

Introduction

The Problem of the Sophists

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τὸ δὲ φῶλον ὃ νῦν ἐπινοοῦμεν ζητεῖν οὐ πάντων ῥᾶστον συλλαβεῖν τί ποτ' ἔστιν, ὁ σοφιστής

The tribe we're now intending to investigate, it's not at all easy to sum up what it is, the Sophist. (Plato *Sophist* 218c)

DEFINING THE SOPHIST

“What is it, the Sophist?” The question is no more easily answered today than it was for Plato’s characters. Since Plato’s Theaetetus and Eleatic Stranger sought to define the category over the course of the eponymous dialogue, “the Sophist” has come in and out of focus in the history of philosophy, with little agreement on what the name means and why (if at all) the Sophists matter. There is, nevertheless, broad agreement on *who* (at least some of) the original Sophists are; by traditional understanding the canon includes Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos, Hippias of Elis, and Antiphon of Athens. These five were active in Greece in the latter part of the fifth century BCE and all are recorded as spending significant periods in Athens, where they evidently made major impressions on their contemporaries. Other apparently more marginal figures are often counted Sophists as well: Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, Critias of Athens, the Chian brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, and the authors of the two anonymous treatises called *Dissoi Logoi* and *Anonymus Iamblichi*, though the reasons for including these figures among the Sophists differ, in some cases quite substantially. There is an important case, too, for understanding Socrates as a Sophist. The divergent groupings imply differing ideas of the Sophist and indeed of

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the contours of early Greek philosophy and intellectual history broadly.

The problem of the Sophists – what a Sophist is and who the Sophists are – is central to understanding Classical Greek intellectual culture and the early development of what we know as “philosophy.” The Sophists offer a window into Greek thought at a moment of substantial transformation, when an understanding of philosophy as a discipline, and the questions and methods proper to it, emerged from a period of vibrant contestation and debate. The Sophists, individually and collectively, were some of the major figures of this moment of transformation, yet their contributions have consistently been denigrated and marginalized since the time of Plato. The lack of attention to the Sophists over millennia has created significant gaps in our understanding of this crucial phase of intellectual history, and the Sophists have received far less scholarly attention than their predecessors, the so-called Presocratics.¹ As the essays in this *Companion* demonstrate, however, taking full account of their intellectual and cultural significance leads to a novel picture of Classical Greek culture and the development of Greek thought. The Sophists, themselves fascinating and multiform figures, can serve as keys to unlocking this fascinating and multiform moment in intellectual history.

If we return, in modified form, to Plato’s question and ask “what are the Sophists?” we can delineate two conventional ways of answering. The more widespread sees the Sophists as professional teachers who offered their wisdom (*sophia*) and their training in virtue (*aretê*) to students for pay. This is a primary sense of the term in Plato and Xenophon and has conditioned understandings of the Sophists since. The profession of a paid teacher of wisdom has most often been denigrated, particularly in contrast to its apparently more noble counterpart, the practice of philosophy, which is thought to be

¹ The Sophists have a liminal role in Presocratic studies generally; in Diels’s standard edition, evidence for Sophists is edited alongside that for the Presocratics, but in a separate section, “The Older Sophistic.” Most of the Sophists, of course, are contemporaries of Socrates.

pursued without financial interests. But Sophists, on this understanding, can also be praised for opening the gates of learning to a range of people beyond the aristocratic elite. More neutrally, Sophists can be seen as an emergent socioeconomic category on a par with the professors or private tutors of today. This sociological view sees the Sophists' primary significance in activities that brought certain pursuits and forms of learning to a ready public, making a profound impact on Greek intellectual culture of the late fifth and early fourth century.²

An independent but complementary way of understanding the Sophists is philosophical, and sees the Sophists as defined by similar views – usually relativism or skepticism, the doubt that we could ever get or share objective knowledge, especially in normative domains but also about the basic nature of reality. Though relying on evidence from Plato and Aristotle, this way of understanding the Sophists is primarily modern, importantly canonized in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Though Hegel's understanding of the Sophists as “subjectivists” has largely been abandoned, his lectures were a milestone for recognizing the philosophical significance of the Sophists. They stand at the origin of a number of modern rediscoveries of the Sophists as thinkers important for their naturalistic thought, sensitivity to historical contingency and human diversity, and application of theory to practice.³ The philosophical understanding of the Sophists as a group, moreover, persists, with recent scholars arguing that the center of the category is a concentration on language or a defined set of views on human knowledge, reason, and ethics.⁴ Where the Sophists are not understood primarily as a professional class, they are seen to constitute the core of a “sophistic movement” defined by shared beliefs or philosophical tendencies.

² Guthrie 1971 and Kerferd 1981, the two most important references for Anglophone readers, both take essentially this view in defining the Sophists (though it does not preclude them also from analyzing philosophical commonalities). De Romilly 1992 likewise offers a version of this view that is even more socially inflected.

³ See Chapter 15.

⁴ A recent exponent is Bonazzi 2020a; for another attempt at defining intellectual continuities, see Mayhew 2012: xxiii–xxvi.

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There is much to both these ways of understanding the Sophists (which are often combined in practice), but both meet with substantial difficulties when attempting to elaborate a definition of the Sophists. The sociological view of the Sophists as a professional class founders when confronted with the ancient evidence for the activities of the canonical Sophists. While some are said to provide private instruction (Protagoras, Gorgias, and Antiphon), this is less emphasized for others (Prodicus and Hippias), and all engage in a much wider range of professional activities, including giving public display speeches (*epideixeis*), writing for publication, speechwriting, and giving advice, often at the political or geopolitical level. Indeed, for most, their fame or significance seems grounded in one of these latter activities. These tend to be continuous with the activities of figures not known as “Sophists,” such as musicians who took paying pupils, making the boundaries of the sociological category highly porous, potentially to the point of incoherence. Moreover, as we discuss below, fifth- and fourth-century uses of the word “Sophist” show clearly that the term did not refer specifically to teachers, even if its referents were often teachers to one degree or another. All the canonical Sophists were certainly intellectual professionals of a kind, but their activities are better understood in relation to their *sphere* of activity than to the pedagogical activities they engaged in. When Sophists are denigrated as “hunters of rich young men” (Plato *Sophist* 223b4), only one of several aspects of their practical lives is described, and not necessarily the most distinctive or culturally significant one.

As for the philosophical understanding of the Sophists, this too recognizes genuine commonalities among the major figures; there is evidence for a widespread interest in human culture (as opposed to the natural philosophy of most Presocratics), for language, for unconventional ideas about divinity, and for reasoning about ethics and responsibility. But none of these is an adequate starting place for a definition of the Sophists that applies to all and only the canonical Sophists. The core sophistic tenets that have been proposed rely heavily on one or two

thinkers and then seek to read these concerns into the rest.⁵ And here commonalities with other contemporary thinkers – for example, Democritus or the Socratics, to whom the Sophists are often opposed – are in some respects just as notable as commonalities among the Sophists.⁶ If the Sophists are to be understood as a philosophical movement, this must be an exceptionally wide and diffuse one, for the most part indistinguishable from late-fifth-century intellectual culture as a whole.

If we cannot locate the Sophist by either of the two conventional routes, what is left to us and to this volume? We accept the canonical five Sophists – Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Antiphon – along with the familiar, though more marginal, figures mentioned above as core to the category. This grouping has been fruitful to others, and its members in fact now constitute a historiographical category, the emergence and transformations of which are traced in the later chapters. But rather than seeking to identify some essence to be found within this grouping, we seek to understand the Sophists as a product or phenomenon of their time and its extraordinary intellectual ferment, distinct in some respects from their contemporaries and continuous in others, and revisited time and again throughout the later history of thought. We pay close attention, on one hand, to the place of the Sophists within fifth-century intellectual culture and, on the other, to the emergence and transformations of the category “Sophist” from the fifth century to the present. In doing so, we seek to obviate the problem of definition, adopting a flexible understanding of the boundaries of the group (which our contributors understand differently in different contexts) and approaching the Sophists as a category that was and remains in process of definition – in other words, as a problem.

This Introduction lays some foundations for exploring the problem of the Sophists over the course of the rest of the volume. We begin by

⁵ Bett 2013. This overgeneralization characterizes otherwise highly sophisticated works such as Untersteiner 1954 [1949].

⁶ For Democritus, see esp. Cole 1967; Johnson 2020.

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reviewing the evidence for the word *sophistês* in Classical Greece. This leads us to argue that the conventional understanding of the Sophists as specifically those individuals offering “selective secondary education” was not current in the fifth century and is rather a retrospective creation (which is not to deny that the canonical Sophists did in fact teach).⁷ There is no contemporary evidence for the familiar grouping of the Sophists, and we should understand the category (though not always the term itself) as a polemical one and a significant problem in itself. We then turn from the question of what generically identifies a “Sophist” to the question of who in Classical Greece should be included among the Sophists. Here we turn from lexical considerations to the constitution of the sophistic corpus – those texts attributable to the familiar Sophists and the testimonia about the lives of the named ones – with a fresh eye to the wide range of materials relevant to an understanding of the Sophists and their moment. This leads us to propose an understanding of the Sophists not as a stable category or discrete grouping, but as a phenomenon that touches on every aspect of the intellectual culture of the late fifth century. This understanding guides the design of the volume, which we explain in the final section of this Introduction.

WHAT IS A SOPHIST?

We may begin to approach the category “Sophist” by looking at the application of the term in the fifth and fourth centuries. It is sometimes thought that Protagoras and his ilk would have been identifiable as “Sophists” to their contemporaries by virtue of their professional activities (usually taken to be teaching for pay), and that this identification grounds the uses of the term in fourth-century authors. When one approaches the ancient evidence, however, no such clearly defined contemporary meaning emerges. What one finds, instead, is a word group with a range of usages, surprisingly few of which are compatible with our understanding of the category “Sophist.” The familiar meaning of “Sophist,” we find, is largely

⁷ The quoted formulation is taken from Kerferd 1981: 17.

derived from Plato, and though we cannot rule out its having a fifth-century precedent, this would likely not have been the dominant meaning. We have to recognize in the category “Sophist” a site of definitional contestation (one parallel to the struggle over the meaning of “philosophy”) and take account of the derogatory or polemical valences found in many of its usages, ancient as well as modern.⁸

The earliest surviving uses of the term *sophistês* seem straightforwardly positive and unproblematic. The word appears twice in early-fifth-century literature, neither use implying an extraordinary status or fraught title. Around 478 BCE, Pindar refers to those being honored by Zeus as “providing a subject (*meletê*) for *sophistai*.”⁹ The suggestion that *sophistai* have a range of *meletai*, “subjects, themes,” picks them out as a class dedicated to some craft – in this case, the class of poets that includes Pindar and his competitors. The *-tês* suffix, indicating specialization, suggests they were professionals, and while the term includes poets for hire, it need hardly be limited to them.¹⁰ The poets of Pindar’s ilk conveyed *sophia* through myth-telling and gnomic expression, among other routes;¹¹ *sophistês* would then seem to denote the professionalization of such proffered insight, and its unmarked application to encomiastic poets would acknowledge that epinician performance is a familiar site of such advice. Contemporaneously, Aeschylus speaks of a “*sophistês* misplaying a lyre.”¹² From this fragment, shorn of its context, we can merely guess that Aeschylus refers here to a musician, a guess supported by Sophocles’ later use of *sophistês* for a cithara player and the tragedian Iophon’s apparent use of it for an aulos player.¹³ But presumably he

⁸ On such contestation, see, e.g., Nightingale 1995; Tell 2011; Moore 2020a.

⁹ Pindar *Isthmian* 5.28–9: μελέταν δὲ σοφισταῖς . . . πρόσβαλον.

¹⁰ The nominative ending *-istês* appears to be built on the verbal *-izô*; compare, for example, *agônistês/agônizomai* (competitor/to compete) or *akontistês/akontizô* (javelin thrower/to throw a javelin).

¹¹ On Pindar on *sophoi*, see Moore 2020a: 98–101; on the significance of his giving advice, see Morgan 2015; cf. Kurke 1991.

¹² Aeschylus fr. 314: εἶτ’ οὖν σοφιστῆς τκαλάτ παραπαίων χέλων.

¹³ The evidence is provided by Eustathius’ *Commentary on Homer’s Iliad* 15.412. Iophon, in his *Auloidoi Satyroi*, speaks of the “outfitted crowd of numerous *sophistai* coming in” (fr. 1), probably referring to the chorus.

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refers in fact to an *expert* musician, given the noteworthiness of the false notes struck. The choice of *sophistês* rather than some specifically musical term again links the role of the player to *sophia*, which brings to mind the self-accompanying singer of moralizing tales or social commentary, for instance, in a sympotic setting. At any event, in neither Pindar nor Aeschylus does *sophistês* simply mean “poet” or “musician”; poets and musicians are prominent within a broader class of people taken to have authoritative knowledge and wisdom.¹⁴

The later fifth century begins to show a wider range of uses. Either because of our broader evidence base or because of shifting cultural valences of *sophia*, we can see the term *sophistês* being used in increasingly negative fashion. We still find relatively authoritative musical or poetic *sophistai*, for example, as rhapsodes (in Eupolis).¹⁵ But we now see a “swarm” of *sophistai* (in Cratinus) and choruses of them in both Iophon and the Plato who was a comic playwright (a generation older than the Academic Plato).¹⁶ The clumping together of *sophistai* in these comic contexts might suggest that the poets dramatized an amusing variety of persons, with diverse professional focuses but bound by a concern for *sophia* (after all, these playwrights are not animating a swarm or chorus of “ode singers” or “citharists”). We do not know what that variety in putative intellectual authority amounted to, but the humor points to a nascent skepticism concerning *sophistai*. We can say little about the specific reference of the term *sophistês*, but it is clear that Attic comedy frequently lampooned the growing class of individuals engaged in intellectual pursuits.

Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, written in 423 and revised in the ensuing years, makes multiple references to so-called *sophistai*, none of them flattering. Though *Clouds* does not use the term in a sharply delineated way, its portrait of Socrates and his school receiving money for

¹⁴ Kerferd 1950: 8 describes them as “those who in one way or another function as the Sages, the exponents of knowledge in early communities.”

¹⁵ Eustathius’ *Commentary on Homer’s Iliad* 15.412 (again).

¹⁶ Cratinus *Archilochoi* fr. 2 (from 430; “swarm” is σμῆνος); Plato Comicus *Sophistai* (at fr. 134, someone is said to be δωδεκαμίχανος, “dozen-skilled”).

an education in pedantry and immorality evidently contributed to the popular image of Sophists as paid teachers whose education corrupted the youth.¹⁷ Strepsiades, a debt-wracked Athenian, sends his son, Pheidippides, to acquire a learning he has heard about, whereby one may argue one's way out of any obligation and without concern for the usual pieties. He knows of a little house that serves as a "thinkery" (φροντιστήριο) for "wise spirits" (ψυχᾶι σοφαί), men who discuss the heavens and proclaim its nature and who, if you pay them money, will teach you how to talk yourself into victory, whatever it takes.¹⁸

Neither father nor son in this early exchange calls these thinkers, who sell their lessons in just and unjust speech, *sophistai*; indeed, the issue of quite what to call them comes up explicitly and is answered inconclusively.¹⁹ But soon Strepsiades meets Socrates, whom Aristophanes characterizes as a multidisciplinary scientific researcher, contemplator, and freethinker. He introduces Strepsiades to the Clouds and in so doing first mentions the term;²⁰ the Clouds, he says, "nourish many *sophistai*, Thurian seers, medical experts, long-haired idlers with onyx signet rings, and song-twisters of cyclical choruses, men practicing astronomical quackery (μετεωροφρονάκεις), whom, though doing nothing, they [sc. The Clouds] feed because they compose music about them."²¹ In this syntactically ambiguous list, *sophistai* names either the general category of nourishees or just one kind of them; "Sophists" are thus treated as having a scope of interest including or at least parallel to that of soothsaying, city-founding, health-provision, cosmology, and praise poetry. Later in

¹⁷ Plato *Apology* 18c–19c; Xenophon *Household Management* 11.3. The music teacher Lamprus, considered to have undermined traditional genres by his musical innovations, is called a "hyper-sophist" by the Old Comic playwright Phrynichus (fr. 74).

¹⁸ *Clouds* 94–9, developed at 112–18 and 126–30. ¹⁹ *Clouds* 99–100.

²⁰ Strepsiades had already called a device for "measuring the earth" a *sophisma*, "a clever thing" (203–5).

²¹ *Clouds* 331–4: πλείστους αὐται βόσκουσι σοφιστάς / Θουριομάντιες, ἰατροτέχνας, σφραγιδονχαρργοκομήτας, / κυκλίων τε χορῶν ἄσματοκάμπτας, ἄνδρας μετεωροφρονάκας, / οὐδὲν δρῶντας βόσκουσ' ἄργούς, ὅτι ταύτας μουσοποιούσιν. That Socrates sees himself as a nourishee of the Clouds is clear from 317 to 318, where Socrates says that they provide "us" with "judgment and exchange, marvels and circumlocution, verbal offense and defense."

the play, it is suggested that Pheidippides will return a “handy Sophist” when he has gained training in legal disputation, to be deployed for good or ill.²² *Sophistês* in *Clouds*, then, clearly names – and tends to derogate – those associated with novel intellectualism, but does not clearly denote a professional class or category.

Outside of comedy in the late fifth century, the term *sophistês* could likewise be applied to individuals whose intellect is undeniably formidable but who deploy it in underhanded fashion. Prometheus in the *Prometheus Bound* is twice called *sophistês*, once when told that, despite his self-confidence, he will come to see that he is slower-witted than Zeus, and once when his fire-theft is recollected; both times are scornful.²³ These usages obviously refer to his character-defining cleverness; they may also point to his culture heroism, provisioning humans with fire and much else that they need. Rather more positively, Herodotus calls the Seven Sages (among whom Solon is included) *sophistai*,²⁴ as well as the culture innovators Melampus and Pythagoras, suggesting the survival of an earlier, positive sense of the term alongside more derogatory ones. In any case, there is no clear consensus among these usages about what a *sophistês* is, beyond someone notable for their intellectual efforts.

We do find in a few fifth-century texts an understanding of *sophistês* as a professional designation – but not for the professionals conventionally understood as Sophists today. The Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine* mentions that “some doctors and *sophistai*” think that medicine requires knowledge of the nature and origins of man. The author disagrees with this position, calling it more suited for *graphikê* (“illustration”?) than actual cure.²⁵ *Sophistai* thus are those who develop complex theoretical positions and take public written and spoken stances, intending to

²² *Clouds* 1111, cf. 1309.

²³ *Prometheus Bound* 61 and 944, the play’s Aeschylean authorship is doubted, so it may have been written in the last third of the fifth century.

²⁴ Herodotus 1.29, 2.49, 4.95. The final version of the *Histories*, written in Ionic but probably performed or presented in Athens, may be dated to 425–415.

²⁵ *On Ancient Medicine* 20; see Schiefsky 2006: 306–10; Moore 2020a: 137.