

14. THE SOPHISTS

From the time of Homer onward Greek writers were concerned with questions about the best way of life for a human being and just what virtues or excellences a good person needed to cultivate. Herodotus and other early historians had also provided information about other cultures and their social and political systems and compared these with the Greeks. Yet it was primarily in the fifth century BCE that theories about moral, political, and social questions began to be developed. It was primarily the Sophists who raised and discussed these issues, although as we have seen, some of the Presocratic philosophers were also participants in these debates. Most of the Sophists were professional teachers and rhetoricians, but some active politicians in Athens came to be considered Sophists, and although they did not form a single school or group, there were enough similarities in their activities and viewpoints for them to be considered together. The word "sophist" has its roots in *sophos* meaning "wise," and, in its earliest uses, someone who was a sophistēs was a master in his craft or an expert. In general, the Sophists can be considered as practitioners and teachers of wisdom. This obviously raises the question, "What is wisdom?" and the Sophists aimed to answer that question, as well as questions about the other excellences or virtues needed by a successful citizen of a Greek city-state, or polis. Travelling throughout Greece, teaching, giving rhetorical displays, and competing with one another for paying students and audiences, the Sophists were a major part of social and intellectual life, for the questions they raised were fundamental to life in a Greek polis.

Our information about the Sophists comes mainly from Plato, who was not an impartial witness. Like Socrates, his intellectual hero, Plato was suspicious of sophistic teaching and claims to knowledge, and was scandalized by the fact that the Sophists charged for their teaching and would take on any pupil who could afford the price. Many of Plato's dialogues show Socrates demonstrating that one Sophist or another fails to understand his own views or the nature of the wisdom that the Sophist purports to teach. In his writings, Plato explicitly contrasts Socrates, the independent lover of wisdom (the philosopher) with the mere expert technician (the sophistēs)

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who pleases crowds rather than searching seriously for the truth. We should be wary of accepting Plato's views uncritically, and we should treat his evidence about the Sophists—in such dialogues as *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and the two named after *Hippias*—with great care.

The Sophists included here are representative of the movement and its methods; there are short claims illustrating views about knowledge and some longer speeches. The texts given here show that a sharp distinction between the philosophers and the Sophists may be untenable.

14.1. Protagoras

Protagoras was perhaps the most famous of the early Sophists. He was born in Abdera (home of Democritus as well) around 490 BCE and died about 420. He was often in Athens and part of the circle around Pericles (one wonders if he knew Anaxagoras), but he was also very well known in the western Greek cities of Sicily and Southern Italy. Plato's dialogue Protagoras presents an unforgettable (if perhaps not entirely trustworthy) picture of the excitement that Protagoras could generate.

1. (80A5) [Protagoras on what he teaches and the value of his teachings.] My boy, if you associate with me, the result will be that the very day you begin you will return home a better person, and the same will happen the next day too. Each day you will make constant progress toward being better. . . . [Protagoras teaches a young man] Good counsel concerning his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also concerning the city's affairs, so that as far as the city's affairs go he may be most powerful in acting and in speaking.
(Plato, *Protagoras* 318a, 318e–319a)

2. (80B3) Teaching requires nature and training. . . . Learning must begin at an early age.
(*Anecdota Parisiensia* I 171, 31)

3. (80B10) Art (*tekhnē*) without practice and practice without art are nothing.
(Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.29.80)

4. (80B11) Education is not implanted in the soul unless one reaches a greater depth.
(Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Training* 178.25)
5. (80B4) Concerning the gods I am unable to know either that they are or that they are not or what their appearance is like. For many are the things that hinder knowledge: the obscurity of the matter and the shortness of human life.
(Eusebius, *Preparation of the Gospel* 14.3.7)
6. (80B7) [It is not true that geometry studies perceptible magnitudes . . .] For perceptible lines are not the kind of things the geometer talks about, since no perceptible thing is straight or curved in that way, nor is a circle tangent to a ruler at a point, but the way Protagoras used to say in refuting the geometers.
(Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 3.2 997b34–998a4)
7. Protagoras says of mathematics, the subject matter is unknowable and the terminology distasteful.
(Philodemus of Gadara, *On Poetry* P.Herc. 1676, col. 1.12–13; not in DK)
8. (80B1) A person is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.60)
9. (80A1) He was the first to use in dialectic the argument of Antisthenes that attempts to prove that contradiction is impossible.
(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.53)
10. (80A1) Protagoras was the first to declare that there are two mutually opposed arguments on any subject.
(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.51)
11. (80A21) Protagoras made the weaker and stronger argument and taught his students to blame and praise the same person.
(Stephanus of Byzantium, s.v. *Abdera*)

12. (80A21) [Aristotle on Protagoras' method.] This is making the weaker argument stronger. And people were rightly annoyed at Protagoras' promise.
(Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.24 1402a24–26)

What follows is an extract from the anonymous Dissoi Logoi (Twofold Arguments or Contrasting Arguments), a sample collection of arguments for and against various claims, such as for and against Good and Bad, Truth and Falsity, Just and Unjust, and so on. It gives a sample of the sorts of arguments Protagoras or another Sophist might give.

13. (90, 4) (1) Twofold arguments are also stated concerning the false and the true, of which one declares that true *logos* [speech, statement] and false *logos* are different from one another, and others that they are the same. (2) And I say the following: First, that true and false *logos* are expressed in the same words. Second, when a *logos* is spoken, if events have occurred the way the *logos* is spoken, the *logos* is true, but if they have not occurred, the same *logos* is false. (3) Suppose it accuses someone of sacrilege. If the deed took place, the *logos* is true, but if it did not take place, it is false. And the *logos* of the defendant is the same. And the courts judge the same *logos* to be both false and true. (4) Next, if we are seated one next to the other, and we [each] say "I am an initiate of the mysteries," we will all say the same thing, but only I will be truthful, since in fact I am <the only> one <who is>. (5) Now it is obvious that the same *logos* is false whenever falsehood is present to it and true whenever truth is, in the same way a person is the same individual as a boy and as a youth and as an adult and as an old man. (6) It is also stated that false *logos* and true *logos* are different from one another, differing in name just as they differ in fact. For if anyone asks those who say that the same *logos* is both false and true which of the two [namely, false and true] the *logos* that they are stating is, then if it is false, clearly they [the true *logos* and the false *logos*] are two [and therefore not the same]. But if it is true, this same *logos* is also false. And if anyone has ever spoken or borne witness of things that are true, it follows that these same things are false. And if he knows any man to be true, also he knows the same man to be

false. (7) As a result of the argument they say these things because if the thing occurred the *logos* is true, but if it did not then it is false. Therefore it is not their name that differs, but the fact of the matter. (8) Moreover, if anyone should ask the jurors what they are judging (since they are not present at the events), (9) these people too agree that the *logos* with which falsehood is mixed is false, and that with which truth is mixed is true. This is the entire difference.

(*Dissoi Logoi* 90.4)

14.2. Gorgias

Gorgias of Leontini in Sicily was a contemporary of Protagoras and was also born around 490 BCE; there are reports that he was well over 100 years old when he died. As well-known as Protagoras, Gorgias described himself as a teacher of rhetoric, and it appears that his formal and elaborate writing style was influential. He came to Athens on a diplomatic mission in 427 and was famous for his speeches, which he would give in public displays, some of which survive, and two of which are included below. One, a defense of Helen of Troy, explores the power of persuasion through rhetoric. The other, a fascinating response to (or parody of?) Eleatic metaphysics is called On Nature, or, On What Is Not. This essay, written in the 440s and so contemporary with Melissus, influenced later philosophers, including Plato, and so it is given in full here.

14. (82B11) *Praise of Helen* [in part]

(5) I will set forth the reasons for which it was likely that Helen's voyage to Troy took place. (6) She did what she did through the will of Fate and the designs of the gods and decrees of Necessity or because she was taken by force, persuaded by words (*logoi*), or conquered by Love. . . . (8) Not even if speech (*logos*) persuaded and deceived her soul, is it hard to make a defense against this charge and free her from blame, as follows. *Logos* is a powerful master, which by means of the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes most divine deeds. For it can put an end to fear, remove grief, instill joy, and increase pity. I will prove how this is so. (9) But it is to the opinion of my audience that I must prove it. I both consider and define all poetry to be speech (*logos*) with meter. Those who hear it are overcome with fearful shuddering,

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tearful pity, and mournful yearning, and over the good fortunes and ill-farings of other people and their affairs the soul experiences a feeling of its own, through the words (*logoi*). Come now, let me shift from one argument (*logos*) to another. (10) Inspired incantations bring on pleasure and bring away grief through words (*logoi*). For conversing with the soul's opinion the power of incantation charms, persuades, and changes it by witchcraft. Two arts of witchcraft and magic have been discovered—errors of the soul and deceptions of opinion. (11) All who have persuaded or who persuade anyone of anything do so by fashioning false *logos*. For if on all subjects everyone had memory of the past, <a conception> of the present, and foreknowledge of the future, *logos* would not be similarly similar as it is for people who, as things are, cannot easily remember the past, consider the present, or divine the future. Thus, on most matters, most people make opinion an adviser to their soul. But opinion is fallible and uncertain and involves those who make use of it in fallible and uncertain successes. (12) What, then, keeps us from supposing that Helen too, against her will, came under the influence of *logoi* just as if she had been taken by the force of mighty men? For it was possible to see how persuasion prevails, which lacks the appearance of necessity but has the same power.¹ For *logos*, which persuaded, compelled the soul, which it persuaded, both to believe what was said and to approve what was done. Therefore, the one who persuaded, since he compelled, is unjust, and the one who was persuaded, since she was compelled by *logos*, is wrongly blamed. (13) As to the fact that persuasion added to *logos* makes whatever impression it likes on the soul, one should attend first to the accounts (*logoi*) of the astronomers, who replace one opinion with another and so make things incredible and unclear seem apparent to the eyes of opinion; second, to compulsory competitions that use speeches (*logoi*) in which a single *logos* written with art (*tekhnē*) but not spoken with truth delights and persuades a large crowd; and third, to contests of philosophers' accounts (*logoi*), in which is revealed how easily the swiftness of thought makes our confidence in our opinion change. (14) The power of *logos* has the same relation (*logos*) to the order of the soul as the order of drugs has to the nature of bodies.

1. Translator's note: The text of this sentence is corrupt. I follow Diels' suggestions (DK vol. 2, p. 291).

For as different drugs expel different humors from the body, and some put an end to sickness and others to life, so some *logoi* cause grief, others joy, some fear, others render their hearers bold, and still others drug and bewitch the soul through an evil persuasion. (15) It has been stated that if she was persuaded by *logos* she did not do wrong but was unfortunate. . . . (21) By my account (*logos*) I have removed ill fame from a woman. I have stayed faithful to the rule (*nomos*) I stipulated at the beginning of my *logos*. I have attempted to put an end to the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion. I wanted to write the *logos* as a praise of Helen and an entertainment for myself.

15. (82B3)² *On What Is Not or On Nature*

(66) He concludes as follows that nothing is: if <something> is, either what-is is or what-is-not <is>, or both what-is and what-is-not <are>. But it is the case neither that what-is is, as he will show, nor that what-is-not is, as he will justify, nor that both what-is and what-is-not are, as he will teach this too. Therefore, it is not the case that anything is.

(67) And in fact, what-is-not is not. For if what-is-not is, it will be and not be at the same time. For in that it is considered as not being, it will not be, but in that it is not being, on the other hand, it will be. But it is completely absurd for something to be and not be at the same time. Therefore, it is not the case that what-is-not is.

And differently: if what-is-not is, what-is will not be, since they are opposites, and if being is an attribute of what-is-not, not-being will be an attribute of what-is. But it is certainly not the case that what what-is is not, and so neither will what-is-not be.

(68) Further, neither is it the case that what-is is. For if what-is is, it is either eternal or generated or eternal and generated at the same time. But it is neither eternal nor generated nor both, as we will show. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is. For if what-is is eternal (we must begin at this point), it does not have any beginning. (69) For everything that comes to be has some beginning, but what is eternal, being ungenerated did not have a beginning. But if

it does not have a beginning, it is unlimited, and if it is unlimited it is nowhere. For if it is anywhere, that in which it is is different from it, and so what-is will no longer be unlimited, since it is enclosed in something. For what encloses is larger than what is enclosed, but nothing is larger than what is unlimited, and so what is unlimited is not anywhere. (70) Further, it is not enclosed in itself, either. For "that in which" and "that in it" will be the same, and what-is will become two, place and body (for "that in which" is place, and "that in it" is body). But this is absurd, so what-is is not in itself, either. And so, if what-is is eternal it is unlimited, but if it is unlimited it is nowhere, and if it is nowhere it is not. So if what-is is eternal, it is not at all.

(71) Further, what-is cannot be generated either. For if it has come to be it did so either from a thing that is or from a thing that is not. But it has come to be neither from what-is (for if it is a thing that is, it has not come to be, but already is), nor from what-is-not (for what-is-not cannot generate anything, since what generates anything must of necessity share in existence). Therefore it is not the case that what-is is generated either. (72) In the same ways, it is not both eternal and generated at the same time. For these exclude one another, and if what-is is eternal it has not come to be, and if it has come to be it is not eternal. So if what-is is neither eternal nor generated nor both together, what-is would not be.

(73) And differently, if it is, it is either one or many. But it is neither one nor many, as will be shown. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is. For if it is one, it is either a quantity or continuous or a magnitude or a body. But whichever of these it is, it is not one, but being a quantity, it will be divided, and if it is continuous it will be cut. Similarly if conceived as a magnitude it will not be indivisible. And if it chances to be a body, it will be three-dimensional, for it will have length, width, and depth. But it is absurd to say that what-is is none of these. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is one. (74) Further, it is not many. For if it is not one it is not many either. For the many is a compound of individual ones, and so since <the thesis that what-is is> one is refuted, <the thesis that what-is is> many is refuted along with it. But it is altogether clear from this that neither what-is nor what-is-not is.

(75) It is easy to conclude that neither is it the case that both of them are, what-is and what-is-not. For if what-is-not is and what-is is, then what-is-not will be the same as what-is as regards being.

2. Translator's note: This is a translation of the version in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.65–86 = DK 82B3. The shorter summary in pseudo-Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*, Chs. 5–6 (not in DK), is preferable at some points.

And for this reason neither of them is. For it is agreed that what-is-not is not, and what-is has been shown to be the same as this. So it too will not be. (76) However, if what-is is the same as what-is-not, it is not possible for both to be. For if both <are>, then they are not the same, and if <they are> the same, then <it is> not <the case that> both <are>. It follows that nothing is. For if neither what-is is nor what-is-not nor both, and nothing aside from these is conceived of, nothing is.

(77) Next in order is to teach that even if something is, it is unknowable and inconceivable by humans. For if things that are thought of, says Gorgias, are not things-that-are, what-is is not thought of. And reasonably so. For just as if things that are thought of have the attribute of being white, being thought of would be an attribute of white things, so if things that are thought of have the attribute of not being things-that-are, not to be thought of will necessarily be an attribute of things-that-are. (78) This is why the claim that if things that are thought of are not things-that-are, then what-is is not thought of is sound and preserves the sequence of argument. But things that are thought of (for we must assume this) are not things-that-are, as we will show. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is thought of. Further, it is completely clear that things that are thought of are not things-that-are. (79) For if things that are thought of are things-that-are, all things that are thought of are—indeed, however anyone thinks of them. But this is apparently false. For if someone thinks of a person flying or chariots racing in the sea, it is not the case that forthwith a person is flying or chariots racing in the sea. And so, it is not the case that things that are thought of are things-that-are. (80) In addition, if things that are thought of are things-that-are, things-that-are-not will not be thought of. For opposites have opposite attributes, and what-is-not is opposite to what-is. For this reason, if being thought of is an attribute of what-is, not being thought of will assuredly be an attribute of what-is-not. But this is absurd. For Scylla and Chimaera and many things-that-are-not are thought of. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is thought of. (81) And just as things that are seen are called visible because they are seen and things that are heard are called audible because they are heard, and we do not reject visible things because they are not heard or dismiss audible things because they are not seen (for each ought to be judged by its own sense, not by another), so also things that are

thought of will be, even if they may not be seen by vision or heard by hearing, because they are grasped by their own criterion. (82) So if someone thinks that chariots race in the sea, even if he does not see them, he ought to believe that there are chariots racing in the sea. But this is absurd. Therefore it is not the case that what-is is thought of and comprehended.

(83) But even if it should be comprehended it cannot be expressed to another. For if things-that-are are visible and audible and generally perceptible and in fact are external objects, and of these the visible are comprehended by vision and the audible by hearing and not vice versa, how can these be communicated to another? (84) For that by which we communicate is *logos*, but *logos* is not the objects, the things-that-are. Therefore it is not the case that we communicate things-that-are to our neighbors, but *logos*, which is different from the objects. So just as the visible could not become audible and vice versa, thus, since what-is is an external object, it could not become our *logos*. (85) But if it were not *logos*, it would not have been revealed to another. In fact, *logos*, he says, is composed from external things, that is, perceptible things, falling upon us. For from encountering flavor there arises in us the *logos* that is expressed with reference to this quality, and from the incidence on the senses of color arises the *logos* with reference to color. But if so, it is not the *logos* that makes manifest the external <object>, but the external <object> that comes to be communicative of the *logos*. (86) Further, it is not possible to say that *logos* is an object in the way visible and audible things are, so that objects that are can be communicated by it, which is an object that is. For, he says, even if *logos* is an object, it anyway differs from all other objects, and visible bodies differ most from *logos*. For the visible is grasped by one organ, *logos* by another. Therefore it is not the case that *logos* makes manifest the great number of objects, just as they do not reveal the nature of one another.

(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 765–86)

14.3. Prodicus

Prodicus was born on Ceos, an Aegean island near Attica, around 460 BCE, and probably lived into the fourth century. Growing wealthy from his teaching and speech-giving, he was well-traveled and was an acquaintance of Socrates (in some Platonic dialogues Socrates says that he had been a student