
UNIT 3 NATURALISTIC AND SOPHISTIC PHILOSOPHERS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we explain in detail the Sophist movement and their philosophical insights that abandoned all abstract, metaphysical enquiries concerning the nature of the cosmos and focused on the practical issues of life.

By the end of this Unit you should know:

- Their foul or fair argumentation
- Epistemological and ethical skepticism and relativism of the Sophists
- The differentiation between the early philosophers and Sophists
- The basic philosophical positions of Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias and Gorgias

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Sophist movement flourished in 5th century B.C., shortly before the emergence of the Socratic period. Xenophon, a historian of 4th century B.C., describes the Sophists as wandering teachers who offered wisdom for sale in return for money. The Sophists were, then, professional teachers, who travelled about, from city to city, instructing people, especially the youth. They were paid large sums of money for their job. Until then teaching was considered something sacred and was not undertaken on a commercial basis. The Sophists claimed to be teachers of wisdom and virtue. These terms, however, did not have their original meaning in sophism. What they meant by these terms was nothing but a proficiency or skillfulness in practical affairs of daily life. This, they claimed, would lead people to success in life, which, according to them, consisted in the acquisition and enjoyment of material wealth as well as positions of power and influence in society.

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The epistemological and ethical skepticism and relativism of the Sophists reflected a reaction against the abstract and metaphysical philosophy of the pre-Socratic thinkers. The earlier Greek philosophers had been chiefly interested in investigating the ultimate nature of the cosmos. Their systems excluded one another. In fact the Sophists' attention was diverted from the problem of Nature to problem of Man by the diversity of opinions found among the early Greek philosophers. Faced with this baffling array of conflicting theories of the world, the Sophists came to the conclusion that the lack of agreement among nature philosophers was due to the inherent limitations of the human reason. The Sophists however subjected the human reason to a searching criticism. As a result they came to a thoroughly relativistic conclusion, denying all objectivity to knowledge and thus paving the way for skepticism.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Political life gained momentum in Greece after the Persian Wars (500 – 449 BC) and this was particularly the case in democratic Athens which became the centre of intense political, cultural and economic activity in the region. The free citizen was expected to play an active role in the affairs of the state, and so he had to be trained to share greater political responsibilities. Mastery of rhetoric and oratory was of considerable importance in building up a political career. In fact the Sophists considered speech as a powerful weapon with which the speaker might bewitch his audience and induce them to accept his views. In a Greek democracy, there was money to be made by winning lawsuits, and the Sophists claimed to be able to teach the right way of winning lawsuits. By instructing the youth in political eristic skills, the Sophists helped create a new aristocracy of intellect and ability, naturally frowned upon by the older aristocracy that lived by conventional wisdom in knowledge and conduct.

SOPHIST TEACHINGS: MAIN FEATURES

As has been pointed out, the Sophists were concerned to explore problems of knowledge and conduct rather than the structure of the universe or the ultimate constituents of reality. Their acquaintance with earlier philosophers had convinced them that it was impossible ever to attain certain knowledge of external reality, that human reason could not solve the riddle of the universe. The more pertinent, therefore, was an enquiry into the very nature of human knowledge and the practical rules of moral conduct. Thus, the chief contribution of sophist thought concerns basic questions in ethics and epistemology as well as the proper method and goal of rational enquiry. This represented a major change of philosophical interest from the problems of nature to the problem of man though this change is best seen in the philosophy of Socrates.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Pre-Socratic philosophers, while investigating the nature of reality, had taken for granted the competence of human reason to attain truth. It never occurred to them to criticize the intellect itself. It was this very assumption that the Sophists called in question; for, why else should these great thinkers arrive at conflicting, even contradictory, conclusions about the nature of reality since they all were investigating the same object? The conclusion arrived at by the Sophists was that knowledge depends upon the particular knower, that what seems true to him *is* true for him, that

there is no objective truth, but only subjective opinion. Protagoras' famous dictum, namely, 'Man is the measure of all things' is a repudiation of the paradoxical conclusions of the nature philosophers in favour of the common sense judgments of the individual man. Such a view would make the individual a law unto himself in matters of knowledge. There may be as many views of the same thing as there are individuals, yet all will be true. Likewise, two opposite statements on the same subject may both be true, each relative to the individual making it. This being so, there is no point in attempting to demonstrate *the* truth of a statement that is acceptable to all; rather, it is the business of the Sophist to persuade people to embrace one of the two opposing statements rather than the other.

ETHICS

The ethical views of the Sophists are of a piece with their epistemology in that these views follow natural from the subjectivism and relativism of their theoretical position. If knowledge of reality is impossible, then knowledge of right and wrong is impossible; there is no universal right and wrong so that each person is free to make ethical choices according to his conscience. If it was conflicting cosmologies of early Greek thought that generated the Sophists' epistemological skepticism, it was the diversity of customs, morals and traditions prevailing in various nations that led them to question the validity of absolute, objective standards of action and value. Sophism differed from the early Greek philosophy not only in regard to subject matter, namely, metaphysics and epistemology, but also in the method and the proper goal of philosophical investigation.

METHOD OF ENQUIRY

The method of the Sophists was "emperico-inductive" while that of the early philosophers was, in the main, deductive. The latter would typically start with a general principle, and then proceed to explain the phenomena in accordance with that principle. The Sophists, on the other hand, started with particular observations and facts. They would have collected a plentiful store of them from their travels. From these they would draw their conclusions, partly theoretical and partly practical. For instance, having studied a store of facts concerning differences of opinion and belief, they would come to the conclusion that it is impossible to have any certain knowledge universally valid for all.

THE GOAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY

Because they were knowledge skeptics, the Sophists did not aim to establish objective norms or discover necessary truths from their investigations. Here, again, they differed from the early Greek philosophers whose primary aim was finding out the truth. The cosmologists wanted to find out the objective truth about the world. The Sophists, on the other hand did not expect to reach objective truth, but only relative, subjective truth. They set themselves the modest task of teaching the art and control of life. In other words, their goal was practical, not speculative.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOPHIST THOUGHT

The sophistic movement of 5th century BC represents a phase of transition. It reveals a growing distrust of the power of human reason to solve the riddle of the universe and a consequent lack of faith in traditional values and institutions. This movement is radically skeptical and revolutionary; it is indifferent and even hostile to metaphysical speculation; in calling attention to the problem of man, however, it necessitates a

thorough examination of the problem of human knowledge and conduct, and ushers in the Socratic period.

On the positive side, we might note that the Sophists made philosophy accessible to the common man, turned attention away from the contemplation of external nature to man himself. Secondly, they fostered the spirit of critical reflection on all fields of human life and thought. They compelled philosophers to examine the thinking process itself and this led to the formulation of a theory of knowledge. Likewise, their use of logical fallacies and sophisms made it necessary to study the correct laws of thought. In time, this led to the development of dialectic (Plato) and logic (Aristotle). In the same way radical criticism of the common notions of right and wrong, of public and private justice compelled a reexamination of the foundations of ethics and politics.

On balance, then, it must be conceded that the Sophists were a great educative force in Hellas. They forced philosophy to be built upon more solid foundations, to examine more closely the fundamental concepts of knowledge, truth, right and wrong, the meaning and purpose of human institutions and religion.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the epistemological position of Sophists

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2) Write a short note on Sophist's ethics.....

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MAJOR SOPHIST THINKERS

3.2 PROTAGORAS

LIFE

Protagoras was born about 481 BC at Abdera in Thrace. He is believed to have come to Athens sometime by the middle of the century. Pericles entrusted him with the task of drawing up a constitution for the colony of Thurio, founded in 444 BC. He was back at Athens in 431 and during the plague in 430 which killed two of Pericles' sons. The story goes that Protagoras was charged with blasphemy because of his book on the gods, fled the country before trial, and was drowned on the crossing to Sicily.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Protagoras is best known for his dictum: “Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not”. Controversy surrounded the precise signification of the terms ‘man’ and ‘things’. Does ‘man’ refer to individual man or man in the specific sense? Does ‘things’ mean physical objects only or does it include objects of thought (eg. ethical values) as well? In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, the above saying of Protagoras is interpreted in the individualistic sense in regard to sense perception. When the same wind is blowing, one may feel chilly, another not. Socrates asks if we should agree with Protagoras and say that the wind is cold to the one who feels chilly and not to the other. From this it is clear that Protagoras is taken to mean the individual man, and not man in the specific sense. Moreover, it is to be noted that the Sophist does not mean that the wind *appears* cold, but that it *is* cold to one man’s sense perception, while to another’s it *is not*.

ETHICS

Against this interpretation it is pointed out that in the *Protagoras* of Plato, the Sophist is not represented as applying his dictum to ethical values in the individualistic sense. One might say, in answer to this objection, that what is true of objects of sense perception need not necessarily be true of ethical values. If, however, it is further objected that since Protagoras uses the term ‘all things’, he must be taken to mean both objects of sense perception and objects of abstract, conceptual thought and intuition (= values). This objection can be countered in two ways. First, it is far from clear whether Protagoras intended to bring together both material and spiritual objects under the term ‘all things’. Secondly, objects of sense perception (= material objects) are of a kind that *cannot* become the subject of true and universal knowledge whereas ethical values are of a kind that *can* become the subject of true and universal knowledge. This was the view of Plato himself. Not that Protagoras subscribed to such a view; he did not. But point is that sense perception, and intuition of values do not stand or fall together in relation to certain knowledge and truth for all.

We still have to find out Protagoras’ actual teaching in regard to ethical judgments and values. In the *Theaetetus* he does set forth a relativistic view of ethical judgments that is characteristic of his theory of knowledge: he declares that whatever practices seem right and praiseworthy to any particular State are so for that State. At the same time, he also urges that the wise man should attempt to substitute sound practices for unsound. In other words, all kinds of ethical views are true relatively, yet some may be ‘sounder’ (= more useful, expedient) than others and it is beauty of the wise man to promote these sounder practices. When we come to the *Protagoras* we find in the Sophist’s words hints of a natural law common to all men. Plato depicts him as saying that the gods have bestowed on all men a proper sense of righteousness, moderation and respect for others, which are absolutely necessary for the existence and functioning of the State; otherwise the State would not exist at all. This is a peculiar domain of human activity that is quite different from all others. For instance, a city could function properly even if only a few possessed musical skills, but it would not, if only a few citizens possessed a proper sense of rights and obligations enjoined by just laws. Now, does this contradict the relativism of *Theaetetus*? What Protagoras seems to mean is this: law in general is founded on certain ethical tendencies implanted in all men, but that the differences of law found in individual States are

relative. On this view, the law of one State will not be 'truer' than the law of another State, but it may be 'sounder'. The State of city community would be the determiner of law, and not the individual. Yet, its laws will only be relatively true with reference to the legal code of another State, no more true or no less. Now, Protagoras was an upholder of tradition and social convention. He laid great emphasis on the importance of education, of imbibing the ethical traditions of the State while admitting that the wise man may lead the State to the formulation of 'better' laws. As far as the individual citizen is concerned, the proper course is to be faithful to tradition, to the accepted code of the community. This is so because no one 'way' is 'truer' than another. It is as though Protagoras would say: do not set up your private judgment against the law of the State, for no one code is 'truer' than another. In this way, Protagoras is able to reconcile his relativism with respect for tradition and custom, a relativism that had seemed to many to be intentionally revolutionary.

RELIGION

Of Protagoras' work *On the gods* only a fragment has come down to us. In this extract he expresses a characteristic skepticism regarding the existence and nature of gods. Such a statement may easily be interpreted as subversive of faith in religion. In fact, however, this is not so. In the *Protagoras* the Sophist recommends submission to one's inherited faith just as he advocated obedience to the laws of the State and for much the same reason: if we cannot be certain of absolute truth, why throw out the religion of our fathers! At any rate, Protagoras' attitude is not really so destructive as believers of a dogmatic faith might suppose. The fact of the matter is that Greek religion was not based on a reasoned faith; its main thrust was worship rather than dogmatic affirmations and negations. Although the general tendency of sophist thought was to weaken men's trust in tradition, Protagoras personally was a conservative in temper and had no intention of educating revolutionaries. On the contrary he claimed that his task was to educate good citizens. Ethical tendencies innate in all men can only come to fruition in organized societies. A good citizen should, therefore, strive to realize this aim by absorbing the social tradition. This tradition is not absolute truth, but it is the norm for a good citizen.

ERISTIC

As regards eristic practices, Protagoras' views stem directly from his relativistic theory. On every subject, he argued, it was possible to have more than one opinion. The dialectician and rhetorician would do well to develop different opinions and arguments. He would shine best when he made the weaker side appear the better. Enemies of sophism have interpreted this to mean making the morally worse cause appear the better. However, by 'weaker side', Protagoras did not necessarily mean a morally worse side. In a court case this could mean presenting the case of a man who is too weak to defend himself, or presenting a case the justice of which it is difficult to establish with hard evidence. It is true that in the hands of unscrupulous rhetoricians and lawyers, this principle easily degenerated into unscrupulous advocacy; but such a motive could not be attributed to Protagoras.

LINGUISTICS

Protagoras led the way in the study of the science of grammar. His distinctive contribution relates to classification of different kinds of sentence and the terminology of genders of nouns.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the epistemological position of Protagoras.

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2) Write a short note on the ethical philosophy of Protagoras

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3.3 PRODICUS

Prodicus was a native of the island of Ceos in the Aegean. Like most of his compatriots, he is said to have possessed a pessimistic disposition. In the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Axiochus* it is said that he considered death desirable as it afforded an escape from the evils of life. Fear of death, he argued, is irrational because death concerns neither the living nor the dead. The basis of this argument is the notion that life and death are mutually exclusive.

Prodicus' chief contribution was in the area of theogony. In the beginning men worshipped natural objects – sun, moon, rivers, lakes, fruits etc. - as gods because these were useful to them. The cult of the Nile in Egypt was an example of this practice. The next stage was worship of inventors of various arts and crafts – agriculture, viniculture, metal work etc. So they had such deities like Demeter, Dionysus, Hephaestus. This view rendered prayer superfluous and for this reason, Prodicus got into trouble with authorities at Athens. Like Protagoras, Prodicus too was interested in the study of language. He wrote a treatise on synonyms. His style was markedly pedantic.

3.4 HIPPIAS

A younger contemporary of Protagoras, Hippias of Elis was a polymath, being well versed in mathematics, astronomy, grammar and rhetoric, music, literature, history and mythology. He prided himself on his sartorial skills. His list of the Olympic victors paved the way for the later Greek system of dating by means of the Olympiads. In the *Protagoras*, Plato attributes to him the view that law is the tyrant of men, which forces them to do many things contrary to nature. It appears that Hippias wanted to draw attention to laws of the city state that were at variance with natural laws.

3.5 GORGIAS

A Sicilian by birth, Gorgias came to Athens in 427 BC as ambassador of his native State. He was a champion of panhellenism.

METAPHYSICS

Gorgias' early interests were the philosophy of Empedocles and natural sciences. It is generally believed that he wrote a book on *Optics*. Later, he was attracted to skepticism by the dialectic of Zeno and published a book entitled *On Not-being or Nature*. It is learned from this work that Gorgias reacted to the Eleatic dialectic differently from Protagoras. While the latter held that everything is true, Gorgias asserted an absolute nihilism. The three cardinal propositions of this doctrine are the following: (1) Nothing exists; (2) If there were anything, then it could not be known; (3) Even if there were knowledge of being, this knowledge could not be imparted.

It need hardly be said that these ideas struck one as being provocative in the extreme. But did Gorgias seriously offer it as his metaphysics? Some thought he did. Others took it as a joke intended to show what can be done by a clever use of words. It may well be that Gorgias wished to employ the Eleatic dialectic in order to render Eleatic philosophy meaningless. Afterwards, Gorgias renounced philosophy and turned to rhetoric.

RHETORIC

Gorgias saw that to master rhetorical art one had to master the art of persuasion and this required a close study of practical psychology. He deliberately practiced the art of suggestion which could be used for both practical and artistic ends. With regard to artistic use Gorgias proposed the concept of justifiable deception, of which tragedy was an obvious example. Tragedy's power over the spectator is compared to the effect of purgatives which reminds one of Aristotle's theory of Katharsis.

3.6 THE LESSER SOPHISTS

Amongst the lesser figures of the Sophist movement one might mention Callimachus who put forward the 'might is right' doctrine; Lycophron who asserted that nobility is a sham, that all men are equal; Thrasymachus of Chalcedon who figures in the *Republic* as the brutal champion of the rights of the stronger; and Antiphon of Athens who denounced the distinction between nobles and commons, Greeks and barbarians as itself a barbarism.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) State the philosophical thoughts of Prodicus.

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2) What are the philosophical contributions of Hippas and Gorgias?

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

We have already seen how some of the sophists held a relativistic view on cognition and knowledge. Their philosophy contains criticism of religion, law, and ethics. Though many sophists were apparently as religious as their contemporaries, some held atheistic or agnostic views. In some cases, such as Gorgias, there are original rhetorical works that are fortunately extant, allowing the author to be judged on his own terms. In most cases, however, knowledge of sophist thought comes from fragmentary quotations that lack context. Many of these quotations come from Aristotle, who seems to have held the sophists in slight regard, notwithstanding his other disagreements with Plato. Owing largely to the influence of Plato and Aristotle, philosophy came to be regarded as distinct from sophistry, the latter being regarded as rhetoric, a practical discipline. Thus, by the time of the Roman Empire, a sophist was simply a teacher of rhetoric and a popular public speaker.

3.8 KEY WORDS

- Judgment** : Judgment is an act of the intellect in which we say something of an object by way of affirmation or denial
- Rhetoric** : Rhetoric is the art of using language as a means to persuade. Along with grammar and logic or dialectic, rhetoric is one of the three ancient arts of discourse. From ancient Greece to the late 19th Century, it was a central part of Western education, filling the need to train public speakers and writers to move audiences to action with arguments.

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3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Knowledge depends upon the particular knower, that what seems true to him *is* true for him, that there is no objective truth, but only subjective opinion. There may be as many views of the same thing as there are individuals, yet all will be true. Thus, there is no point in attempting to demonstrate *the* truth of a statement that is acceptable to all. To fix a truth that is valid for all and for all times is to go against the very nature of reality which is in constant flux. Thus anything and everything can be equally true or false at the same time depending on the experience of various individuals.

For Protagoras, two mutually contradictory statements might be equally true. But one might be 'better' than the other - one view might be more normal or natural than the other. For Gorgias, in any case of conflict of opinions, none is true. He supports this in three paradoxical statements: (1) there is nothing; (2) even if there were something, we could not know it; (3) even if it existed and we could know it, we could not communicate this knowledge to others.

- 2) If knowledge of reality is impossible, then knowledge of right and wrong is impossible; there is no universal right and wrong so that each person is free to make ethical choices according to his conscience.

The older Sophist Protagoras declared all institutions, including law and morality, to be merely conventional. However, he recognized the necessity of legal and moral rules for social order.

The younger Sophists argued that the foundation of ethics is mere convention and arbitrary agreement among men. Some maintained that laws were made by the "weak" in order to prevent the "best" from getting their due. Others held that laws were made to subserve class interests, to promote the interests of minority of privileged individuals.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The epistemological position of Protagoras can be presented in his own saying: "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, of things that are not that they are not". But the questions are: Does 'man' refer to individual man or man in the specific sense? Does 'things' mean physical objects only or does it include objects of thought (eg. ethical values) as well?

For example, When the same wind is blowing, one may feel chilly, another not. This means the wind is cold to the one who feels chilly and not to the other. From this it is clear that Protagoras is taken to mean the individual man, and not man in the specific sense. Moreover, the Sophist does not mean that the wind *appears* cold, but that it *is* cold to one man's sense perception, while to another's it *is not*.

- 2) In the *Theaetetus* he does set forth a relativistic view of ethical judgments. He declares that whatever practices seem right and praiseworthy to any particular State are so for that State. At the same time, he also urges that the wise man should attempt to substitute sound practices for unsound. In other words, all kinds of ethical views are true relatively, yet some may be 'sounder' (= more useful, expedient) than others and it is beauty of the wise man to promote these sounder practices.

What Protagoras seems to mean is this: law in general is founded on certain ethical tendencies implanted in all men, but that the differences of law found in individual States are relative. On this view, the law of one State will not be 'truer' than the law of another State, but it may be 'sounder'. The State of city community would be the determiner of law, and not the individual. Yet, its laws will only be relatively true with reference to the legal code of another State, no more true or no less. As far as the individual citizen is concerned, the proper course is to be faithful to tradition, to the accepted code of the community. This is so because no one 'way' is 'truer' than another. In this way, Protagoras is able to reconcile his relativism with respect for tradition and custom.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Prodicus considered death desirable as it afforded an escape from the evils of life. Fear of death, he argued, is irrational because death concerns neither the living nor the dead. The basis of this argument is the notion that life and death are mutually exclusive.

His chief contribution was in the area of theogony. In the beginning men worshipped natural objects – sun, moon, rivers, lakes, fruits etc. - as gods because these were useful to them. The next stage was worship of inventors of various arts and crafts – agriculture, viniculture, metal work etc. So they had such deities like Demeter, Dionysus, Hephaestus.

- 2) For Hippias, law is the tyrant of men, which forces them to do many things contrary to nature. It appears that Hippias wanted to draw attention to laws of the city state that were at variance with natural laws.

Gorgias proposed absolute nihilism. The three cardinal propositions of this doctrine are the following: (1) Nothing exists; (2) If there were anything, then it could not be known; (3) Even if there were knowledge of being, this knowledge could not be imparted.