

The Sophists:

Or Oh My Gosh, They're Paying People to Teach Philosophy

I. How did early philosophers make a living?

A. Philosophy started as a pastime for the intellectual elite of the wealthy class.

B. Therefore, we can assume that early philosophers were either:

1. Rich
2. Got gifts, meals, and parties from those that were rich
3. Didn't give a darn about 1 or 2, but managed to keep from starving because people in 1 gave enough of 2 to keep them alive.

II. The Big Change

A. As Greece developed, a middle class emerged that made money through trade and crafts.

B. These folks forced changes to make city-state government more democratic.

C. A need grew up among the middle class to be able to speak in government assemblies and court cases. These were skills that only the rich had.

D. Philosophers stepped up and offered to teach the middle class for money.

E. These teacher philosophers were looked down upon by the philosophers on the upper class gravy train and called Sophists.

1. Sophists generally claimed to teach areté (excellence) in the management of one's own affairs.

- a. The claim that areté could be taught and was not inherited solely by aristocrats alone was a major threat to the powerful.
- b. The question of what areté truly was became a theme for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (and us!).

F. Influences on Sophist Philosophy

1. Teaching was what the Sophists were getting paid for and teaching people how to win lawsuits influenced their view of the world.

2. Their clients, the middle class, wanted to rise in society and held a grudge against the rich who they believed held them down.

G. In Athens, the leader of the democratic party, Pericles, had a favorable

attitude toward intellectuals of all types.

1. He was a rationalist who had been trained in music and politics by early sophists.
2. He associated with the Pre-Socratics Zeno of Elea and Anaxagoras and debated moral problems with the sophist Protagoras.

III. Famous Sophists

A. **Protagoras** (circa 480-circa 411 B.C.)

1. Protagoras is generally considered to be the first person to support himself though charging for lectures. He was a friend of Pericles and Euripides and was respected by Plato and Socrates who generally disdained sophists in general.
2. Protagoras said “If you associate with me, on that very day you will return a better man than you came.”
3. He taught that the best way to achieve success was through a careful and prudent acceptance of traditional customs, not because they were true, but because understanding and manipulating them were useful.
4. In fact, all customs were relative, not absolute. There is no “truth” because everything is filtered through human subjectivity.
5. Therefore, the only standard left to judge an action is the standard of advantage (expediency). If an action furthers your interest, it is good.
 - a. Protagoras did not believe this gave carte blanche for morally reprehensible actions. Although truth was relative, he claimed, it was still possible to distinguish between whether an action was morally better or worse.
6. “Man is the Measure of All Things” said Protagoras, the slogan of many humanists down to the present day.
7. His insistence on subjectivity, relativism, and expediency are the cornerstones of all sophism.

B. **Gorgias** (circa 483 BC-375BC)

1. He was a former student of Empedocles who apparently did not share his teacher’s infatuation with volcanos.
2. He is famous for making and defending the following three assertions:
 - a. Nothing really exists.

- b. Even if something did exist, it couldn't be known.
 - c. And even if something existed and could be known, knowledge of it couldn't be imparted to others!
- 3. Scholars still debate whether
 - a. He was being serious
 - b. He didn't get his wine properly watered down at the local taverna
 - c. He was making a joke to prove the power of his rhetorical skills
(Would a teacher really argue that knowledge couldn't be taught?)
- 4. Most scholars believe the point was that if you could "prove" these absurdities, you could "prove" anything and that philosophy was meaningless.
 - a. Gorgias eventually abandoned philosophy entirely and worked exclusively teaching rhetoric
 - b. Many philosophy students still believe the point of philosophy is to be able to "prove" whatever they want to believe.
 - i. If you believe this, make your point in the most absurd (and loudest) method possible and never, NEVER listen honestly to another's viewpoint.
 - c. Consistent application of the Gorgian technique might get you an A in rhetoric, but an F in philosophy.
 - i. But, as the Sophists might argue, as long as that makes you happy....
- 5. A kinder interpretation is that Gorgias was trying to show a distinction between thought and existence. If thought and existence were truly the same, then anything you thought would suddenly exist. Interestingly, Gorgias also apparently argued that words and sensations must be measured by different standards even though both originate in the mind. Looked at from this perspective, Gorgias was struggling with some of the issues of philosophical psychology.

C. **Thrasymachus**

- 1. A sophist who appears in Plato's dialogue, the **Republic**, where his view is shot down easily by Socrates, but many philosophers have used his insight in subsequent centuries (Karl Marx, for example).

2. He said, “Justice is in the interest of the stronger,” or more simply, “Might makes Right.”
3. His point was that all arguments about ethics, morality, and justice are meaningless unless they are analyzed as a struggle for power.

D. Callicles

1. Callicles claimed that traditional morality is just a clever way for the weak masses to enslave the powerful individual.
2. It is “naturally right,” according to Callicles, that the strong should ignore morality entirely and use their power.
3. He argued that power is good because using it promotes survival, and that survival is good because it allows us to seek as much pleasure (food, drink, sex) as possible.
4. Maximizing pleasure both in quality and quantity is, according to Callicles, the ultimate goal of life.

E. Critias

1. Critias was Plato’s uncle and had been a student of Socrates.
2. He actually ruled Athens as the cruelest of the Thirty Tyrants.
3. His “contribution” to the art of philosophy is his belief that the clever ruler controls his subjects by encouraging their fear of nonexistent gods.

F. Hippias

1. A contemporary of Socrates, Plato wrote two dialogues featuring Hippias which show him to be both vain and arrogant. A further indication that Hippias might have been ancient Athens’ Martha Stewart is his claim to universal knowledge. He made his reputation by his prodigious memory and the fact that he once appeared at the Olympic games gorgeously attired in a costume he had made himself right down to the ring on his finger.
2. Like many sophists he made a distinction between laws of nature and human laws, but he appears to be the first to use natural law as a basis for morality.
 - a. He argued human laws may be different in every country, but that there was an element of right common to all which derived from the laws of nature.

b. He also held that the good and wise of all countries were naturally akin and should regard themselves as citizens of a single state.

IV. A Summary of the Sophists Views

A. Education

1. Man should be trained to take care of himself at all times and advance himself in his community at all costs.
2. Education should promote the happiness of the individual and insure his success.
3. In a democratic society the best way to insure both happiness and advancement was to focus education on debate and oratory.

B. Man's Place in the Universe

1. Speculation about the universe didn't win lawsuits
2. "Man is the Measure of All Things" said Protagoras. The most important contribution of the Sophists was to change the direction of philosophy towards man and his relationships.
 - a. This is a plus in developing the freedom we prize today, but
 - b. The anthropocentric view it promotes is partly responsible for the environmental crisis we find ourselves in today.
3. Their theory of knowledge, explained below, made them skeptical of man's power to understand the universe

C. Fate vs. Free Will

1. Man was not subject to any inevitable laws of the universe, but was free to determine his own fate

D. What are Good and Evil?

1. If man is the measure of all things, then man is the measure of good and evil.
2. Each man has the right to determine for himself what is good and what is evil.
3. Many sophists taught that morality was mere convention like a habit. They said there were no moral laws, no all-inclusive principles of right and wrong
4. Their inevitable conclusion was that each man should live as he desired, getting what he wanted by any means possible, and framing

his own code of good and evil.

5. Protagoras argued that whatever seemed right and admirable in a particular city state was indeed right as long as that opinion holds. Thus, he did not necessarily believe that truth was completely subjective as did other sophists.

E. The Nature of God

1. The Sophists, as free-thinkers, were extremely skeptical of the popular belief in the Olympic gods.

2. Protagoras was banished from Athens for professing agnosticism, the belief that man couldn't know if gods exist.

a. Travelling to Sicily after his banishment, Protagoras was lost at sea. An accident or Neptune's wrath, you decide.

G. Man and the State

1. Many sophists drew distinctions between laws of nature which were real and laws of man which were simple conventions or customs.

a. The idea of laws of nature and laws of man was to have a profound influence on the history of philosophy and government.

b. Reaction to this perceived dichotomy was mixed among sophists.

i. Sophists like Callicles and Thrasymachus used this distinction to promote their "might makes right" theories. Claiming that the dominance of the strong was only "natural."

ii. Protagoras, however, believed left to nature man would destroy himself, and that human laws were necessary for civilized communal life

iii. Finally, some sophists argued that if all humans shared a basic human nature then human conventions like slavery or the prejudice against Barbarians by Greeks were wrong and could be changed.

c. The ideas of Hippias and others who shared his beliefs and those expressed in 1biii influenced both the Cynic and Stoic schools of philosophy.

i. The Stoic analysis of natural law advanced human freedom

and influenced Roman law making which in turn became a cornerstone of our own system of government.

H. Ideas and Thinking

1. In keeping with their view of the universe, they held that the knowing subject, man, was more important than the object of knowledge, nature.
2. They concluded that knowledge depended wholly on the individual knower. My ideas are true for me, your ideas are true for you.
3. Sure and universal knowledge was impossible they claimed.

IV. Implications

A. Good News

1. In keeping with the goals of their middle class clients, the Sophists worked hard to overturn conventional views of human relations and promote original, individual thought on all subjects.
2. Also in keeping with the middle class, they asserted the value and importance of each individual.
3. They offered a sharp critique of the old philosophy of subjugation to the state (and the upper class rulers).
4. Their theory of knowledge, emphasis on logic and study of the meaning of words raised the standards of philosophical argument.
5. Their choice of subjects refocused philosophy on topics still important today: theories of knowledge, politics, and ethics.

B. Bad News

1. Their moral beliefs could be used to justify any evil.
2. The political philosophy of many sophists replaced an all powerful state with complete anarchy.
3. Their general view undermined all belief in spirituality.
4. The philosophical ideas and terms associated with the Sophists have had a great influence on current philosophy especially the “pop” philosophy most Americans carry around with them without analyzing it. Socrates recognized these views as mental deadends:
 - a. Relativism-At its most basic, the belief there are no absolute values. All values are relative to a particular time, place, and culture.

b. Subjectivism-The view that there are no objective truths or values; all truths and values are relative to the subjectivity of the individual. This is an extreme version of relativism.

c. Skepticism-A denial of the possibility of knowledge. General skepticism denies the possibility of any knowledge. Skepticism about particular areas of knowledge or about particular arguments is often justified.

d. Nihilism-The view that nothing exists or that nothing deserves to exist.

5. Their apparent commitment to complete subjectivity made them easy targets for Aristophanes and Plato—and people have been laughing at them ever since (even while their ideas have become the basis for some of the worst (and best!) ideas in contemporary society).