Chapter 1

The Power of Speech: The Influence of the Sophists on Greek Politics

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1 Some Methodological Problems

What did it mean to be a ‘sophist’?1 ‘Sophist’ is one of those words whose history needs to be traced in order to fully understand who the people that bore that name were, what their role was, how they presented themselves to the public and, conversely, how they were perceived by their audience and more generally by the ordinary citizens of the cities where they happened to work. The sophists were not a school or a movement, properly speaking, but they had in common some research interests and a general approach which we may call ‘rationalistic:’ they all believed, in a rather aggressive way which to some interpreters reminded the iconoclastic attitude of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment philosophers, that the unfettered use of reason was the key to arrive at the truth of the matter, whatever that was.2 In addition, they all pursued their investigations to their logical conclusion regardless of how shocking and subversive this could be with respect to traditional beliefs and values: received opinions were regarded as prejudices and nothing could stand unchallenged before the bright light of reason.3 This fact put them inevitably in contrast with the traditional ‘masters of truth’ of Greece: the poets, whose

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1 I am not the first person to pose this question. For an introduction to the answer see Untersteiner 1954; Dillon and Gergel 2005; Gagarin and Woodruff 2008; O’Grady 2013.
2 I am here thinking of such works as Theodor Gomperz’s influential Griechische Denker, which described the impact of philosophy and the sophists on fifth-century Greek society as ‘the Age of Enlightenment;’ or W.K.C. Guthrie’s 3rd volume of his History of Greek Philosophy titled The Fifth-Century Enlightenment.
3 If this sounds too literary and emphatic one may see the aggressive stance displayed by Eteocles in his confrontation with Polinices in Euripides’ Phoenician Women: Eteocles speaks with the force of the newfound truth he reached with his reasoning. Conversely, one may observe the qualms that this ‘rationalistic’ attitude induced in many people in Sophocles’ dramatic treatment of Oedipus, who solved the enigma of the Sphinx with his reason unaided by supernatural forces, only to discover his own condition of παίδα τῆς ψυχῆς.
teaching the sophists challenged and eventually replaced, and the diviners and soothsayers, whose methods they rendered obsolete and ridiculed. These features made ordinary citizens uneasy, as it is reflected by such reactions as the decree of 432 named after the soothsayer Dioppeithes that sanctioned people who scrutinized τὰ μετέωρα, the celestial bodies, or by Aristophanes’ mocking portrait of Socrates, depicted as a ‘sophist’ at home in the clouds.

The sophists also shared some traits although they obviously had their characteristic individuality: they considered themselves professionals in some art and therefore asked for a fee for their teaching—a rather novel practice at the time, although it has to be noticed that other practitioners of the art of discourse (such as schoolmasters and writers of forensic discourses, the logographers) were paid too. Plato’s dismay and aristocratic disdain for this practice was thus unwarranted. They also differed in their political views: Protagoras was a democrat; Antiphon and Critias a moderate and a staunch oligarch, respectively. Being a sophist therefore did not issue in one specific political stance.

And here enters Plato. Today the word ‘sophist’ and its cognates—sophistic, sophistry—has mostly a derogatory connotation, while ‘sophisticated’ is ambiguous. However, Diogenes Laertius (1, 12) already remarked that σοφός and σοφιστής were once synonymous in identifying someone who possessed σοφία, wisdom of some kind. The reason for the derogatory undertone that the word ‘sophist’ acquired is twofold. In the first place there was the animosity that the sophists’ teaching stirred up in ordinary citizens: their critical attitude was perceived as subversive of current laws and moral values; they were in general perceived as a corrosive element of the traditional ethos and piety of the city. As Gagarin and Woodruff aptly put it: “In challenging traditional views, the sophists liked to use deliberately provocative, sometimes paradoxical arguments that seem aimed at capturing the audience’s attention rather than enlightening them.” Hence the trials for impiety that befell many sophists (and philosophers in general), including Socrates, who was not perceived as different from an Anaxagoras or a Protagoras. In addition, in fifth century democratic Athens, the most interesting and attractive city for the sophists,

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4 See for instance Protagoras’ statement that “the greatest part of a man’s education is to be clever about poetry” (Plato, Prot. 338e). Plato himself followed in the wake of the sophists in challenging the poets’ pretences about truth.

5 On the decree of Dioppeithes see Plutarch, Pericles, 32, 1; Dover 1976.

6 To mention only the most famous example. The Attic comedy is replete of lost plays mocking the ‘new intellectuals,’ their eager patrons and their gullible pupils.

7 Gagarin and Woodruff 2008.