

I. THE SOPHISTIC PERIOD

Antiphon was active in the second half of the fifth century, a period of great intellectual activity generally associated with the group of thinkers we call Sophists. In using this term and expressions like “the sophistic movement,” I do not mean to imply any strict unity of belief or coordination of activity; indeed, the sophistic period is more notable for rivalry than for agreement or cooperation, as the vivid picture Plato draws of three Sophists (Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus) in *Protagoras* indicates. But the Sophists do share certain common interests, attitudes, and methodologies, and a review of these will provide the background for Antiphon’s work. The following sketch is not intended to be either comprehensive or balanced, but rather to highlight especially areas and aspects of the Sophists’ activity that are significant for Antiphon’s work.¹

I. WHO WERE THE SOPHISTS?

Since Plato, the word “Sophist” has come to designate in the first instance a member of a specific group of fifth-century intellectuals, but in the fifth and fourth centuries the name was widely applied to poets and other sources of wisdom, including Socrates, whom Plato sharply separates from the Sophists, and to orators and logographers such as Demosthenes and Lysias.² One characteristic often singled out is that the Sophists were teachers who took pay. Both features must be understood in context: before the Sophists, the only professional teachers in Greece were elementary-school masters (*grammatistai*), who taught reading, writing, and other subjects.³ There were no

¹For a fuller survey of the Sophists’ accomplishments, Guthrie (1971) and Kerferd (1981) have not been superseded. For a different approach, see Cassin’s recent book (Cassin 1995) and her brief article on “Sophistique” (Cassin 1996).

²Kerferd 1950; Guthrie 1971: 27–54.

³Beck 1964.

established institutions for postelementary education. Young men attracted to intellectual pursuits might arrange privately for a tutor, or might join the circle of an established thinker like Pythagoras, but teaching at this level was in general ad hoc and loosely structured.⁴ In this context, some of the Sophists (but not necessarily all) offered formal courses of study for a fee. We have good evidence for this sort of teaching by the four most prominent Sophists, Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias, but Thrasymachus and Critias are never referred to as teachers, and reports about Antiphon have been disputed. It may be, then, that only some Sophists offered formal lectures or courses of study for a fee; but all Sophists were probably teachers in the broader sense of influencing younger men who associated with them. Teaching was thus an important activity of many Sophists; but Plato's real objection to the Sophists was not that they taught per se but the content of their teaching.

Plato objects to the Sophists' taking pay for two reasons: because they cannot say exactly what it is they are selling or show its value; and because anyone who accepts pay is obligated, like a merchant, to sell his wares to anyone who can pay for them, whereas higher education should be reserved for those with superior intelligence who have already advanced to a certain point in their studies. The first objection is characteristic of Plato's insistence on a rigorously intellectual and theoretical approach; no one before him was able (in his view) to give an adequate account of his profession. The second objection is more political. As Kerferd notes, Plato's implied criticism that Sophists display their wisdom to "all sorts of people" (*ἐν παντοδαποῖς ἀνθρώποις*, *Hippias Maior* 282c) is contemptuous, and aristocratic prejudice is also evident in Xenophon's analogy of a prostitute who sells his beauty to all comers (*Memorabilia* 1.6.13).⁵ Such remarks suggest that although those who studied with the Sophists must have been fairly wealthy and (even more important) must have had leisure time, the Sophists were intellectually more egalitarian, and probably politically, too,⁶ than outspoken elitists like Plato, Xenophon, and perhaps also Socrates.

⁴Cf. Anytus's assertion that "any Athenian gentleman he happens to meet" can teach a young man virtue (*aretē*) better than the Sophists (*Meno* 92e; the entire conversation 89e–94e is revealing on the matter of postelementary teaching).

⁵Kerferd 1981: 25–26.

⁶On possible political leanings of individual Sophists, we are very poorly informed and can only speculate; see Gagarin and Woodruff 1995: xxiii, to which we should add that Hippias often served as an ambassador for Elis, which seems to have been governed by an oligarchy in the fifth century.

Another contrast with Socrates is that the other Sophists were mostly non-Athenian and itinerant. We have direct reports of travel for most of them, as well as the indirect evidence of, for example, Critias's writings on Sparta. It appears, moreover, that most Sophists were from aristocratic backgrounds, and had the wealth and leisure to travel and pursue their careers. Despite their travels, however, Athens remained a center of sophistic activity,⁷ and its importance is confirmed by the fact that all the major Sophists (to judge from the surviving works) wrote in Attic Greek rather than in local dialects or in Ionic, which was the language of most intellectual communication until after the middle of the fifth century.⁸ Perhaps related to their traveling is the wide range of interests pursued by most Sophists. Hippias was a famous polymath, and Protagoras, Prodicus, Antiphon, and Critias all had wide interests. Even Gorgias and Thrasymachus, who are best known for their contributions to rhetoric, had other interests, especially Gorgias.

More significant is the fact, first emphasized by Grote, that the Sophists' interests (as opposed to Plato's) were practical, not theoretical.⁹ Plato regularly moves from practical concerns to ever more theoretical levels, as for example in the progression of questions in the *Protagoras*: Should the young Hippocrates study with Protagoras? What does Protagoras teach? Can *aretē* be taught? What is *aretē*? By contrast, the Sophists were more oriented toward practical knowledge, which was in part responsible for their success, as young men with expectations of later careers in public life came to study with them. The Sophists' teaching was not narrowly vocational, however, and indeed must have often appeared unrelated to any practical concerns. Protagoras's pronouncements on the proper genders of words, Gorgias's speeches for mythological characters, or Antiphon's (and others') attempts

⁷On the Sophists and Athens, see Wallace 1998. He rightly stresses their activity outside Athens, then argues that before 430 they contributed positively to the Athenian democracy, but after that date "sophistic philosophy had become more extreme" and "less sympathetic to the interests of the democracy," which simultaneously became less sympathetic to the Sophists (ibid.: 221). Wallace makes some good points, but with respect to Athenian democracy he disregards his own strictures against treating sophistic thought as a unity. He also considers only the work of those specifically considered Sophists; if we consider sophistic ideas more broadly, the role of Athens becomes more prominent (see below, 1.2).

⁸The main exceptions are the early medical treatises, written in Ionic, and the *Dissoi Logoi*, written in Doric, though most consider this a minor work. Most Presocratics wrote in Ionic, though Anaxagoras (mid-fifth century) wrote in Attic.

⁹Grote 1869, 8: ch. 67, p. 158.

to square the circle could hardly have been of direct use in real life—a point Aristophanes ruthlessly parodies in the *Clouds* (as Strepsiades learns to measure the distance a flea jumps when he had hoped to learn how to escape from paying his debts). But this play also reveals the strong popular conviction that the Sophists' teaching is fundamentally of practical value. In the dialogue named after him, Plato has Protagoras say that he teaches what a student wants to learn, namely “good judgment (*euboulia*) about domestic matters, so that he may best manage his own household, and about political affairs, so that in affairs of the polis he may be most able both in action and in speech” (Plato *Protagoras* 319a). *Euboulia* nicely captures the tenuous conjunction of theoretical reasoning and practical management that teachers of liberal arts in the modern university know well—the belief that general, nonprofessional intellectual training has ultimate practical value, a greater value, in fact, than the more directly practical but narrower training in, say, accounting.

This ambivalence about the value of a Sophist's teaching reflects ambivalence about the name “Sophist” itself and the activities associated with members of this group. The Sophists' critics, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, give the impression that the negative connotations of the term dominated public thinking by the last quarter of the fifth century, and, to some extent, their continual use of the term in a derogatory sense undoubtedly fostered this view of the Sophists among the general public. We have seen how in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, constant denunciation of political “liberals” rendered this word almost unusable in any positive sense, so that almost all politicians who might once have welcomed the label learned to substitute other designations, such as “progressive.” Similarly, it is impossible to find in the fourth century an unequivocally neutral, let alone a positive, use of *sophistēs*.¹⁰ And yet scenes like the opening of Plato's *Protagoras* reveal a more complex picture. Although the young Hippocrates vehemently denies that he wants to become a Sophist himself, he (and apparently others, too) is excited to have a chance to hear Protagoras and to learn what he is teaching. In short, it should not surprise us if the kind of teaching we associate with the Sophists stirred considerable interest among many Greeks in the last half of the fifth century, especially among the young, while at the same time arousing considerable hostility among the more traditionally minded members of the commu-

¹⁰The latest example of a neutral (perhaps even positive) use may be in the fifth-century treatise *On Ancient Medicine* (20): “certain doctors and Sophists.”

nity. Thus, although the word *sophistēs* appears to have acquired negative connotations soon after it began to be used of this particular group of intellectuals, public perceptions of the Sophists themselves remained ambivalent. Thucydides testifies explicitly to this ambivalence in the public perception of Antiphon.

2. INQUIRY AND EXPERIMENT

Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of the Sophists' activity is a spirit of inquiry (*historia*), which manifests itself as both curiosity and skepticism. These are exemplified in the great work of Herodotus, who compiled an account (*logos*) of his inquiry and made a public display (*apodeixis*) of this account, at times orally.¹¹ Herodotus's inquiries took him all over Greece and much of the non-Greek world in search of information. He asked questions of local authorities such as priests, and often his *logos* simply reports their answers, but he also reveals his own conclusion on some issues, and sometimes his reasoning as well. Sometimes he repeats a tradition without comment, but he is not averse to challenging tradition, as in his conclusion that Homer was wrong about the Trojan War (2.120). These attitudes are widespread among the Sophists and in the work of Antiphon.¹²

Herodotus undertook his inquiries in the direct aftermath of the Persian War, which ended in 479. The victory infused the Greeks with confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles and the desire to learn more about the world they had conquered and to draw lessons for understanding their own world. Herodotus was born a little before the war, in Halicarnassus, which was under Persian control at the time. Protagoras was born about the same time in Abdera in Thrace, and would have witnessed the might of Persia in his youth. Gorgias (also born ca. 490) came from the other end of the Greek world, Leontini in Sicily, but he, too, may have had contact with non-Greek cultures on that island. All three would have begun their careers

¹¹ On *apodeixis*, see Nagy 1987. Johnson's arguments against oral performance by Herodotus (Johnson 1994) apply only to the work as a whole, but Herodotus may have presented many parts of his work orally before committing the whole to writing; see further Thomas 1993.

¹² Lloyd 1979 argues that this fondness for controversy is uniquely Greek, inspired in part, at least, by the absence in Greek culture of powerful central authorities, whether political or religious. The poetry of Homer did not have the same degree of authority as the Hebrew bible, and a Homeric "king" (*basileus*) had none of the authority of a Near Eastern king, Chinese emperor, or Egyptian pharaoh.