

## THE SOPHISTS: AN ANTI-CULTURAL TRADITION

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**Abstract:** Emerging in the 5th century BC as a professional class of paid teachers, the sophists responded to an increased demand for rhetoric and political instruction. They operated at the time when “traditional ethical norms for Athenians collapsed: universal norms of good and right, and their religious foundations, were lost” (Antonites, 2005). The sophists are probably best known for their relativism (Chapell, 2006) and subjectivity regarding the truth, for being able to argue both sides of a case with equal success, etc. The criticism is equally due to the fact that the sophists charged fees for their services and to a great diversity within the sophist movement itself. However, the teachings of their best representatives cannot be denied either depth or scale of the greatest philosophers of the Antiquity. Protagoras was the first to declare himself a paid teacher of wisdom just when new importance was attached to the issues of upbringing, education and scientific exploration of the person. He challenged the traditional Athenian culture as the externally fixed and explicit norm by throwing light on subjective reality, largely ignored before.

**Objective:** The study aims to identify the specific Athenian cultural and educational traditions that Protagoras opposed and to highlight some of the ideas that he contended.

**Methods:** The analytical, historical, cultural, comparative and hermeneutical methods were used to pursue the objective.

**Results:** The study has found a number of ways in which the sophists, particularly Protagoras, challenged Athenian culture. Firstly, Protagoras made a distinction between written and unwritten laws and argued that written laws were a poor foundation for a virtuous act. Secondly, he claimed that man is the measure of all things. It marked a shift of the cognitive efforts of contemporary thinkers from nature to scientific exploration of the personality. Finally, in response to the issues of upbringing and education he expressed the ambition to teach virtue to every student by leading them to discover in themselves such qualities that used to be thought of as only available for comprehension through a teacher’s explanations.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that Protagoras’ teachings were essentially anti-cultural because they challenged traditional Athenian culture in the ways described above. The findings obtained in the course of the study can be applied to interpreting and evaluating issues of culture and education in view of subjective reality.

**Keywords:** The sophists, Protagoras, education, virtue, culture, science, written and unwritten laws, subjective reality.

## INTRODUCTION

New ways of thinking often emerge in response to crises in society, and sophism was no exception. The sophists came forward as “a professional class of teachers” (Herrick, 2005) when “traditional ethical norms for Athenians collapsed: universal norms of good and right, and their religious foundations, were lost” (Antonites, 2005). Values and morals were in decline, resulting in subjectivist and formalistic approach to virtues and laws.

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The sophists were there to meet the demand for teachers of rhetoric and political discourse (Herrick, 2005). “As Greece, particularly Athens, was extremely litigious, a knowledge of the art of public speaking was highly valued as a means of defending oneself in court or prosecuting someone else. There were no professional lawyers in ancient Greece and, therefore, it was up to the individual involved in a case of law to hire a professional speech writer and then be able to deliver that speech eloquently” (Mark, 2009).

Sophists did not form a centralized school of thought, nor produce a coherent set of writings. That is partly why it was easy for those who came after them to find faults with their teachings. It appears that many of the ideas put forth by the sophists were sadly misinterpreted and distorted. It is argued that “the interpretation ... is arbitrary and also quite convenient for his critics... Due to the blatant contradictions and untenableness of individual relativism, charity commands us to make an interpretation of human relativism. In the end, the new human relativism and the old objectivism are understood to be the same position. The original disagreement was merely confusion over terms” (Cohen, Curd, 2000).

The rehabilitation of the sophists began only in the XIX century, and modern thinkers still have a lot of sophists’ legacy to ponder and comment upon (Balaban, 1999; Jarratt, 1991; Waterfield, 2009). However, it is evident that the best representatives of the sophists’ circles exceeded the humble roles of rhetoric teachers traditionally ascribed to them.

Protagoras “wandered through Hellas for forty years, devoting himself with brilliant success to his work as a teacher” (Zeller, 1886). He was the first to declare himself a paid teacher of wisdom. His challenge to the traditional forms of education in Athens consisted in his promise to make men good citizens. This, according to Chernyshev, required not only faith in the reliability of his teaching methods, but also courage (Chernyshev, 1929).

Plato was probably the earliest to speak sarcastically about the sophists’ practice of charging fees for instruction. “Plato himself had adequate private means, and was unable, apparently, to realize the necessities of those who had not his good fortune. It is odd that modern professors, who see no reason to refuse a salary, have so frequently repeated Plato’s strictures” (Russell, 1945). Whatever Protagoras’ mercenary ends, what he taught was targeted at the very foundation of Ancient Greek outlook and, as such, merits a more detailed observation and interpretation.

The objective of this study is to identify the specific Athenian educational and cultural traditions that the sophists, particularly Protagoras, opposed and to highlight some of the ideas that they contended.

## **METHODS**

The analytical, historical, cultural, comparative and hermeneutical methods were used to pursue the objective. The analytical method enables the researcher to achieve definite answers in response to certain questions; the historical method allows accounting for the development of the issue from the past to the present in a coherent and evidence-based way; the cultural method is used to gain insights into the way philosophy interacts with culture, and to reveal the implications of such interaction; the comparative method aims to make comparisons between the ways the possibility of teaching values was viewed by Protagoras and his opponents, and how their views were influenced by contemporary politics, social trends and other factors; the hermeneutical method is used to interpret works of ancient philosophers, as well as modern texts relevant to the issues studied.

## **RESULTS**

The study has found a number of ways in which the sophists, particularly Protagoras, challenged Athenian culture as a set of externally fixed and explicit norms. Firstly, Protagoras made a distinction between written and unwritten laws and argued that written laws were a poor foundation for a virtuous act. Secondly, he claimed that man is the measure of all things. It marked a shift of the cognitive efforts of contemporary thinkers from nature to scientific exploration of the personality. Finally, in response to the issues of upbringing and education he brought forth a subjective reality, largely ignored before. Protagoras expressed the ambition to teach virtue to every student by leading them to discover in themselves such qualities that used to be thought of as only available for comprehension through a teacher's explanations. All of the above, the study concludes, demonstrates that Protagoras' teachings were essentially anti-cultural.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Historical and Social Context for the Emergence of the Sophists**

As mentioned above, the appearance of the Sophists in the "golden age" of Athens is routinely associated with the decline of aristocracy and the growth of democracy there. There were, they say, in Athens, enemies of democracy - the supporters of the aristocratic, familial and tribal ties. Being the defenders of the old order, they declared a war against the sophists. The speculation goes on to claim that in their fight with stagnation and conservatism, the sophists failed to keep up the cutting edge of criticism and went to the other extreme plunging into relativism and subjectivism.

However, it would be too superficial to attribute these extremes only to the advent of the sophists. In the second half of the 5th century BC subjectivism became a kind of norm caused by a burst of individualism not only in the private lives of the Athenians, but also in politics, religion, art, and philosophy. Subjectivism, as believed by Gilyarov, created both the sophists (Gilyarov, 1891). Although Athens was considered the most democratic city-state (polis) of its time, first the sophists, and then Socrates, criticized the increasingly obvious negative implications of the slave-owning democracy with its arbitrariness and tyranny, the latter being subjectivism driven to its logical completion, acting on behalf of the “democratic” legitimacy. It is these phenomena in Athenian life that became the target for caustic Socratic irony about the possibility of establishing the truth by means of a vote in the assembly; they also gave rise to the idea of “the rule of the best” as an alternative to democracy. Protagoras witnessed all of that. He shared the ethical views of Heraclitus involving the rejection of self-will: he called to “extinguish it faster than fire.” It is to be supposed that Heraclitus deliberately used the image of the fire, which is only superficially similar to the “Cosmic Fire”. The destructive fire is an illegal and dangerous similarity of the life-giving element.

### **The Conflict of Written and Unwritten Laws and its Conceptualization in Philosophy and Drama**

Following Heraclitus, Protagoras admitted that only the law can withstand self-will. However, having tried his hand at law-making (Protagoras is known to develop a set of laws for the Pan-Hellenic colony Furies) he could not but understand that the rule of law requires a proper doer. The law must become the internal content and conviction of the person. As long as the law remains an outside prescription and compulsion, the question of its implementation remains open.

The idea that there is a necessity for a person perceived as inner duty, not only as external requirements, had been known since the time of the Lyric Poets. Heraclitus also gave it consideration asserting that the individual has its own “logos” linking him to the universe. In his search for the truth the philosopher discarded the familiar way of recounting insignificant external details in favour of a deeper intuitive insight into its nature. Typically, physical blindness was a symbol of wisdom and understanding in ancient myths and tragedies. Well-known is Plutarch’s story about Democritus who blinded himself “so that his eyes did not give trouble, often distracting his thinking to the outside world...”

Another reflection of the juxtaposition between the internal and the external can be found in the spreading Athenian legislative practice. The unwritten rules of family and tribal traditions were being replaced by written laws of the polis democracy. The problem of correlation of written and unwritten laws became particularly relevant in Athens in the days immediately preceding the appearance of the sophists. It escalated because of new settlements being established, and it

was accompanied by discussions leading to the conviction that written laws cannot be the point of last resort and the only foundation of a virtuous act. Otherwise, arbitrariness and violence in the society might prevail. In other words, if the strict implementation of external regulations were considered an essential norm and the sole reason to act, it would entail the triumph of unfettered lawlessness because any action can be found legitimate in the long run. The private beliefs of individuals and their ideas of duty, honor and justice as the foundations of decent behavior hinder rather than help the law.

Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* vividly depicts the conflicting interplay between the two kinds of laws. Creon, the protagonist of the tragedy, acts on behalf of the written law. He represents the spiritual blindness that condemns Antigone to death. In her turn, Antigone attempts to justify her act differently, appealing to "the law established from the beginning." She herself knows nothing about the origin of the law, but she is convinced that it is above both the people and the gods. Antigone cannot define this supreme law more precisely, but its sanction is more imperative to her than Creon's edict, and more valuable than her own life. Antigone's death is a logical consequence of the conflict for both of them and evidence that life cannot reconcile the written and unwritten laws, that for the simultaneous celebration of both it has to be sacrificed.

*Antigone* is sometimes interpreted as a conflict of personalities. This is not entirely true, because there is nothing personal in Creon's actions. His decisions are fully and blindly governed by the regulations of the city-state. It is only when his actions lead to Antigone's and his own son's deaths, that he begins to see. He says of himself: "I am nothing." It describes not only the Creon, but also those grounds on which it relies.

Antigone is Creon's complete opposite. Her actions call for no external regulations; they are justified by the consciousness within her and her current need, more important to her than any written rules. Antigone's tragedy lies in her inability to express her inner feeling clearly enough or use it as a persuasive argument accessible to everyone. Her only argument is she herself, her youth, femininity, love of life, all of which she is ready to sacrifice. What would seem to be more convincing than the living embodiment of the best of human qualities, demonstrating the fallacy of Creon's reasoning? However, what Antigone sees as a justification of her actions, in Creon's eyes confirms his own assumption that unrevealed essence is immaterial.

Creon's position is quite in line with culture understood as the externally fixed and explicit norm. By contrast, Antigone's position, her insisting on the truth of the unrevealed essence, is anti-cultural. Bonnard wrote that no matter what kind of society – ancient or modern – she was born into, Antigone had to die (Bonnard, 1995). Proof of this was in the teachings of the sophists, as well as in the story of Socrates' life and death.

Antigone is a bright and pithy symbol created by Sophocles. It indicates a personality embracing its ancestral roots. The sense of belonging to one's tribe is the result of a thousand years of experience; it is perceived as something objective and pre-existing. Such a person views the immediate community of people as a link in a long chain of generations who have left the visible world, but are still present in the invisible one.

### **Teaching Virtue as the Ultimate Goal of Education**

It was not without the influence of the famous "Pericles circle" in Athens that Sophocles created the image of Antigone complete with the living dialectics of the internal and the external in her identity. Beside Sophocles, the "Pericles circle" featured Herodotus, Anaxagoras, Phidias, and Protagoras. The list of names alone suggests that the "circle" played a significant role in the spiritual life of the polis. Protagoras was by no means a secondary member because he was thoroughly interested and engaged in politics, law, philosophy, and history alike. Yagodinsky wrote that Protagoras' broad outlook enabled him to interpret the nature of man as a result of natural and social development (Yagodinsky, 1906). The philosopher highlighted culture as a specific object of cognition and explored the history of language and its influence on thinking. In the field of philosophy of law Protagoras was among the first to distinguish between conscious and unconscious approach to the law, as well as the concepts of guilt and unintended infliction. Finally, and most importantly, he made the first attempts to justify ethical, *i.e.*, virtuous behavior. As is clear from Plato's "Protagoras" dialogue, the eponymous thinker considered virtue to be an inherent, though implicit, human trait. Protagoras ascribed endowing people with moral qualities to the god Hermes (not Prometheus). Herein lies a possible explanation of the covert nature of morality. After all, secretive action was the domain of Hermes, and he had a mastery of all things hidden (hermetic) or sealed.

Implicitness of virtue does not mean that it cannot be acquired and taught in the same way as people develop their mental and physical abilities. To learn virtue, all one needs to do is to be exposed to examples and imitate them as closely as possible (Plato, 380 B.C.E). Therefore, virtues can be taught in the same way as people teach all the usual crafts. Such learning is based on the assumption that "they do not conceive virtue to be given by nature, or to grow spontaneously, but to be a thing which may be taught; and which comes to a man by taking pains" (Plato, 380 B.C.E).

During the early days of the sophists education was much talked and argued about in Athens. This was due to democratization, the need for mass education, and the emergence of schools as corresponding institutions. The implementation of the designs of the "Pericles' circle" demanded new citizens, whose minds were free from age-old prejudices. Without class wars or rebel clashes this group of like-minded individuals conducted a full-scale revolution in the cultural centre of

ancient Greece, but faced a major impediment of revolutionaries and reformers of all times, which is the popular consciousness. New ideas did not fit the usual way of thinking of ordinary, uneducated Athenians. For the ideas to be assimilated it was necessary to eliminate orthodoxy, not only in mass consciousness, but also in the minds of individuals. A well-known sophism of that time goes, "To educate an uneducated person means to kill him." Contrary to a common belief, it expresses the essence of public education, not sophistical activity. The one and only message it contains is that standard education levels out any personality.

But if virtue as an inherent quality of citizens is so essential for the implementation of new ideas, thought Protagoras, it must be preserved and used as a foundation for education. It is up to the individual to discover and develop this quality in himself. But first he must question the validity of the artificial mental accretions known as education, which he used to identify himself with. It is only by realizing both his uniqueness and his objective universality, that is, his belonging to a family that an individual can become a person. True education, therefore, must explore the depth of the individual, without being restricted to the assimilation of external knowledge. Makovelsky quotes Protagoras, "Education does not initiate spiritual growth unless it penetrates to a considerable depth" (Makovelsky, 1940). In this way, the first sophist denied the conventional view of education as the process of filling the individual with knowledge. Instead, he put forth his own concept of education which is the development of innate properties of the individual. He came to such a conclusion by observing not only the negative aspects of polis democracy, but also the increase of technology and the emergence of standard cognitive scientific methods during his time. The described approach to education, wherein knowledge is not given to the student, but discovered in the process of creative learning, is gaining followers at all stages of education worldwide (Mac Suibhne, 2010).

### **A Turn from Studying Nature to Studying the Person**

Science was undergoing the same transformation as education: it was becoming a mass phenomenon. With all the positive significance of this fact, it also undoubtedly involved a spread of formalism, caused by the need to develop methods of transferring knowledge from teacher to student. Continuity became a more conventional form of scientific development. The entire cognition was gradually reduced to a collection of techniques of knowledge accumulation and acquisition. Science was understood as "normal" learning; its methods consisted in mastering sets of principles, norms and opinions. The only difference was that the researcher, as a former student, received knowledge from the object of cognition instead of his teacher. The aim and meaning of research amounted to revealing the inner essence, or contents, of objects. Anaxagoras is credited with developing the appropriate method: "it is possible to gain knowledge about the unseen by observing the phenomena that are accessible to our senses." Analogy-based methods of research, reliable in natural sciences, were increasingly applied to the study of human nature.



There is no need to prove that the method has an impact on the results of a study, or that the use of the same methods in the study of qualitatively different objects can yield similar results in which the uniqueness of the objects is almost entirely lost. In the case of personality studies, there is the risk of overlooking the 'personal' component, essentially inaccessible by means of external observation. The researcher might erroneously conclude that the 'personal' does not exist at all.

Protagoras was not the only one aware of the fact that the drawbacks of democracy stem from the deficiency of the mainstream outlook and the commonly assumed superficial idea of personality. He was the first to see that human studies in no degree deepen the idea because they are based on it and reproduce it. The ultimate understanding of human nature and corresponding education must be based on the existence of essential inherent qualities that can't be reduced to observable behaviours. These qualities, or virtues, discovered by the individual in himself, are the only measure in judging both his own and others' behaviours. At the same time, the virtue discovered in himself can serve as a natural and objective basis for the nurturing of the personality.

Protagoras was not the only one who tried to solve the problem of personality and consciousness in general (McCoy, 2005). Many thinkers of the time gave it some consideration. According to Losev, it was a time when the Greek spirit first "faced itself, directed its gaze into its depth, felt something in itself for the first time" (Losev, 1969). However, Protagoras was the first to approach the problem of the personality from an epistemic and methodological point of view. Protagoras held it that knowledge per se contributed little to the development of the personality because it is controversial by nature. Diogenes Laertius cited his words, "every object can be described in two contrasting ways" (Diogenes, 1979). Controversy and refutability of knowledge is evidence of its integrity and authenticity because 'nothing' is no less meaningful than 'something'; to know of the implicit and hidden is just as important as to know of the explicit and obvious. This thesis became the cornerstone of the 21st century philosophy of science.

Protagoras developed an original method of adjusting the direction of personal development, i.e. discovering the 'nothing' in the mind of the individual. The central idea of this method is to see a controversy in any 'something'. Strictly speaking, Protagoras' invention is not a method in its original meaning, complete with a specific goal, a desirable destination to be achieved that serves as an impetus for activity. Protagoras' invention is a tool used to discover the objective in the subject, or the 'nothing' as it was understood before the sophists. But Protagoras' major achievement was applying his 'problem-setting' method to education. He introduced the type of discourse that later became known as Socratic dialogue. This was where the wisdom of the first sophist lay: to teach his listeners to discover in themselves such qualities that used to be thought of as only available for comprehension



through a teacher's explanations. Protagoras taught virtue in the absence of any other coherent system of beliefs that dealt with the nature of the human. In Plato's dialogue titled after him, Protagoras defines the content of his teaching as "prudence in affairs private as well as public; learning to order the house in the best manner, and the ability to speak and act for the best in the affairs of the state." Any knowledge that does not bear upon this domain is essentially empty and abstract, and its validity is invariably questionable. Protagoras and other sophists, as well as Socrates, were skeptical of such knowledge because they believed that the immediacy of human existence was the measure of the truth and reliability. A man was not just an object of cognition for them; they regarded him as an active participant, a living knower. Protagoras' ultimate aim was to teach everyone to be oneself. He also made the payment he charged contingent on his disciples' consciousness, saying, "When a man has been my pupil, if he likes he pays my price, but there is no compulsion; and if he does not like, he has only to go into a temple and take an oath of the value of the instructions, and he pays no more than he declares to be their value." The sophist saw it as an indicator of maturity of his pupils who were just setting foot on the path of self-education.

## CONCLUSION

Emerging in the 5th century BC as a professional class of paid teachers, the sophists responded to an increased demand for rhetoric and political instruction. However, their significance lies not only in the fact that they drew attention to the problem of subjectivity. Considered in the context of the general development of Greek philosophy and culture, their work was a challenge to culture. In a radical departure from the uncritical subjectivism of the 5th century BC they criticized the traditional patterns of cognition and education, highlighting their internal inconsistencies. The sophists treated the problem of subjectivity as a means to solve the common problems of human existence.

The study has found a number of ways in which the sophists, particularly Protagoras, challenged Athenian culture. Protagoras made a distinction between written and unwritten laws and argued that written laws were a poor foundation for a virtuous act, lest arbitrariness and violence in the society might prevail. This idea had a corresponding artistic reflexion at the time, as represented by Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Another important point Protagoras made was man being the measure of all things. It marked a shift of the cognitive efforts of contemporary thinkers from nature to scientific exploration of the personality. Seeing that human studies in no degree clarify the idea of personality because they are based on it and reproduce it, Protagoras suggested basing the ultimate understanding of human nature on

the existence of essential inherent qualities that can't be reduced to observable behaviours. These qualities, or virtues, discovered by the individual in himself, are the only measure in judging both his own and others' behaviours.

In response to the issues of upbringing and education, Protagoras expressed an ambition to teach virtue to every student by leading them to discover in themselves such qualities that used to be thought of as only available for comprehension through a teacher's explanations. The newly discovered inner virtue can serve as a natural and objective basis for the nurturing of the personality.

Much of the sophists' thinking and teaching was done locally, on a comparatively small scale, yet they were able to consider all the relevant questions about human nature that continue to arise in the modern world. Ignoring subjective reality is considered by some researchers [22] to be the most "ridiculous scientific delusion of the XX century (Vilyunas, 1990)". Therefore, the sophists' insights can come across as new and refreshing for today's over-standardized education.

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