

I THE SOPHISTS: HISTORY OF A NAME AND PREJUDICE

One day around the year 430 BC, before dawn, a young and promising Athenian, Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus, hastens to Socrates' house to rouse him from his sleep. The reason for this bizarre behaviour soon becomes clear: Protagoras is in Athens! With a knowing smile, Socrates answers that he is already aware of this, as though he could not really understand the reason for all this excitement. But Hippocrates shows no hesitation: Protagoras, the great sophist, he who 'makes people wise', is in Athens – an opportunity not to be missed! The two of them must leave immediately, and Socrates must help Hippocrates gain access to Callias' house, where the sophist is staying. However, Socrates insists on enquiring about the reason for Hippocrates' excitement: does he wish to become a sophist?

'And if somebody asks you what do you expect to become in going to Protagoras?'

He blushed in response – there was just enough daylight now to show him up – and said, 'If this is all like the previous cases, then, obviously, to become a sophist.'

'What? You? Wouldn't you be ashamed to present yourself to the Greek world as a sophist?'

'Yes, I would, Socrates, to be perfectly honest.' (Plato, *Protagoras*, 310a–312a)

This famous page from Plato – the prologue of the *Protagoras* – probably constitutes the most compelling example of the ambiguous fame attached to the name of the sophists. That fame has not changed much over the centuries: the sophists have always been the object of violent polemics and passionate vindication. After centuries of criticism, in the modern age the sophists received the support of some most distinguished philosophers: first from Hegel, who regarded them as the masters of Greece, then from some English liberals (in particular George Grote), and finally – and even more staunchly – from Nietzsche, who saw them as the most genuine representatives of the Greek spirit.¹ Later, Popper was to go so far as to speak of a 'great generation', while other scholars have even suggested that ours is the age of the Third Sophistic.² At the same time, however, 'sophist' and

¹ On the importance and limits of the interpretations put forward by Hegel and English liberals, see Kerferd 1981a: 4–14; on Nietzsche, see Consigny 1994.

² Popper 1971: 162. One author who describes the contemporary age as a 'Third Sophistic' is Vitanza 1997; see also Fowler 2014. See too Rorty 1979: 157. The expression 'Second Sophistic' is used to describe the revival in the Imperial age of certain elements introduced by the sophists in

‘sophistic’ are still used to describe ‘a verbal philosophy that is neither sound nor serious’, to quote Lalande’s *Vocabulaire technique et critique de philosophie* – almost a paraphrase of the scathing verdict of Aristotle, who had dismissed sophistry as the wisdom of appearances, and hence an appearance of wisdom (*Sophistical Refutations*, 171b34). In other words, in antiquity, just as in the modern age, the sophists elicited sympathy at times, but more often deep hostility; and neither situation has helped to adequately reconstruct their thought. In order to make an appropriate assessment, it is necessary first to clarify the topic to be discussed: the primary aim of the present book is to provide a reliable reconstruction of the sophists’ thought – as far as the sources allow it – within their historical and philosophical context. It will then be up to the reader to assess their importance.

Who were the sophists?

In order to adequately analyse the sophists’ thought, it is necessary to address a highly challenging preliminary problem: to identify which thinkers can legitimately be called ‘sophists’, and to clarify what distinguishes them from other intellectuals of their age. One often speaks of the ‘sophistic’ as though its definition was taken for granted, as though it were clear to everyone in antiquity. Yet, when taken literally, even the term ‘sophistic’ itself is improper and misleading, insofar as in fifth-century Greece there was never a homogeneous tradition of thought or institutionalized school to which the label ‘sophistic’ could be applied.³ In the ancient sources, the term from which our word ‘sophist’ derives, *sophistês*, expresses a much more fluid situation, encompassing a more or less extensive range of meanings: *sophistês* is used for a poet like Homer, a politician like Solon, and a mythical figure like Prometheus. According to Plato, a sophist is ‘troublesome and hard to grasp’ and there is a risk that each person will assign a different meaning to the word (*Sophist*, 218b–d). Such a broad use of the word

the fifth century BC. The focus in this case was on rhetorical and literary themes, while the more strictly philosophical aspect was largely overlooked. For this reason, I will not be discussing the phenomenon here (for an interesting attempt to link the fifth-century sophistic and the Second Sophistic, see Cassin 1995).

³ It may be worth noting that, in the surviving testimonies, the only sophist to describe himself as such is Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name (*Protagoras*, 317b = 80A5 D.–K. = 31P13a L.–M.).

risks making it useless, as it would come to generically describe anyone who has some relationship with knowledge or wisdom (*sophia* in Greek).

Fortunately, however, a more precise definition can be found. While the ancients were quite aware that the ‘sophistic’ was not a homogeneous school of thought, they acknowledged the sophists as a group of thinkers who, over the course of the fifth century, had promoted a radical renewal of the Greek cultural tradition. This makes it possible to narrow down the scope of the term: while doubts may be raised about this or that figure, it is possible to identify a core of thinkers who may be regarded as part of this ‘movement’ (to quote George Kerferd, the author of a key study on the sophists).⁴ In this respect, the most authoritative contribution comes from Hermann Diels, who devoted the final section of his extensive edition of the Presocratics to ‘ancient sophistic’, by including testimonies and fragments pertaining to nine authors and two anonymous treatises: Protagoras, Xenias, Gorgias, Lycophron, Prodicus, Hippias, Thrasymachus, Antiphon, and Critias, to which we should add the so-called Anonymus Iamblichus or the ‘Anonymous of Iamblichus’, the author of a text preserved by the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus (third–fourth century CE), and the anonymous author of the *Dissoi logoi*, a set of dialectical exercises concerning standard topics for argumentation. Diels hesitated at first about including the sophists in his work; nonetheless, the sources he selected – with some possible integrations (for example, Alcidas and figures such as Polus, Euthydemus, and Dionysodorus, who are only known to us through the little information that Plato provides) – make up the ranks of the ‘sophists’, for us as much as for the ancients.⁵

This point can be agreed upon. But what criteria allow us to better define the sophists? One hint comes from the very meaning of the term *sophistês* and from the history of its use: by briefly retracing this

⁴ Kerferd 1981a.

⁵ Naturally, this list, while perfectly reasonable, is not decisive. To give just one example of how difficult it is to precisely identify the sophists: in his writings, Aristotle applies this label to four authors alone, namely Lycophron, Polyidos, Bryson, and Aristippus. Only the first of these is reckoned among the sophists today (Polyidos appears to have been a poet and literary critic, while Bryson and Aristippus are possibly to be associated with the milieu of the Socratic schools). All four are called sophists in relation to language and ethico-political issues, which – as we shall see – constituted the privileged object of reflection for the sophists.

history, we can identify some key features.⁶ Other clues may then be inferred through an engagement with the ancient sources. The word *sophistês* is based on the root **soph-*, which we also find in *sophos* (knowledgeable, wise) and *sophia* (knowledge, wisdom), two terms commonly used from early Greece to express the notion of *skill* in some field or craft. Starting from this general meaning, *sophos* gradually came to describe individuals who were knowledgeable and accomplished in intellectual pursuits. These ‘wise men’ (*sophoi* in the plural), usually poets or soothsayers, possessed a kind of knowledge that was unattainable by other men and which could have beneficial effects. From the fifth century BC onwards, *sophistês* entered into use as a synonym of *sophos*: to be more precise, *sophistês* is formed from the verb *sophizesthai*, which is to say ‘to exercise *sophia*’. A ‘sophist’, therefore, is someone who acts as a *sophos*, someone who possesses intellectual knowledge either in a general sense or in a specific discipline. *Sophistês*, originally a synonym of *sophos*, thus came to describe something more narrow, something more suited to the needs of an increasingly sophisticated society: the exercise of knowledge in practice is teaching, as a profession; hence, a sophist is a teacher, and educator. This is an initial defining feature, from which others follow.

The professionalizing of the sophist’s role helps to explain another crucial characteristic that further distinguishes his social position, namely his salary. Insofar as the sophist imparts some teachings, he expects some payment in return – a request that is only natural for us, but which was very unusual for the ancient Greeks, who regarded the idea of teaching wisdom or virtue to anyone for a fee as something quite shocking.⁷ Secondly, what also distinguishes the activity of the sophist – albeit to a lesser degree than the demand for pay – is his itinerant character. The sophists are teachers who share their knowledge in exchange for a fee in the many cities they visit. This is hardly surprising, given that almost all sophists were born far away from the major cultural

⁶ On the meaning of *sophistês* and its history, see the following analyses: Untersteiner 1949–62: i.xvi–xxiii; Guthrie 1971: 27–35; and Kerferd 1981a: 24–41. An alternative reconstruction is put forward by Edmunds 2006, according to whom *sophistês* only entered into use as a technical term in the fourth century BC, whereas in the fifth it described a gamut of intellectual figures, including soothsayers, dithyrambic poets, scientists, and orators. This study confirms the importance played by Plato and Aristotle in the definition of the sophists’ identity; still, it does not rule out that by the fifth century the term ‘sophist’ had already come to be associated with the practice of teaching, which is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the sophists’ activity; on this, see also Tell 2011.

⁷ Blank 1985.

and political centres of their day, such as Athens: travelling for them was practically a requirement.⁸ The itinerant character of the sophists' teaching may seem like a trivial fact, but actually has some important implications – as we shall see – that at least partly account for the degree of hostility they incurred.

These three criteria (teaching, the charging of a fee, and travel) allow us to narrow down the field of our enquiry, insofar as they help us distinguish a 'sophist' such as Protagoras from a 'sophist' such as Prometheus. Protagoras was a teacher who visited many cities of the Greek world, exercising his profession for a fee; by contrast, when Aeschylus calls Prometheus a sophist, he is only highlighting his knowledge and commitment to help people (*Prometheus Bound*, 944). What is even more interesting is the case of Solon, who had also travelled the known world: Herodotus (1.29) calls him both *sophistês* and *philosophos*, not because he wishes to portray him as a forerunner of the sophists and philosophers, but to praise his desire for knowledge (the literal meaning of *philo-sophia* being 'love of wisdom') and the experience he had acquired through his travels – two virtues which are certainly noteworthy, but which do not distinguish the sophists' teaching activity.

Polemicists, bad teachers, and fake philosophers: the charges against the sophists

Based on the three criteria just outlined, it is possible to identify a group of 'sophists' in the sense in which Hermann Diels and all modern scholars have understood this term. Still, difficulties remain. Thus far, the sophists appear to resemble one another in terms of their practical activities, without having any shared status. But if this is the case, how do the sophists differ from all other teachers and educators? Once again, the ancient sources are ambiguous on the matter, and the simplest answer seems to be that there is no difference between the sophists and other teachers: in a way, all teachers are sophists.

⁸ To get an idea of the extent of the sophists' travels, see the profiles in Appendix 1. It is important to bear in mind that many sophists also travelled for political reasons, acting as ambassadors of their cities: see esp. Plato, *Hippias*, 282b–c, on Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias. One may recall Gorgias' famous embassy to Athens in 427 BC. Similar embassies have been suggested in relation to Thrasymachus, albeit on less certain grounds: see White 1995 and Yunis 1997. It is also worth mentioning Antiphon's famous embassy to Sparta after the coup of 411 BC – assuming that the hypothesis that identifies the sophist with the orator by that name is correct.

Curiously enough, this is the position of Plato's Protagoras in a passage of the dialogue that bears his name, where he mentions teachers of gymnastics and music, along with poets and prophets, as the forerunners of the 'sophist's art' (Plato, *Protagoras*, 316c–317d, partly quoted by Diels-Kranz as testimony 80A5 D.-K. = Soph. R11 L.-M.). However, this very passage shows that the situation is rather more complex: Protagoras admits that the profession of the sophist is very dangerous, as it 'stirs considerable hostility, enmities and intrigues', to the point that sophists often even risk coming across as swindlers; and it is precisely in order to avoid this hostility that Protagoras associates himself with universally esteemed figures such as the poets Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides. Protagoras' move is a brilliant and shrewd one, but clearly it does not reflect his contemporaries' beliefs: there are more differences than affinities between Homer and the sophists, as well as between teachers of gymnastics or music and the sophists. While affinities lie in the common practice of teaching, the divergences can be identified in the things taught and the teaching strategies.

At the present state of our knowledge, it is not easy to establish the exact nature of these divergences – and not merely because few reliable testimonies are available. One equally important aspect, which cannot be overlooked, is the fact that the subject taught varied from sophist to sophist: Protagoras focused on politics, but some sophists – including Hippias – also dealt with other disciplines ('arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music, and poetry': Plato, *Protagoras*, 318d–e), whereas Gorgias' only concern was to make people clever at speaking, 'to train skilled orators' (82A21 D.-K. = 32D47 L.-M.). At first sight, then, it would seem almost impossible to find any guiding thread in the sophists' activity. Upon closer inspection, however, this is not really the case: if not in positive terms, the sophists at least agree from a negative standpoint, in terms of their polemical aim. And this, when examined in the light of their opponents' responses, can help us more accurately define the sophists' activities.

One aspect that constantly emerges from the surviving testimonies is the fact that the sophists' teaching – whatever its object – entailed a staunch opposition to traditional forms of teaching (such as music and gymnastics) and even more so to other types of knowledge: the sophists not only upheld the worth of their new intellectual teaching against traditional education, but even boasted that they were capable of refuting poets and philosophers, physicians and mathematicians,

and more generally the experts in all other disciplines.⁹ As has often been noted, competition plays a central role in ancient Greece, a society lacking ‘official’ types of authority: each teacher was required to provide concrete proof of his superiority over other aspiring ‘wise men’.¹⁰ The sophists offer a striking example of this polemical spirit. Their teaching constitutes a remarkable challenge to the claims to truth made by other experts in the *polis*, and betrays the sophists’ desire to establish themselves as the new intellectual masters in Greece.¹¹

From the point of view of their opponents, the sophists’ claim to be capable of taking the place of experts amounted to the promotion of a strictly verbal kind of knowledge: the sophists do not really know what they are talking about; they are only brilliant speakers who conceal their shortcomings behind linguistic tricks; their only concern is how to win an argument. Accusations of this sort may be found in many texts by Hippocratic physicians, who label the sophists ‘professional defamers’ (see Appendix 2). No less eloquent are Aristotle’s observations, which convey a further and more serious criticism. Aristotle is less drastic than other detractors and grants the sophists a few merits: it is true – he states – that the sophists have chiefly focused on language and argumentative techniques; yet their analyses are still worth discussing, if only to highlight their errors and fallacies. In Aristotle’s perspective, however, the real problem is this: the sophists’ exclusive interest in language implies that they do not examine reality, causes, and principles, which is to say that they are not genuine philosophers at all. At best they are dialecticians, grammarians, and orators, even though it is tempting

⁹ See Fait 2007: xl–xliv.

¹⁰ Lloyd 1979.

¹¹ The sophists’ ambition explains why their activity entailed not only private lessons but also public performances (*epideixis*): see Guthrie 1971: 41–4. Privately, the teacher was chiefly concerned with presenting certain argumentative schemes that the pupil could then make use of for his own benefit (see Natali 1986; it is possible that these arguments were subsequently brought together to form genuine discourses that might serve as a model for students). Public performance was a privileged avenue for sophists to promote themselves and their wisdom even before an extensive audience (for instance, during solemn celebrations such as the Olympic Games). For a vivid description of these performances, see Lloyd 1987: 79–102; for analyses of the possible circulation of these discourses in written form, see O’Sullivan 1996 and Thomas 2003. While bearing this distinction in mind, we should not overemphasize the break between public and private, since even the teaching of arguments could take place in open contexts: this is the case, for instance, in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, where Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, mocking their interlocutors, present argumentative schemes that their pupils can apply to new cases. The truly enduring feature of the sophists’ activity is its agonistic-competitive character. Interesting points on the historical and cultural context may also be found in Soverini 1998.

to simply dismiss them as word-jugglers who stand out for their (unfounded) claim to master the art of discourse.¹²

Insofar as sophistic teaching was simply reduced to a verbal argument, it is easy to understand why the sophists were also accused of being bad teachers, or teachers of immorality: exclusively concerned with winning arguments, the sophists proved incapable of tackling the great moral questions that lie at the basis of any real education. In fact, the importance of this accusation also depended on the social problems associated with the itinerant character of the sophists' activity. Particularly in archaic societies, education was a means to hand down values and beliefs from father to son, a social mechanism intended to ensure order and continuity.¹³ With the sophists, this circle was broken: their social otherness ensured their independence with respect to the various communities in which they found themselves teaching. As foreigners and outsiders in the cities hosting them, they felt free to question everything and to scrutinize what were traditionally perceived as absolute, unchangeable, and undeniable values. With the sophists, the idea that cultural traditions are relative gained ground, as people realized that the values of a society are not absolute, but are rather the historical product of such a society. If we add the fact that the sophists often favoured provocation and paradox for 'promotional' reasons, as a means to attract potential clients, it is easy to understand why within a short time they were made the target of the predictable and banal accusation of subverting all values. Thus in the *Clouds*, written by the great comic poet Aristophanes and first performed in 423 BC, the sophists are presented as unscrupulous, hypocritical, quibbling charlatans (see lines 441–51): they are masters of the 'worse discourse',

¹² Significantly, in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, the treatise that is usually regarded as the first history of philosophy, no mention is made of the sophists, whereas their theses are widely discussed in the treatises of the *Organon* – in particular, in the *Sophistical Refutations*. On Aristotle and the sophists, see the observations made by Classen 1981, who notes that, although Aristotle does not regard the sophists as genuine philosophers, he does not simply despise them either. Aristotle's interpretation was especially influential among the great Latin orators, from Cicero to Quintilian, who only dealt with the sophists in relation to their rhetorical studies. Among modern scholars, a similar interpretation has been upheld by Gomperz 1912 and, more recently, in a completely different context, by several American scholars interested in a reassessment of rhetoric (see e.g. Schiappa 1991 on Protagoras and Consigny 2001 on Gorgias). Along much the same lines, Michael Gagarin, who is the author of some of the most enlightening contributions on the ancient sophists, has stressed the central importance of *logos* (which can mean 'word', 'speech', or 'reason') as the cornerstone of the sophists' investigations (see, for example, Gagarin 2002 and 2008). While the importance assigned to *logos* is indisputable, it does not imply a lack of interest in ethical and political issues, as we shall see.

¹³ Goldhill 1986: 222–7.

the discourse which with unjust arguments overturns the better discourse and contradicts the laws in such a way as to make injustice triumph (lines 882–4).¹⁴ Naturally, their teaching is not an innocuous abstraction, but has concrete effects, which affect society to its very core – or, rather, subvert it: Aristophanes' comedy ends with a son beating his father, a gesture which constitutes the most eloquent evidence of the overturning of traditional values.¹⁵ The sophists are represented as the bad teachers of Athens (and the whole of Greece), those responsible for its moral and political crisis.

I will assess the soundness of these charges at different stages in the course of the present investigation, in order to expose their limits and prejudiced character. For the moment, I only wish to note that both accusations in a way depend on what may be regarded as the sophists' most important contribution: their acknowledgement of the fact that reality is 'problematic'.¹⁶ It is this awareness which leads the sophists to investigate new issues and to question established values, as was already observed by Plato himself – the sophists' fiercest opponent in a way, but also the philosopher who had most clearly grasped the philosophical and political significance of the challenge they posed.¹⁷ This not only acquits the sophists of the charge of promoting immorality, but assigns them a prominent place in the history of philosophy – a point I will be discussing at length in the following chapters.¹⁸ For the time being, it is important to note that these two accusations allow us to better define the primary aim of the sophists' research and teaching: the charge of playing with words may be explained by considering the sophists' utmost interest in the issue of language, while the accusation of promoting immorality is due to their interest in practical, ethical, and political problems. The sophists' favourite object of enquiry was the art of speech (*logos*), and in particular its practical and political applications. Language and politics, then, are two of

¹⁴ The thinly veiled allusion here is to Protagoras, who promised to 'make the weaker argument the stronger' (80B6b D.-K.): a provocative claim in its ambiguity, given that 'weaker' might also mean less just.

¹⁵ Besides, the sophists had touched upon this theme too in a provocative fashion: see Antiphon 87B44B, 5.4–8 D.-K. = 37D38 L.-M.

¹⁶ Paci 1957: 126.

¹⁷ See now Corey 2015.

¹⁸ Significantly enough, aside from a few exceptions, the dominant view today is precisely that the sophists' activity entailed an engagement with ontological and political issues. This may be inferred from the most authoritative studies on the subject, which, while disagreeing on many points, agree at least on this one – from Untersteiner 1954 (first published in Italian 1949) to Kerferd 1981a, from Guthrie 1971 (first published 1969) to Cassin 1995.

their chief interests. Contrary to what Aristotle suggests, research on language and arguments is not only of theoretical relevance, but also entails practical repercussions, insofar as the sophists' teaching promises to bring their pupils success in their private and public life. This – it is worth stressing once more – does not justify any 'strong' interpretation of the sophists, as members of the same 'schools': the sophists are grouped together, not because they uphold the same doctrines, but because they share the same focuses of interest (namely language and politics), the same method of investigation, and similar aims.¹⁹ These points will suffice as an initial overview.

The reticence of the ancient sources notwithstanding, it is possible, then, to reach some general conclusions on the sophists. They were travelling teachers, who moved from city to city and taught for a fee (these being the external criteria). Their thought and teaching focused on man, his nature, and his needs. This led them to concentrate on issues pertaining to language and politics, which does not mean – as we shall see – that they ignored the more traditional topics of Presocratic reflection (such as *physis*, for instance). A link between all the various sophists is to be found in this sharing of the same problems and attitudes, rather than in the upholding of common theses (internal criteria). This accounts for the ambition of each sophist, who in polemical opposition to other sophists as much as to poets and philosophers sought to establish himself as the new intellectual master that Greece needed. Succinctly put, such is the view which a unitary presentation of the sophists supports.

The richness and complexity of the sophists' challenge is eloquently attested to by the *Dissoi logoi*, which present the sophists' aim in the following terms:

I think that it belongs <to the same> man and to the same art to be able to discuss briefly, to know <the> truth of things, to judge a legal case correctly, to be able to make speeches to the people, to know the art of speeches, and to teach about the nature of all things, both their present condition and their origins. (90.8 D.-K. = 40.8.1 L.-M.)

No doubt, it was an ambitious aim.

¹⁹ Gagarin 2008: 23.