CHAPTER TWO
A PROTAGONIST OF THE SOPHISTIC MOVEMENT?
PROTAGORAS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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1. Is Protagoras the First Sophist?

1.1. Question about Protagoras

What is Protagoras? Is he a sophist? If so, what does that mean? This question is not an easy one to answer, first of all because hardly anything of his writings has survived. Moreover, when we ask whether Protagoras is a sophist, we may already be seeing him within the Platonic framework, which presupposes a strict dissociation of the philosopher and the sophist. I aim to shed new light on this question from the sources outside Plato.¹ It will prove to be the case that Protagoras presents philosophy with a serious challenge, which ancient thinkers found hard to deal with. For this reason Plato severely criticizes him as the first sophist.

One may wonder if it matters whether Protagoras was a sophist or a philosopher. Modern scholarship offers divergent views on the sophistic movement.²

(1) Many people did and still do criticize the sophists as teachers of apparent wisdom and empty rhetoric, or as manipulators of eristic arguments and fallacies. The sophists are bitterly condemned as amoralists in respect of relativism and atheism.³

¹ Diels-Kranz include about 50 testimonies of Protagoras, to which Capizzi 1955 adds 40. I have collected some 330 testimonies mentioning Protagoras or his thesis, from the 5th century BC to the Byzantine period. Contrary to the common pessimistic view that we have no important evidence outside Plato, I will show that there are a substantial number of ancient testimonies to contrast with, or support, Plato’s treatment. For this new evidence, see Notomi forthcoming.

² For a history of the views on the sophists, see Kerferd 1981a, Ch. 2; Kerferd 1981b; Schiappa 1991, Ch. 1.

³ Judging from the famous statement in “On gods” (reconstructed as DK 80 B 4, II.265.7–9),
(2) Since Hegel, the sophists are put down as subjectivists, who prepared the full-blown philosophy of Socrates and Plato. They are positively evaluated if only as a negative factor in the history of philosophy.

(3) The recent revival of the sophistic movement tends to appraise the sophists as truly important thinkers, i.e., as philosophers. They engaged in natural sciences (such as mathematics and astronomy), logic, linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, politics, ethics, epistemology, and religion.  

(4) Since Nietzsche, the sophists are praised as heroes of anti-philosophy; in contrast to Plato, who is elitist, anti-democratic, totalitarian, and absolutist, the sophists represent freedom, egalitarianism, and democracy. Their teaching of rhetoric and relativism attracts modern human and social scientists.

We can see Protagoras featuring in each of these views as a representative sophist.

1.2. ‘First Sophist’

All these views take it for granted that Protagoras was the first sophist. In fact, this is how Plato presents him: in the dialogue Protagoras, ‘Protagoras’ professes to be the first man who calls himself ‘sophist’, i.e., a professional teacher of virtue who charges a fee for education.

[1]

ἐγὼ οὖν τούτων τὴν ἔναντιαν ἀπασάν ὀδὸν ἑλήλυθα, καὶ ὁμολογῶ τε σοφιστῆς εἶναι καὶ παιδεύειν ἀνθρώπους (...).

Therefore, I have taken a course entirely different from theirs (i.e., disguised sophists such as Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, Orpheus and others), and I admit that I am a sophist and that I educate men.

Plato Prot. 317 B 3–5 (DK 80 A 5, II.256.13–15)

We usually take this declaration by the Protagoras of Plato as historical, and regard him as the protagonist of the sophistic movement. Later it became a commonplace that Protagoras was the first (πρῶτος) professional teacher.

Protagoras was not atheist in the strict sense of the word. Initially he was regarded as a sceptic or an agnostic, but at a later stage came to be included among the ‘atheists’. This change in treatment is examined in Notomi 2008.

4 Following the classical work of Grote 1850/1855, Ch. 67; this trend is represented by Kerferd 1981a.


6 In DL 9.51–54 (DK 80A.1, II.253.23–254.21), Protagoras is repeatedly (9 times) described...