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Introduction

Not one barrier but two stand in the way of anyone who seeks to arrive at a proper understanding of the sophistic movement at Athens in the fifth century B.C. No writings survive from any of the sophists and we have to depend on inconsiderable fragments and often obscure or unreliable summaries of their doctrines. What is worse, for much of our information we are dependent upon Plato’s profoundly hostile treatment of them, presented with all the power of his literary genius and driven home with a philosophical impact that is little short of overwhelming. The combined effect has been fairly disastrous. It has led to a kind of received view according to which it is doubtful whether the sophists as a whole contributed anything of importance to the history of thought. Their major significance, it has often been said, was simply that they provoked their own condemnation first by Socrates and then by Plato. In all the essentials of this quarrel it was Plato who was judged to be right and the sophists who were in the wrong. Even the revulsion from Plato felt by those to whom Plato has tended to appear as a reactionary authoritarian has done little for the sophists. Condemned to a kind of half-life between Presocratics on the one hand and Plato and Aristotle on the other, they seem to wander for ever like lost souls.

This result is paradoxical. The period from 450 to 400 B.C. was in many ways the greatest age of Athens. It was a period of profound social and political changes, in which intellectual and artistic activity was intense. Established patterns of life and experience were dissolving in favour of new patterns. Beliefs and values of previous generations were under attack. The sophistic movement gave expression to all of this. We whose fortune it is to live at the present time, it might be supposed, are particularly well placed to understand what was likely to happen in such a situation, and to proceed to investigate and, so far as may be, establish by scholarship what actually did happen.

The modernity of the range of problems formulated and discussed by the sophists in their teaching is indeed startling, and the following
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List should speak for itself. First, philosophic problems in the theory of knowledge and of perception—the degree to which sense-perceptions are to be regarded as infallible and incorrigible, and the problems that result if such is the case. The nature of truth and above all the relation between what appears and what is real or true. The relation between language, thought and reality. Then, the sociology of knowledge, which cries out for investigation because so much of what we suppose that we know appears to be socially, indeed ethnically, conditioned. This opened the way for the first time to the possibility of a genuinely historical approach to the understanding of human culture, above all through the concept of what has been called ‘Anti-primitivism’, namely the rejection of the view that things were much better in the distant past in favour of a belief in progress and the idea of an unfolding development in the history of human beings. The problem of achieving any knowledge at all about the gods, and the possibility that the gods exist only in our minds, or even that they are human inventions needed to serve social needs. The theoretical and practical problems of living in societies, above all democracies with the implied doctrine that at least in some respects all men are or ought to be equal. What is justice? What should be the attitude of the individual to values imposed by others, above all in an organised society requiring obedience to the laws and to the state. The problem of punishment. The nature and purpose of education and the role of the teachers in society. The shattering implications of the doctrine that virtue can be taught, which is only a way of expressing in language no longer fashionable what we mean if we say that people in their proper position in society can be changed by education. This in turn raises in an acute form the question what is to be taught, and by whom and to whom it is to be taught. The effect of all this on the younger generation in relation to the older. Throughout all, two dominant themes—the need to accept relativism in values and elsewhere without reducing all to subjectivism, and the belief that there is no area of human life or of the world as a whole which should be immune from understanding achieved throughout reasoned argument.

A long list, and one may be pardoned for feeling that it represents something like the very process of transition from an earlier, traditional picture of the world to a world that is intellectually our world, with our problems. Yet the attempt to interpret the sophists along these lines has as yet hardly got under way. What follows in the present book is very much a first beginning. Before proceeding to
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actual interpretations along these lines, it will however be helpful, I judge, to deal at some slight length with two preliminary topics — the history of past attempts at assessing the sophistic movement, essential for an understanding of why its significance has been so underrated up to now, and the social and historical situation which produced the activities of the sophists.
Towards a history of interpretations of the sophistic movement

Plato’s hostility to the sophists is obvious and has always been recognised. But exactly what he says about them has not always been described with precision. In two places in his dialogues he provides what may be seen as set-piece treatments. In the Gorgias 462b3–465e6 he distinguishes between on the one hand a range of genuinely scientific activities which he here calls technai, whose aims or objectives are the highest degree of excellence in each of their proper spheres, and on the other hand various empirical activities. These are not scientific since they are not based on rational principles and are unable to provide explanations, they aim at pleasing rather than excellence, and do so by pandering to people’s desires and expectations. They are deceptive imitations of the genuine technai. In the general area of concern for the human soul Plato includes the declaration of norms of behaviour,¹ and this he regards as a genuine technē. Corresponding to it however is a counterfeit activity, the empirical pursuit known as sophistic.

In the dialogue the Sophist the analysis is more elaborate and the hostility no less marked. No fewer than seven different definitions of the sophist, with one possible exception all derogatory, are discussed in turn. There has been discussion as to whether Plato regarded them all as satisfactory descriptions or not, but it is clear, I think, that he did regard each of them as expressing at least particular aspects of the sophistic movement. They define the sophist (1) as the hired hunter of rich young men, (2) as a man who sells ‘virtue’, and, since he is selling goods not his own, as a man who can be described as merchandising in learning, or (3) who sells it retail in small quantities, or (4) as a man who sells goods that he has fabricated in person for his customers. On another view, (5) the sophist is one who carries on controversies of the kind called Eristic (an important term discussed further in Chapter 6 below), in order to make money from the discussion of right and wrong. (6) A special aspect or kind of sophistry is then identified as a

¹ Nomothetikē, usually translated ‘law-giving’, but here much wider in its meaning.
kind of verbal examination called Elenchus which educates by purging the soul from the vain conceit of wisdom. Just what Plato is trying to convey here has been a matter of controversy, but he does seem to regard this essentially negative function as one of the less undesirable results of sophistic activity when he labels it as ‘the sophist which is of noble family’, presumably in order to distinguish it from other aspects of the activities of the sophists. Finally at the end of the dialogue, after a long digression, we come to (7) where the sophist is seen as the false counterfeiter of philosophy, ignorantly framing contradictions that are based on appearances and opinions rather than reality.

It will be necessary to return later to what Plato has to say about Eristic, Elenchus and the Art of framing contradictions. But it is clear that his characterisations in the Sophist, which can be matched by similar statements in other dialogues, constitute an outright condemnation. When we find Aristotle telling the same story — the sophistic art, he says, consists in apparent wisdom which is not in fact wisdom, and the sophist is one who makes money from ‘apparent and not real wisdom’ (Sophistici Elenchi 165a22–23, and Metaphysics Γ. 1004b25 ff.) — it is not surprising that this remained the standard view for the next two thousand years. If anything the reputation of the sophists became still worse — they provided what seemed ready-made material for moralising and christianising interpretations of history. They came to be seen as ‘ostentatious imposters, flattering and duping the rich youth for their own personal gain, undermining the morality of Athens public and private, and encouraging their pupils to unscrupulous prosecution of ambition and cupiditv. They are even affirmed to have succeeded in corrupting the general morality, so that Athens had become miserably degenerated and vicious in the latter years of the Peloponnesian war, as compared with what she was in the time of Miltiades and Aristeides.’

The question of the alleged degeneration of the Athenians raises larger issues and it may suffice to mention the reply of the historian Grote who declared that the Athenian character was not really corrupted between 480 B.C. and 405 B.C. But the question of the nature

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2 Well-meant attempts by some nineteenth-century scholars to show that in the earlier dialogues Plato took a more favourable view of some sophists have not been generally accepted.

3 Grote, History of Greece, new edn, London 1883, Vol. VIII p. 156. This of course is not Grote’s own view.
Towards a History of Interpretations

of the sophists’ teachings is very much the subject of this present book and will be considered fully later on. At this point it may be of interest to repeat a further characterisation of the standard view of the sophists obtaining before the reconsiderations of the nineteenth century, which has become a classic description:

The old view of the Sophists was that they were a set of charlatans who appeared in Greece in the fifth century, and earned ample livelihood by imposing on public credulity: professing to teach virtue, they really taught the art of fallacious discourse, and meanwhile propagated immoral practical doctrines. They gravitated to Athens as the Prytaneum [here = central place of assembly] of Greece, they were there met and overthrown by Socrates, who exposed the hollowness of their rhetoric, turned their quibbles inside out, and triumphantly defended sound ethical principles against their plausible pernicious sophistries. That they thus, after a brief success, fell into well-merited contempt, so that their name became a byword for succeeding generations.4

Thus formulated, the charges really amounted to two: that the sophists were not serious thinkers and had no role in the history of philosophy, and secondly that their teachings were profoundly immoral. Both these contentions had to face a certain degree of reconsideration with the growth of new approaches to history in the first half of the nineteenth century. While the two charges are interrelated it will be convenient to treat them to some extent separately.

First the question of the place of the sophistic movement within the history of philosophy. The history of the study of Greek philosophy has been profoundly influenced in modern times down to and including the present by the treatment adopted by Hegel in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy.5 Hegel did indeed restore the sophists to an integral position in the history of Greek philosophy, but in such a way that his successors were able for a hundred more years to continue with only a partial modification of the previous profoundly hostile view of the sophistic movement.

Hegel saw the history of philosophy as the progressive unfolding of the Universal Mind or Spirit. The movement of its thinking follows the pattern that is universal for all thought: it begins by laying down a positive thesis which is then negatived by its antithesis. Further thought produces a synthesis of thesis and antithesis and the process

5 These were first published in German at Berlin in 1833–36, when they had been collated after his death in 1831 from lecture notes taken by his students over the previous twenty years. An English translation was published at London in 1892.
continues with the synthesis forming the thesis of a fresh cycle in each case until all that was implicit in the original starting point has been made explicit. This movement of thought Hegel called Dialectic, and it proceeds by negations because each step, thesis, antithesis and synthesis, negates the step that comes before it. It is able to do this just because each step in itself is partly true and partly false.

The application of this scheme to the history of Greek philosophy gives three periods, Hegel supposed. The first extends from Thales to Aristotle, the second constitutes the Hellenistic period or ‘Greek philosophy in the Roman world’ (Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism), and the third consists of Neoplatonism. Within the first period Hegel saw a further three-fold or triadic division, namely (1) from Thales to Anaxagoras, (2) the sophists, Socrates and the followers of Socrates, and (3) Plato and Aristotle. The first of these subdivisions is described by Hegel as that in which thought is found initially in sensuous determinations. In non-Hegelian language we might say that these determinations are viewed as merely objective, as stating scientific facts about the world which we are perceiving and studying. So Thales and the other Ionians grasped Universal Thought in the form of natural determinations of it, as water and air, out of which they supposed our physical universe was made. The second subdivision contained those who through sceptical criticism came to negate this view and to substitute for it as its antithesis the principle of subjectivity, according to which it is supposed that it is the thinking and perceiving subject himself who determines his own thoughts and perceptions. The conflict of thesis and antithesis in due course predictably gave rise to synthesis, in this case the systems of Plato and Aristotle which form for Hegel the third subdivision of the first period.

For our purposes the important feature of all this is that Hegel reinserted the sophists into the history of philosophy and did so by treating them as subjectivists. For Hegel their subjectivism was a necessary stage in the self-determination of Thought which is what the history of philosophy was. It was a necessary stage despite its negative character because negation was an integral part of the movement of Universal Thought. But throughout the nineteenth century and for the first third of the present century the tradition of idealist philosophy continued to dominate the minds of students of Greek philosophy. As a result the characterisation of the sophists as subjectivists was widely accepted. But so far from re-establishing their reputation as philosophers the effect was the opposite. It seemed to confirm the hostile judgments of
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Plato and Aristotle. Truth and reality were objective, not subjective. All those who denied this were opposed to truth and reality, and as such were not merely not philosophers, they were enemies of philosophy; and such were the sophists. Paradoxically the traditional view of the sophists would seem thus to have been confirmed. Nowhere was this more strongly felt than in the sphere of morals. Here to many it seemed that to claim that right and wrong were subjectively determinable was fundamentally to deny the validity of moral values altogether.

The next stage in the story is reached with the famous sixty-seventh chapter of George Grote’s *History of Greece*. Grote was a Radical and a free-thinker and he entered the circle of the utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. For a period he was a member of the House of Commons, and from its beginnings he was associated with the movement to set up the then new London University in Gower Street, later to become University College, London. As a reformer and utilitarian he was himself much concerned with attacking the dead hand of tradition. It was no accident that he set himself to revalue the sophists. He saw them as the champions of intellectual progress and rejected crucial features of the traditional assessment of their work. In particular he argued first of all that they were not a sect or school but a profession, and that there was no community of doctrine. So, if one doctrine put forward by an individual sophist was objectionable, this was no ground for condemning the movement as a whole. Secondly as regards the alleged teaching of immoral doctrines, not even Plato brought this as a charge against the principal sophists, Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias and Gorgias. Grote refused to believe that either Thrasymanchus or Callicles could ever publicly have taught the anti-social theories of justice attributed to them by Plato in the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*. Even if they did, it would be wrong to infer from this anything as to the other sophists. Basically Grote regarded the sophists as teachers who simply represented the standard opinions of their age.

A vigorous controversy followed Grote’s defence. His main point eventually received very general acceptance – it was simply not a matter of historical fact that they had poisoned and demoralised, by corrupt teaching, the Athenian moral character. But he had done little to rehabilitate the sophists intellectually. Indeed by denying that the

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persons styled sophists possessed doctrines, principles or methods both common to them all and distinguishing them from others he made it as difficult to defend them as a class as he had intended to make it difficult to attack them.

A different path was followed in the influential history of Greek philosophy by Eduard Zeller. While critical of many features of Hegel’s approach, Zeller nonetheless adopted his basic pattern. He accepted the idea of a kind of internally generated development of Greek philosophy – this was reflected in the title of his work Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung. He included the sophists, and, unlike Grote and many who followed him, he claimed that they all had so much in common despite individual differences that we were justified in treating them as all representing the same educational discipline. He argued persuasively against attempts to divide or distribute the sophists in any fundamental way into early and later kinds, or into different schools, and proceeded to attempt to characterise the movement as a whole. He did so very much in the way Hegel had done it. First the negative side. Their calling things into question destroys all scientific endeavour at the root, their Eristic has as its final result only the bewilderment of the interlocutor, their rhetoric is concerned with appearance and serves the cause of wrong as well as truth, their views of scientific knowledge are that it is worth little, their moral principles are dangerous. But on the positive side, the philosophic validity of the principle of subjectivity was now asserted, and for the first time. The previous period had confined itself in its consideration of practical behaviour to the existing moral and religious tradition and in its science to the contemplation of nature. Now people become conscious that this is not sufficient. Man loses his respect for the actual and the given as such, he will accept nothing as true which he has not himself approved, he will act only on the basis of his own judgment. But for Zeller this also is inadequate. Instead of completing physics by a system of ethics, physics are now entirely set aside; instead of seeking a new scientific method, the possibility of knowledge is denied. Likewise with morals. Instead of searching for the internal grounds of obligation in the nature of moral activities and relations men are satisfied with a negative result, the invalidity of existing laws.

7 First published in German at Tübingen in three volumes, 1844–52, but expanded in successive editions, by Zeller himself until the fifth, and subsequently by W. Nestle in a sixth edition (Leipzig 1920).
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The result for Zeller was something superficial and onesided, unscientific and dangerous in its results. But this onesidedness was not to be avoided and it had its place in the history of philosophy. As the Germans would scarcely have had Kant without the Period of the Enlightenment, so the Greeks would scarcely have had a Socrates and a Socratic philosophy without the sophists. Such was the assessment provided by Zeller in 1892. The sixth edition published in 1920 contained an extra appraisal by Wilhelm Nestle, which continued the same viewpoint as Zeller, but showed a retreat on one point. The sophists are now differentiated from philosophers (without qualification) and not simply from earlier philosophers. They differed in the objects with which they were concerned (men, not natural science, and above all men in society); in their methods, which were empirical and based on experience, rather than deductive and based on assumed first principles or first beginnings for the physical world; and their aim was different. They were concerned with subjective knowledge for practical purposes, to secure mastery over men and over life, whereas the philosopher is concerned with knowledge pursued for its own sake. But while Nestle contrasted the sophists with philosophers he stressed their ultimate connection so strongly that in effect he treated them as a kind of philosopher. What he was really doing was what his predecessors had done, namely restricting the term philosopher to a certain kind (the approved kind) of philosopher. It has become common to classify the defenders of the sophists into two groups, the one, which labelled the sophists ‘positivists of the Enlightenment’, stemming from Grote, and the other the Hegelian. Nestle, together with Zeller, belongs to the second group.

To attempt to distribute writers in the present century between the two groups is dangerous, since almost all in one way or another would probably now wish to combine elements from both groups. But predominant sympathies can still be recognised. The positivist approach concentrates the greater attention on what the sophists were and did, rather than on what they thought. Here belong the views that they were inspired above all by the educational ideal of rhetoric, that they were the encyclopaedists or illuminators of Greece, that they

9 ibid. 1.2, 6th edn, 1291–6.
11 See e.g. K. Joël, Geschichte der antiken Philosophie, Tübingen 1921, 674.