Recovering the Sophists


The history of philosophy characterizes the Sophists by their opposition to the moral thought of Plato and Socrates. Since the history of philosophy is read as the *development* of philosophy, the Sophists are accordingly assigned a circumscribed niche in the maturing process of Greek thought. Attempts have been made to rescue them from this Hegelian frame. Grote saw them as liberal progressives, though stripped as a group of intellectual cohesion and with devalued originality. Twentieth century admirers found liberal allies in the attack on what Karl Popper called "the spell of Plato" whose political thought had come to be regarded as anti-democratic and anti-liberal. Jacqueline de Romilly’s *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* now moves to disengage the Sophists from their antagonism with Platonic-Socratic thought and view them as an integral part of the Athenian democracy.

By deliberately removing the Sophists from the developmentalism of the history of philosophy that with its "problems and prejudices ... turns its back on history as it was lived" (p. xi), she places them in a close context of fifth-century Athenian culture, seeking to recreate "the dialogue that took place between the Sophists and Athenian public opinion" (p. xiv). This is not an easy task. The Sophists’ own words survive largely in fragments without supporting context, while beliefs others credit to them come predominantly from hostile sources, particularly Plato. His antipathy to democracy, Sophists, and rhetoric raises the ever present possibility of distortion if not actual misrepresentation.

Plato effectively sets an agenda for anyone trying to understand the Sophists. While de Romilly agrees he is our best guide, the intractability of the Socratic problem should remind us of the dangers in relying on him unguardedly. Gregory Vlastos argues that even with Socrates, Plato’s interest was "producing, not reproducing Socratic philosophizing;" Socrates
says what Plato thinks "would be the most reasonable thing for Socrates to be saying" (Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher, Ithaca NY, 1991, p. 50). If Plato operates in this fashion - more Thucydidean - with the admired Socrates, we should hardly expect a more rigorous historiography in the case of men subjected to his polemics. At times de Romilly succumbs to Plato's charms, citing for example his rich portrait of Protagoras as "proof" of the extent to which Plato reproduced "discussions that had really taken place and theses that had really been defended" (p. 47). This is no proof, however. The rich details of an encounter set in the 430's, before Plato was born, could be equally convincing evidence of Plato's imaginative genius rather than the "extremely faithful imitation" found by de Romilly.

Fortunately, the conditions of setting the Sophists in their fifth-century context insulate her from most Platonic blandishments. She must free them from the Platonic web in order to evaluate the Sophistic contribution, positive or negative, to the political life and thought of fifth-century Athens, the city that gave them their place in history. An explicit objective of the book is to rescue the reputation of the Sophists from the negative connotations of "sophistry" and above all from the epigones whose immoralism violently betrayed the serious purposes of the original generation, the "great Sophists" Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, even Antiphon and Thrasymachus who are placed here in a new and positive light. Not denying the "disconcerting negative force" (p. 95) frequently part of Sophistic ideas, de Romilly argues that they all made constructive contributions as well, and claims that "only those in a hurry or motivated by ambition" (p.185), men such as Callicles and Alcibiades, could have retained one aspect of the Sophists' thought while ignoring the other. This is de Romilly's focus, presented as a discursive-contextual history of ideas rather than an analytical treatment of Sophistic thought.