morality, Justice and Religion must lose their objective value; they too must perish in the abyss of doubt.

In an inquiry into the causes which gave rise to the peculiar teaching of the Sophists, we must not omit from view the social and political condition of Greece at the time. The unphilosophical and frivolous temper of mind of the Sophists could find favour only in an age when men had ceased to take a serious view of life, and to pursue serious aims. This was certainly the case in Greece at the time when the Sophists came into prominence. At the close of the struggle with Persia Athens found herself in a position of pre-eminence and power. A rapid advance in art and science followed upon this increase of her political importance. But avarice and sensuality were also stimulated into activity, and in proportion as these passions extended their ravages, morals became corrupt, the sense of religion became enfeebled, and the attitude of mind towards objective truth more sceptical. Such a spirit found its natural expression in a system of empty Sophistry which lightly set aside all Truth, Religion, Morality and Justice.

The causes which more immediately and directly contributed to create the system of the Sophists were connected with the rise and steadily growing power of the Athenian democracy — a movement which favoured the development of Rhetoric as the art of speaking. Oratory ceased to be the mere expression of the speaker's mind, seeking to convince by the substance rather than the form; it became an art of language designed to impress the listeners by the sound and pomp of mere words, and it encouraged the effort after captious devices of speech calculated merely for passing effect. In this field the labours of the Sophists were expended. They were

the founders of the Schools of Rhetoric, in which young men were instructed in the Arts of Oratory. In this way they largely influenced education. Speech was for them only a means to gain over an audience by skilful exposition of the subject of discourse, apart altogether from any consideration for the truth or falsehood, rightness or wrongness of the matter advocated. Their skill in oratory was mere deftness in defending or refuting any position whatever. This was expressed in the well-known saying: "They understood how to make the weaker reason (the worse cause) the stronger (the better), and contrariwise. . . . They were skilled to assert and to dispute everything, and to represent things the most widely different as identical."

It was to be expected that the Sophists would make philosophical. inquiry, which had hitherto sought objective truth, subserve the purposes of empty rhetoric, and use knowledge merely as a means to success in oratory. Objective truth, as such, was of no importance in their eyes. They were concerned to put forward as true or false that which it was their interest for the moment that their audience should accept as true or false. What more natural than to maintain as a theoretical axiom what was tacitly assumed in practice, and to assert that there is no objective truth at all, that everything is true which the individual, for the moment, takes to be true; that objectively there is neither Goodness nor Justice, that everything is good and right which the individual, for the time, holds to be such? In these principles the main doctrine of the Sophists was enunciated; it remained only to embody this doctrine in appropriate formulae and give it further development. To do this was the whole effort of the Sophists in the field of Philosophy.

The teaching of the Sophists was destructive of that Philosophy which consists in the knowledge of objective truth. The Sophists went about from city to city advertising themselves as professional thinkers, and offering their knowledge for sale. Such a procedure could only be fatal to science. We must not, however, deny them all scientific merit. Their efforts after success in oratory naturally led them to the study of Language and of Logic, for readiness in exposition and in argumentative development and proof were indispensable for their purposes. That they did something to promote a study of the forms of speech and to establish a Scientific Method is not to be denied.

We may add that the Sophists helped also to further the progress of the empirical sciences. They were not mere talkers; they could boast, or at least the more distinguished could boast, attainments of a high order. Professing to be politicians they were obliged to have at command a store of historical knowledge, and to be acquainted with the various forms of government. In the case of many of the Sophists we are further told that they held an acquaintance with the ancient poets and a knowledge of the art of exposition to be essential to a man of cultivated mind. Many of them applied themselves to physical science. Arithmetic, Geometry and Astronomy, and Music were also in favour with individuals amongst them. They were the first to devise a system of Mnemonics or Art of Memory, and to fix the forms of expression adapted to the investigation and discussion of a given subject. But all these services rendered in other departments of knowledge cannot atone for the destructive influence which they exercised upon Phiosophy proper.

The most remarkable amongst the Sophists are Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Hippias of Elis and Prodicus of Ceos.

Protagoras

Protagoras was born at Abdera about B.C. 486, and exercised his calling as teacher of oratory chiefly in Sicily, in Italy, and in Athens. He styled himself a Sophist (*Sophistês*), *i.e.,* a teacher of wisdom. He did not undertake to teach any special science, he professed to instruct youth in the virtues becoming citizens and statesmen, eliminating from their education all useless

learning. He was accused of impiety at Athens on account of a treatise which began with the words "Regarding the gods I have no knowledge whether they exist or exist not. There is much to prevent our attaining this knowledge — the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life." His treatise was burnt, he himself escaped on board a ship, but perished, it is said, in the wreck of the vessel (B.C. 416). The principal points of his teaching may be thus stated:

Starting with the notion of a flux in all things, as asserted by Heraclitus, and applying this to the thinking subject as such, he arrived at the principle: "Man is the measure of all things, of the existent as it is, and of the non-existent as it is not," by which formula he merely stated that for each individual things are what they appear to be, in other words truth is for each individual that which he holds to be true. Subjective truth is the only truth.

Even the axioms of geometry have no objective worth, for in the world which we perceive there are no straight and curved lines such as are assumed in these axioms.

No object has a fixed determinate nature; contradictory attributes may be predicated of everything; we can make no statement about anything which shall have objective value, nor on the other hand can any statement made be validly contradicted. All propositions are alike true, and alike false; one and the same thing can be true to one and and false to another, or even to the same mind true at one time and false at another, for truth and falsehood are relative and subjective.

Gorgias of Leontini

Gorgias, who was born in Leontini, in Sicily, was an elder Contemporary of Socrates, whom, however, he outlived. About the year B.C. 427, he came to Athens as Ambassador from his native city to obtain assistance from the Athenians against Syracuse. In later years he taught the art of oratory in various places with great success. But oratory was to him no more than the art of persuasion — the arts which undertook to teach virtue he laughed to scorn; he despised a virtue which he took no pains to cultivate in himself. The chief contents of his work, *peri tou mê ontos ê peri phuseos* are to be found in the treatise "De Melisso, Xenophane, et Gorgia" (Aristotle). His teaching is thoroughly nihilistic; it may be summed up in the following proportions:

(a.) There is no Being at all. For if anything existed its being should be derived, or it should be eternal. Being cannot be derived either from the existent or the non-existent (as the Eleatics prove). Nor can it be eternal, for the eternal is infinite, and the infinite cannot be anywhere since it cannot be in itself, nor in anything else—and what is nowhere does not exist.

(b.) Even if anything existed, it could not be known. For if a knowledge of any being were possible, the thought should resemble this being, nay, should be the existent thing itself, otherwise the existent thing would not be known. Hence the non-existent could not be known. This being so, there could be no error; there could be no error, *e.g.,* in the assertion that a battle of chariots took place on the ocean—conclusions which are clearly absurd.

(c.) Lastly, even granting that being exists, and is the object of knowledge, this knowledge is incommunicable. For a symbol is something different from the thing symbolized. How can anyone by a word communicate his mental image of a colour — the ear does not hear colour, but sounds? And how can the same mental image be in two persons who are different from one another?

Hippias of Elis

Hippias of Elis, a younger contemporary of Protagoras, was renowned for his Mathematical, Astronomical and Archaeological knowledge. He was also remarkable for his ready eloquence;

he boasted that he was able to say something new on any subject whatever, as often as he discussed it. Plato has ascribed to him a saying which exhibits distinctly the ethical standpoint of the Sophists, "The law is the tyrant of men, since it forces them to act against their nature." This is clearly an antinomy. Hippias does not appear to have insisted upon the application of the principle in detail.

Prodicus of Ceos

Prodicus of Ceos was an eminent master in the art of dialectics. He applied himself to fixing the distinction between words allied in meaning, and herein he was the predecessor of Socrates who acknowledged him as his master. He was held in high esteem by the ancients for his hortatory discourses on moral subjects, *e.g.,* on the choice of a career in life ("Hercules at the cross-roads"); on External Goods and their use; on Life and Death, and on other such themes. In these discourses he exhibits a refined moral sense and much acuteness of observation.

Besides those whom we have here mentioned we have further to include among the Sophists: the dialectical jugglers Euthydemus and Dionysidorus, the Rhetorician Polus, a pupil of Gorgias, Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Critias. These far surpassed the other Sophists in the boldness of their assertions. Callicles and Thrasymachus openly maintained that reckless gratification of passion is the law of nature. They proclaimed that right is on the side of the stronger, and that prohibitory laws are but a cunning device of those in power for the oppression of the weak. In a poem by Critias, the ablest, but at the same time the most unscrupulous of the Thirty Tyrants, belief in the gods is represented as the invention of crafty statesmen who have endeavoured to secure an easy obedience from the citizens by imposing on them this deception. He held the blood to be the seat of the soul. Lycophron, Antiphon, Hippodamus of Miletus, and Phaleas of Chalcedon are also named among the Sophists who propounded political theories.

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