The Sophists and Relativism

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It is frequently alleged that the Sophists were relativists. Claims to this effect can be found in general histories of philosophy, in histories of Greek philosophy, in studies of the Sophists, in studies of relativism, and elsewhere. Sometimes it is moral or ethical relativism specifically that is ascribed to them, at other times a broader relativism concerning knowledge, truth or reality in general; but that the Sophists were some species of relativists is something of a commonplace. In fact, I am not aware that it has ever been explicitly contested in print.

My contention, however, is that this view of the Sophists is largely erroneous. There is but one Sophist, Protagoras, whom we have reason to regard as a relativist in any deep or interesting sense. It is not entirely clear whether even he deserves this label. But if he does, it is solely on the basis of his famous doctrine that “Man is the measure of all things” (DK 80B1) – a doctrine which he is never said to have shared with any of the other Sophists. The tendency to describe the Sophists as a group as relativists derives, I think, from at least two sources; first, from a tendency to regard Protagoras as representative of, and indeed authoritative for, the whole movement, and second, from a too hasty examination of the relation between the Sophists and Plato. On the first point, it is no doubt true that

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Protagoras, given his stature and his historical position, influenced other Sophists in many ways. But this does not, of course, imply that the Sophists in general imitated him or agreed with him in every respect. Whether or not other Sophists subscribed to some form of relativism – even assuming, for the moment, that Protagoras did so – has to be determined by looking at the evidence concerning them, not him; and, as I shall argue, the evidence does not support any such conclusion. As for the Sophists and Plato, it is clear that Plato was opposed to much of what the Sophists stood for, and that his mature philosophy includes a view of truth, including moral truth, as robustly objective, rather than relative. One may be tempted to think, therefore, that objectivism versus relativism must have been the issue around which the dispute between them revolved. However, this would be a needless, as well as a groundless, hypothesis. There is plenty for Plato to have objected to in the Sophists' attitudes and activities, quite apart from any supposed relativism on their part; as I shall suggest in closing, his antipathy to them can be uncontroversially accounted for on grounds which have nothing to do with relativism.

Clearly, the plausibility of my claim depends in part on what relativism itself is taken to be. The term "relativism" is often used very loosely; and the resulting confusion is only increased when "relativist" is employed, as it frequently is, as a term of philosophical abuse. This unclarity is very probably a further factor responsible for the generic labeling of the Sophists as relativists; certainly, those who perpetuate this view of the Sophists do not usually explain what they mean by the term. In any case, it is essential that I spend a little time explaining exactly what I mean by the term "relativism", when I deny that the Sophists in general adhered to relativism. There is, I shall concede, a weak sense of "relativism" in which many of the Sophists may plausibly be viewed as ethical relativists. However, I shall be concerned to distinguish this from relativism in the deep and interesting sense – the sense in which, as I said, it is only Protagoras who has any serious claim to be regarded as a relativist.

My argument will begin, then, with a characterization of the deep form of relativism. I shall not, at this point, refer directly to the Sophists; I shall simply define relativism, using contemporary terminology, as precisely as I can. This approach may perhaps seem perverse or incongruous in a paper purporting to deal with ancient thinkers. But the term "relativism" is, after all, a modern philosophical coinage; and it was not coined, as far as I know.

2 The confusion over the use of the term, and its pejorative connotations, are well discussed by Mark B. Okrent, "Relativism, Context and Truth", in Is Relativism Defensible?, The Monist 67, no. 3 (1984), pp. 341-58.