

CHAPTER 3

Sophistic Method and Practice

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1. Problems with the Sophists

The term “sophists” refers to certain Greeks active in the latter half of the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE. Beyond this, the phrase is problematic. Much of the difficulty relates to Plato’s influential appropriation of the term and criticisms of the men to whom he applies it. Hence, in order to make headway in an inquiry into sophistic method and practice, we need to engage with Plato’s treatment and attempt to transcend it.

Before turning to Plato, let us briefly note what I will call the “general sense” of the word “sophist.” “*Sophistês*” derives from the noun “*Sophia*,” which means “knowledge, wisdom, expertise, specialized skill or craft.” The suffix “-*tês*” indicates a practitioner or participant in a sphere of activity designated by the nominal root. A sophist is, therefore, someone who engages in or practices wisdom, knowledge, expertise, or a specialized skill or craft. As such, “sophist” has very broad application. It includes, among others, politicians, poets, philosophers, craftsmen, soothsayers, and diviners. This is too broad to permit a meaningful inquiry into sophistic method and practice.

By contrast, in Plato’s hands “sophist” acquires a narrow Athena-centric sense and also, crucially, a pejorative one. The following conditions are essential to this Platonic conception. The sophists are foreigners. They travel to Athens offering instruction or cultivation in *aretê* (excellence). But they are incapable of providing what they claim to. Hence, the sophists are pseudo-practitioners of *sophia*. Furthermore, they offer their instruction for fees. Their motive is to make money, and they target wealthy and naive Athenian youths. In short, the sophists are unethical as well as incompetent.

The opening scene of Plato’s *Protagoras*—arguably the most important ancient text in which the sophists are represented—well conveys this critical, indeed, hostile attitude. An aristocratic Athenian youth Hippocrates approaches Socrates in great excitement after learning that the famous Protagoras of Abdera has recently arrived in Athens and is staying at the house of his wealthy patron Callias. Hippocrates claims that he will pay

whatever he can to acquire Protagoras' *sophia*. Socrates warns Hippocrates against submitting his soul or mind to such men. He compares the sophist to an itinerant huckster who touts his wares regardless of their value.

In Plato's sense, the sophists are, then, not even a subset of the sophists in the general sense. Moreover, as pseudo-wise men, Plato's sophists either lack methods and practices or employ duplicitous ones. Giving an account of such sophistic method and practice would be analogous to giving an account of either blundering or stealing. Indeed, Aristotle's logical treatise *Sophistic Refutations* is devoted to exposing and clarifying argumentative fallacies.

Since neither Plato's nor the general sense of "sophist" encourages an account of sophistic method and practice, it is questionable whether there is an alternative approach. The following discussion offers a sort of middle course by suggesting alterations to Plato's sense of "sophist" that in turn yield a subset of sophists in the general sense. What is ultimately important here, however, is not to decisively lay claim to a revamped use of "sophist"; it is to clarify why and how Plato appropriated and distorted the term as he did, to consider to what extent those he branded "sophists" were guilty of his charges, and to situate their actual contributions within the cultural and intellectual currents of their day. By this means, we may offer a sensible account of sophistic method and practice.

2. Plato's Sophists

Let us begin with the principal figures Plato identifies as sophists. For now I will call them "Plato's sophists." In *Protagoras*, Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490–420), Hippias of Elis (c. 470–400), and Prodicus of Ceos (c. 460–390) are the sophists Hippocrates and Socrates encounter when they arrive at Callias' house. In addition, scholars consistently include Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483–375) and Thrasymachus of Chalcedon (c. 459–400) among prominent sophists Plato features in his dialogues, specifically in *Gorgias* and *Republic*, book 1. In Plato's corpus, Thrasymachus is, in fact, nowhere called a "sophist." However, he satisfies Plato's conditions for being one. A significant part of Plato's *Gorgias* is devoted to a discussion of rhetoric, Gorgias' special so-called craft (*technê*). Within the discussion, Socrates initially, carefully distinguishes sophistry from rhetoric (464b–465d). He maintains that both are debased forms of politics in that they seek to please rather than to improve citizens. Rhetoric is a debased form of legislation; sophistry, a debased form of judicial administration. According to this passage, Gorgias is not a sophist. On the other hand, later in the dialogue, Socrates overturns his earlier distinction and asserts that rhetoricians are sophists (520a–b). Moreover, in several other dialogues, Gorgias is mentioned, in passing, among others as a sophist. Finally, Gorgias also satisfies Plato's conditions for being a sophist. Consequently, I will include Gorgias among Plato's sophists and return to the relation between rhetoric and sophistry later.

Plato's view that the sophists were foreigners in Athens is misleading. When they were in Athens, Plato's sophists were foreigners. But none of them spent most or even much of their lives in Athens. Protagoras, who was an associate of Pericles and Callias, probably spent the most time in Athens of any of Plato's sophists. We know of at least two visits he made. We know of only one visit Gorgias made to Athens. He seems to have been particularly active in Sicily. Given Elis' alliance with Sparta during the Peloponnesian

War, it is unlikely that Hippias spent much time in Athens in the last decades of the fifth century. Plato, of course, focused on the sophists in Athens because he was especially concerned with their influence on the young men of his city-state. Generally speaking, however, Plato's sophists traveled throughout the Greek Mediterranean, wherever opportunities existed, and they were welcomed.

Plato's sophists sought fees and were paid. As such, they were itinerant professionals—at least, they engaged in itinerant professionalism. But itinerant professionalism had a long history in the Greek world, extending as far back as the epic-singer Demodocus in Homer's *Iliad*. Between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE, there were itinerant professionals of Greek and non-Greek origin working throughout the Mediterranean; for example, in the fields of poetry, music, painting, and sculpture; architecture and engineering, medicine, athletics, soldiery, soothsaying and divination; and in crafts of all kinds: ceramics, masonry, metallurgy, and smithery. Such figures traveled to courts, city-states, and festivals. They were paid or otherwise remunerated for their labor, works, and compositions; for public performances, readings, or displays, as well as for private instruction.

Plato's sophists were not even especially distinctive insofar as the activities for which they were paid principally involved speech or writing in prose form. For example, the historian Herodotus was paid for public readings; Stesimbrotus of Thasos was paid for lectures on Homer's poetry; and there is evidence that the philosopher Zeno of Elea was paid for instruction.

I assume that cultivating *areté* or making (young) men good or better was one among several of Plato's sophists' objectives. Such a good-making objective is compatible with other objectives, for example, making money, entertaining or giving pleasure, fostering diplomacy, and self-aggrandizement or self-perfection. Furthermore, the concept of a good-making objective need not be construed narrowly as an ethical or moral one. When he uses the term "*areté*," to mean "excellence" or "goodness," Plato specifically means "human" excellence or the goodness "of a man." But according to traditional Greek views, physical health, beauty, or strength are also constitutive of the excellence or goodness of a human or man, as are so-called external and relational goods such as wealth, political power, social status, and glory.

Plato himself is principally interested in the cultivation of the *psyché*. Accordingly, he focuses on his sophists as cultivators of the *psyché*. Certainly, Plato's sophists did—once again, among other things—contribute to the cultivation of the *psyché*. But Plato's distorting influence operates here too. The theoretical dichotomy of body (*sôma*) and *psyché* was achieved in the latter half of the fifth century. Socrates seems to have been a key figure in the process, and Plato and his philosophical heirs concretize this distinction. The word "*psyché*," which they employ and which may be rendered as "soul" or "mind," can cover the animating or vital force of a living being, its emotionality, motivation, and character, as well as its intellect and cognitive capacities. It is unclear, however, whether all of Plato's sophists subscribed to the distinction between body and *psyché* so conceived or employed the term "*psyche*" to refer to the substance, faculty, or complex of faculties responsible for all of the psychological or living functions just enumerated. Furthermore, even when their activity did involve cultivation of the *psyché*, Plato's sophists still might not have viewed this as their goal. For example, some might have viewed their goal as facilitating the attainment of political power or honor, in which case cultivation of the *psyché* would be instrumental.

Translators of Plato often render the word “*arête*” not as “excellence,” but as “virtue,” meaning “ethical or moral virtue.” In doing so, however, they obscure something momentous: the distinctiveness of Socrates’ claim that ethical virtue constitutes the value of a human being. Furthermore, Socrates maintains that ethical virtue is knowledge of a certain kind, namely, knowledge of good and bad. It is precisely this that Socrates and Plato conceive as *sophia*. Consequently, in denying that the sophists possess *sophia*, Plato and Socrates are precisely denying that they possess ethical knowledge. Of course, Socrates himself lacks *sophia*. But in contrast to the sophists, as Plato portrays them, Socrates is made to acknowledge this lack, indeed, to highlight it.

Now, if human or manly cultivation solely consisted in the acquisition of ethical knowledge or ethical virtue, Plato might have some grounds for disqualifying his sophists as cultivators of the *psyché*. But, momentous as Socrates’ conception of *sophia* and cultivation is, why should we accept such a narrow view? Setting aside the controversial claim that ethical virtue is a kind of knowledge, there are various ways of cultivating humans and citizens aside from improving their virtue. The smooth functioning of societies requires from their members more than ethical virtue, however crucially it requires that.

Contra Plato, I assume, then, that incompetence or lack of integrity is not a distinctive feature of his sophists. In this respect, Plato’s sophists do not differ from other philosophers, cultivators, educators, specialists, or consultants. Rather, it is Socrates’ and Plato’s conception of “*sophia*” as ethical virtue, conceived as ethical knowledge, their view of themselves as “*philosophoi*,” lovers of *sophia*, and of their intellectual activity as “*philosophia*,” the desire for and pursuit of *sophia*, that is anomalous. Later I will consider the extent to which Plato’s sophists were, in fact, concerned with ethics. Presently, granting that they possessed *sophia*, at least in a sense that does not entail ethical virtue or knowledge, the modified Platonic sense of “sophist” refers to a set of late fifth- and early fourth-century Greek men who engaged in itinerant professionalism and whose activity principally involved speech and writing in prose form, one of whose objectives was to impart *areté* to (young) men or to make them good or better.

Because of their success and, of course, the negative impression it made on Plato, we have more information regarding Plato’s sophists than others. Hence, I will continue to focus on the method and practice of these men and hereafter simply refer to them as “sophists.” In the next section, I discuss the wide range of their activity and, more briefly, the roles of rhetoric and ethics within that activity. Toward the end of the discussion, I briefly touch on some lesser-known sophists and their works.

3. The Sophists’ Activities

It is helpful to distinguish what I will call “kinds” of sophistic activity from contents of sophistic activity. Among kinds, we may distinguish three: first, presentations, performances, or displays to audiences; second, composition and dissemination of written works; and third, private instruction. These kinds may be conceived more succinctly as public oral, public written, and private activities. One might also distinguish public from private written works, at least, written works for general audiences and written works for specialized audiences. But I will stick with the trifold distinction. One may also distinguish sub-kinds of public oral activity. For example, it is one thing to give a presentation at a Hellenic festival

such as the Olympic games or a state-sponsored civic occasion such as a military funeral; it is another to present before a smaller and narrower assembly of guests at the home of a patron or in an athletic training ground, that is, a gymnasium or palaistra.

In a number of his dialogues, Plato portrays the sophists presenting or having just presented in private homes and gymnasia. It appears that a question- and-answer period typically followed such presentations. These events could serve as advertisements for or preliminary to private instruction, but they could also be ends in themselves. We also know that the sophists presented on a larger scale. For example, Gorgias once delivered Athens' annual funeral oration to honor military victims and at least once a speech at the Olympic games. Hippias also presented at Olympia, perhaps on multiple occasions.

The practice of presenting or performing at civic or Hellenic events appears closely related to ambassadorial service. Indeed, most of the sophists served as ambassadors. Consider Hippias' claims in Plato's *Hippias Major*: "Whenever Elis needs to conduct any affairs with other city-states, she always comes to me first out of all the citizens and chooses me as an ambassador" (281a). Compare also Socrates' response: "That man Gorgias, the sophist from Leontini, arrived here from his home as an ambassador on public business, since he was the ablest of the men of Leontini at conducting communal affairs, and he seemed to speak excellently in public; yet also, in private, by giving demonstrations and associating with the young men, he made and received a great deal of money from our city. Or take that friend of ours Prodicus—he often went to other places on public business; and the climax was when he recently arrived from Ceos on public business: he spoke in the Council and ... <gave> private demonstrations ..." (282a–c).

In addition, we have several testimonies regarding other political and diplomatic activities of the sophists. In a speech at the Olympic games in 408 BCE, Gorgias exhorted the Greek city-states to pursue concord (*homonoia*) and to collaborate against the threat of the barbarians. Around 413, Thrasymachus composed a speech, delivered to the citizens of Larisa, encouraging resistance against the Macedonian King Archelaus. And in 443, at the request of the Athenian statesman Pericles, Protagoras apparently composed laws for the Athenian-led Panhellenic colony of Thurii.

Evidently, the goals of the various kinds and sub-kinds of sophistic activity differ, even when they are complementary or overlapping. Moreover, event-type or activity-kind and -content are clearly interrelated. The sophists responded to the varied interests of their audiences, patrons, and clients. Versatility and polymathy would, thus, be among the keys to sophistic success. For example, testimonies suggest that Gorgias could extemporize on any subject presented to him. Likewise, in Plato's *Hippias Minor*, Hippias explains: "I travel to the solemn assembly of the Greeks at Olympia ... and present myself at the sanctuary as both a speaker, on whatever subject anyone wishes from those that I have prepared for demonstration, and as ready to answer whatever anyone wishes to ask me" (363c).

Hippias, in particular, was famed for his polymathy. His skills and competencies apparently extended beyond the verbal and intellectual. Consistent with his high, perhaps supreme estimation of the virtue of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), Hippias is said to have once presented himself at the Olympic games with metal, ceramic, textile, and leather works he had crafted himself (*HpMi* 368b–d). Hippias also speaks of his various poetic compositions: epic, tragic, and dithyrambic. In addition, we have independent testimony that Hippias composed elegiac verses for a monument dedicated at Olympia

commemorating a chorus of boys drowned at sea (Pausanias, 5.25.4). In light of this, the activity of the sophists was not even limited to writing and speech in prose.

The content of the sophists' writings was also highly diverse. For example, an ancient catalog of Protagoras' works includes, among other things: *On Wrestling*, *On Mathematics*, *On the State*, *On Ambition*, *On the Original State of Things*, *On What is in Hades*, and *Opposing Arguments* (also known as *On Truth*). Put succinctly, albeit anachronistically, the range of subjects here appears to include philosophy of mathematics, political theory, ethics, cosmology or social anthropology, eschatology, and epistemology.

Now, one must treat ancient catalogs carefully, at least for three reasons. A title may not refer to an authentic work or to any work at all. One work may pass under multiple names. And the basic content of works cannot straightforwardly be inferred from the titles. *On Wrestling* is a good example of this last problem. One might think that Protagoras' text was a manual on wrestling. (In fact, in Plato's dialogue *Lysis*, Socrates describes the character Mikkos, the trainer and owner of the wrestling school where the dialogue is set, as a sophist 204a.) But comments on Protagoras' text in Plato's *Sophist* suggest otherwise. Two characters in this dialogue, the Eleatic philosopher and Theaetetus, are discussing the areas in which sophistic instruction enables students to become good debaters or speakers: "(E): Those things that concern technical skills both in general and specifically, and which are needed for arguing against any actual practitioner ... (T): I take it you mean Protagoras' work on wrestling and other technical skills" (232d). Presumably, then, Protagoras' text was not a how-to manual on wrestling, but a manual on or perhaps demonstration of speaking effectively about wrestling and other technical skills.

I have already noted Hippias' polymathy. He appears to have been particularly noted for astronomical and mathematical studies. For example, at Callias' house in Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates observes: "Various people were sitting around Hippias on benches. They appeared to be asking questions concerns natural science and astronomy, while he, sitting on his chair, clarified and explained each of the things they asked about" (315c). In his *Commentary on Book I of Euclid's Elements*, Proclus mentions Hippias' contribution to the solution to the geometrical problem of trisecting a rectilinear angle, using a curve called the "quadratrix" (Friedlein 272.3–10).

One of Hippias' works is referred to as *Collection* (*Synagogé*). Bruno Snell and others have compellingly argued that this text is the earliest example of doxography. That is, Hippias' *Collection* consisted of a collection of Hippias' predecessors; opinions on subjects in natural science or philosophy. Clement of Alexandria appears to preserve its opening words: "Of these things, some may have been said by Orpheus, some by Musaeus briefly in various places, some by Hesiod and Homer, some by other poets, others in prose works of Greek and non-Greek writers; but by putting together the most significant and kindred items, I will compose a discourse that is both new and varied" (*Strom.* 6.15).

Hippias also appears to have composed historical and chronological works. One of these consisted of a list of Olympic victors. In Plato's *Hippias Major*, Hippias explains that when he travels to Sparta, the Lacedaimonians desire to hear him speak about the genealogies of heroes and men and how city-states were founded in ancient times, "in a word, all ancient history" (285e). In addition to indicating Hippias' interest or competence in history of certain kinds, this passage also corroborates the point that the sophists tailored their presentations to their audiences.

In a celebrated scene of Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates and Protagoras offer competing interpretations of a poem, Simonides' ode to Scopas. The discussion is initially motivated by Protagoras' claim that the ability to discuss poetry is the central constituent of a man's education. Whether or not the historical Protagoras thought this, commentary on and explication of celebrated works within the Greek poetic tradition figured prominently within sophistic activity. This practice was continuous with the centrality of poetry in primary Greek education and culture broadly. Such commentary and explication was diverse, including semantic, linguistic, and stylistic points, as well as interpretation of broader content. For example, Protagoras is known to have distinguished different kinds of speech-act, including commands and prayers. Aristotle, who reports this, also informs us that Protagoras applied some of these distinctions in a criticism of Homer's diction (*Poetics* 1456b).

Prodicus was especially famed for his contribution to the study of what the Greeks called "correctness of words" (*orthotés onomatôn*). Testimonies indicate that he offered introductory and advanced lectures on the subject, charging distinct fees for each. Once again, this exemplifies the interrelation of activity type, activity content, and activity objective. In one parodic passage of *Protagoras*, Plato alludes to Prodicus' interest in semantic distinctions by having the character Prodicus rattle off subtle distinctions between near synonyms. I myself have argued that Prodicus was not interested in clarifying subtle distinctions in meaning according to common usage. Rather, he was interested in reforming linguistic usage to correspond to distinctions between natural kinds. For example, Galen reports that Prodicus, in his work *On Human Nature*, distinguished two kinds of phlegm and applied distinct terms to each (*nat. fac.* 2.9).

Generally speaking, the sophists' intellectual interests correspond to those of the so-called Presocratics and other intellectuals of the late Archaic and early Classical periods. Protagoras' epistemological work *On Truth* appears to be a critical response to Parmenides' *On Being*. Gorgias' *On Non-Being* is also a response to Parmenides. Arguably, Protagoras' *On Mathematics* involved criticism of the Eleatics or Pythagoreans. Hippias' astronomical work is continuous with earlier philosophical explanations of the cosmos, in addition to contributing to the increasing development of astronomy as a specialized discipline. As Galen's report indicates, Prodicus' *On Human Nature* is likewise continuous with earlier philosophical explanations of human physiology, while also contributing to the, already to some degree autonomous, discipline of medical theory. In composing or at least presenting work on the foundations of city-states, Hippias' contribution continues the tradition of historical writing, in particular, traditions of local and regional history and geography. Hippias' doxographical work was original, but later developed into an important philosophical and medical genre, especially by Aristotle and the Peripatetic school.

The sophists' contributions are comparable, for example, to those of their contemporary Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–370), who is invariably classified as a Presocratic philosopher and never as a sophist. In his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius' catalog of Democritus' works includes, among others: *On Those in Hades*, *On Manly Excellence*, *On Contentment*, *On the Cosmos*, *On the Planets*, *On the Nature of Man*, *On Geometry*, *On Poetry*, *On Homer*, *Medical Regimen*, and *On Fighting in Armor*. As such, I do not hesitate to identify the sophists as philosophers. Indeed, some of the ancients did as well. Protagoras is included among philosophers in Diogenes

Laertius' *Lives*, and the entry for Prodicus in *Suda* describes him as both “a natural philosopher and a sophist” (DK 84 A1).

I have yet to discuss Gorgias and Thrasymachus' writings and thus to comment on the relation between sophistic activity and rhetoric. The sophists are often treated primarily as teachers of rhetoric. Most of them undoubtedly made important contributions to this domain, at least in some sense of the word “rhetoric.” I have already mentioned some of Protagoras' and Prodicus' contributions to literary and linguistic theory. Other works by Protagoras, for example, *On Wrestling*, *The Art of Controversy*, *Instruction Book*, and *Lawsuit about a Fee*—assuming these were at least authentic, if not all distinct works—were evidently rhetorical in some sense. But Gorgias and Thrasymachus stand out among the sophists for their contributions to the art of public speaking. At least, with the exception of Gorgias' *On Non-Being*, the only works of Gorgias' and Thrasymachus' of which we have knowledge are orations or speeches.

In recent decades, however, numerous scholars have compellingly argued that the sophists' contributions to rhetoric have been misunderstood: for the most part, the sophists did not create theories of rhetoric or communication. Rather, for the most part, they developed styles of public speaking, which served later figures such as Aristotle and Anaximenes as grounds for theorizing. As such, the so-called rhetorical manuals (*rhētorikai technai*) typically associated with the sophists in great measure consisted of speeches, which students could memorize, study, and emulate. The only qualification I wish to make to this thesis—and the reason I have qualified my claims by repeating the phrase “for the most part”—is that the view that the early works were only performance texts is probably too extreme. Some *technai* could have contained some commentary on the authors' objectives or theoretical views, limited though these might be. Moreover, even if they lacked such commentary or explanation, private instruction in public speaking must have consisted of something more than handing the student a collection of speeches, telling him to memorize and study the content and then create his own speech. Given what we know of the contemporary Greek intellectual turn to theorize and given the competition for students, these manuals and the living teaching of expertise in speech could not simply have been a kind of exemplary *epideixis*. A teacher who is also something of a salesman must provide his audience with a rationale for his own excellence and distinctiveness.

For convenience, it may be helpful stipulatively to distinguish “rhetoric” as referring to the theory of public speaking from “oratory” as referring to the skill or practice of public speaking, whether or not theoretically informed. Undeniably, teaching oratory was one of the sophists' principal occupations. For example, in Plato's *Protagoras* Protagoras explains that if Hippocrates becomes his student, one of the main things he will learn is to become effective as a public speaker (319a). After all, most wealthy Greek youth aspired to political power; and given the political and social conditions of the ancient Greek world, oratorical competence was essential to that end. In their professional capacities, the sophists were responding to market demands. Although there evidently was demand for all of the other subjects they offered, effective oratory was the central skill their private clients sought.

Finally, to what extent were the sophists cultivators of ethical virtue? Evidence indicates that they were cultivators of ethical virtue to some extent. Protagoras' *On Ambition* and *On the State* appear to be ethical or ethical-political works. Of course, they might be

exemplary speeches on those subjects intended for oratorical training. But Protagoras' creation of laws for Thuri indicates that he had substantive political views. The Great (political) Speech that Plato gives the character Protagoras in *Protagoras* must in various ways correspond to views of the historical Protagoras. There is also an intriguing ancient testimony that most of Plato's *Republic* was based on Protagoras' views.

Hippias seems to have composed an ethical work entitled *Neoptolemus*. Plato has him describe it in *Hippias Major*: "Just now I have made a great impression in Sparta speaking about the activities a young man must pursue. I have a discourse on the subject ... My setting and the starting point ... are something like this. After Troy was taken, the tale is told that Neoptolemus asked Nestor what sort of activities are noble ... After that, the speaker is Nestor, who teaches him a very great many noble customs. I presented this discourse there and expect to present it here the day after tomorrow in Phidostratus' schoolroom" (286a–b).

Hippias' *Neoptolemus* is comparable to the most celebrated of the sophists' ethical works, Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*, which Xenophon paraphrases in his *Memorabilia*. In his work, Prodicus presented the mythological hero Heracles as a young man at a crossroads poised to choose a path of life. Feminine figures representing Excellence (*aretê*) and Depravity advertised their respective courses. Depravity tries to lure Heracles with the promise of sensual pleasures. But Excellence responds with the claim that a life of civic responsibility and duty offers distinct pleasures of its own: "The young enjoy the praises of their elders. The old are glad to be honored by the young. They recall their past deeds with pleasure, and they take pleasure in doing their present deeds well" (*Mem.* 1.2.23).

Insofar as they composed and disseminated ethically didactic works, the sophists' contributions in this domain might be thought similar to those in the art of public speaking. That is, they might have contained relatively little abstract or principled justification and explanation and instead have been basically exhortatory and directive. In short, such works might not have been predominantly a-theoretical. If so, then Plato's criticism of the sophists' lack of *sophia*, even in the sense of ethical *sophia*, could be understood more deeply as follows. For Plato, ethical knowledge requires the ability to justify and explain one's position. For instance, central to such justification and explanation is the ability to define one's ethical terms. Plato's criticism of the sophists' lack of *sophia* and incapacity to make men good would, then, be explicable, if not defensible, according to this peculiar sense of "*aretê*."

This rather speculative interpretation of the sophists' ethical works is, however, open to doubt. There is reason to believe that at least some of the sophists' ethical compositions were relatively theoretical. The strongest evidence for this claim comes from two anonymous works, widely agreed to have been composed in the late fifth or early fourth century and invariably included in collections on the sophists: the *Double Arguments* (*Dissoi Logoi*) and *Anonymus Iamblichi*. Passages constituting the latter have been preserved in a chapter of the neo-Platonist Iamblichus' *Exhortation to Philosophy*. Their content concerns the means by which a young man may achieve success in his pursuit of "wisdom, courage, eloquence, or excellence (*aretê*)" (1.1). Significantly for our present point, the content is presented as a continuous argument. That is, the text does not merely exhort its reader to a certain end by certain means, but attempts to justify the grounds for adopting certain means to attain desired ends, invoking substantive ethical and political principles along the way.

Philosophical argumentation is even more conspicuous in the *Double Arguments*. This work, remarkably different in form from the *Anonymus Iamblichi*, primarily consists of pairs of pro- and contra-arguments for various ethical, political, and indeed metaethical theses. The first three pairs concern the relation between opposed evaluative or normative properties. For instance, the first engages the question whether “the good and the bad are one thing ... or whether they are distinct” (8.1). Later sections consist of opposing arguments regarding whether wisdom and excellence are teachable and whether political offices should be assigned by lot. The remaining fragments contain accounts of the value of oratorical skill and mnemonic ability, respectively.

Assuming that the form and content of these anonymous texts was not atypical, I suggest the following as a more plausible general statement regarding the sophists’ ethical compositions. These works were quite diverse, both in form and content. Some were basically exhortatory or simply contained characterizations of paradigmatic virtuous and vicious figures. But others were more theoretical and argumentative. Once again, such variety in form and content is explicable by the authors’ diverse audiences and occasions for composition, as well as their personal styles, distinct talents, and interests.

In sum, the practices or activities of the five celebrated sophists, who are central to several Platonic dialogues, can be relatively well clarified, in terms of both their various kinds and their extremely heterogeneous content. If “method” entails an explicit theory or theoretical conception informing practice, then to a large extent these sophists do not appear to have been methodical. If, instead, by “method” we merely mean “a manner of approaching a subject,” then one may, as I have, surely speak of the various manners in which they approach their diverse subjects. Finally, if we wish to speak of sophistic method and practice generally, I have cautiously suggested that sophistic activity of the late fifth and early fourth centuries may be distinguished by the prominence, not origin, of engagement in itinerant professionalism, using prose forms, tailored to the local interests of citizens, public and private, of diverse city-states throughout the Greek world, and with numerous overlapping aims: ambassadorial and diplomatic, entertaining, self-aggrandizing and self-perfecting, money making, and variously educational. The existence of this phenomenon is perhaps best explained as a function of several coincident factors: preexisting patterns and practices of itinerant professionalism; the ongoing development of Greek philosophy; the increasing sophistication of prose forms in tandem with their positive reception and growing stature; and emerging and widening markets for oratorical skills and other capabilities materially as well as symbolically efficacious in political and more broadly civic spheres.

Finally, it deserves repeating that the preceding discussion has focused on five men who were particularly successful and celebrated within the sophistic movement. One consequence of their prominence is that they play significant roles in several of Plato’s dialogues. Another is that we have a relatively substantial amount of non-Platonic fragmentary and testimonial evidence regarding their lives and works. Given the great range of these works—topically, formally, and contextually—it is fair to say that these sophists well represent the diversity of sophistic interests and activities generally. In contrast, while it is possible to mention numerous other figures of the period who arguably qualify as sophists, in the revamped sense of this term, many of these men are little more than names to us. Nonetheless, I will conclude by mentioning a few of them.

We know of some other sophists in various connections with the five celebrated sophists. For example, Antimoerus of Mende is characterized in Plato's *Protagoras* as "Protagoras' star pupil, who is studying professionally to become a sophist" (315a). Unfortunately, this is the only surviving reference to Antimoerus.

We know a little more about Polus of Acragas, who was a student of Gorgias and who also plays a prominent role in Plato's *Gorgias*. The limited information we have suggests that Polus specialized in the art of speaking, and we know of at least one text he composed. Generally, Polus' work seems to have been a mixture of rhetoric and oratory. For example, in Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates asks Phaedrus: "What should we say of the whole gallery of terms Polus established—speaking with reduplication, speaking in maxims, speaking in images—and of the terms Licymnius gave him as a present to help him explain good diction" (267b). This passage suggests that Polus coined several rhetorical terms and, no doubt, illustrated their use with examples in some of his work.

The figure Licymnius of Chios, who is mentioned in the preceding *Phaedrus* passage, was also a teacher of Polus. Hence, it is possible he was a sophist too. We know from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that he composed a rhetorical or oratorical text, for Aristotle criticizes some of the rhetorical terms he coined as "pointless and silly" (1414b15). We also know that Licymnius composed dithyrambic poems.

Lycophron, whose city-state of origin is unknown, was another student of Gorgias'. His contribution is somewhat better known. Aristotle refers to him as a sophist. As a student of Gorgias', it is likely that Lycophron taught at least oratory. However, Aristotle's use of "sophist" is broader than Plato's; so it is unclear whether Lycophron engaged in itinerant professionalism. Several fragments survive, all in Aristotle. The breadth of their content shows that Lycophron was alive to various intellectual currents of his day. Hence, it is possible that he was itinerant to some extent, if not in a professional capacity. One fragment mentions a composition in praise of the lyre. Such odes or parodies constitute well-established genres of Greek lyric poetry. Recall that Hippias of Elis also composed poems. Thus, Licymnius', Hippias', and Lycophron's poetic contributions illustrate another point of continuity between forms of traditional Greek *sophia* and the sophistic movement.

Other fragments indicate that Lycophron had substantive philosophical interests. In a discussion of the metaphysical relation of participation, Aristotle mentions that Lycophron characterized the relation between knowledge and the soul as one of participation. In the context of another metaphysical discussion, in this case concerning predication and the unity of being, a topic stemming from Parmenides' thought and central to fifth- and fourth-century philosophy, Aristotle notes that Lycophron avoided the use of the copula. Finally, several fragments refer to Lycophron's political views. One seems to support a democratic ideology: "The nobility of good birth is obscure, and its grandeur is a matter of words" (DK83B4). Another, cited in Aristotle's *Politics*, characterizes law as a convention that serves as a "guarantor of mutual rights" (DK83B3).

On the basis of the fragments and testimonies, it is questionable why in their seminal collection Diels and Kranz classify Lycophron among the sophists rather than philosophers. But, as we have discussed, the same question may be reasonably posed of many of the figures they so classify, including Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus.

On this note, I turn to one final problem case: Antiphon. An Antiphon of Athens is today and was in the Classical period widely treated as a sophist. It is controversial—in fact, the controversy extends back into late antiquity—whether he is identical to Antiphon of Athens of the deme Rhamnus. The basic difficulty in identifying the two is that Antiphon of Rhamnus was an anti-democratic politician who led the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred in 411, whereas content from a fragment of Antiphon the sophist supports egalitarianism.

Antiphon of Rhamnus was a major orator, indeed, the first of the canonical ten Attic orators. He established a school in Athens, and a number of his speeches have survived. These models for instruction are assembled under the title *Tetralogies*.

Antiphon the sophist was the author of several treatises: *On Truth*, *On Concord*, *The Politician*, and *On the Interpretation of Dreams*. We have numerous fragments and testimonies of the first two, little of the last two. *On Truth*, which was composed in two books, covered numerous philosophical topics: in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, cosmology, and biology. *On Concord* was an ethical and political treatise concerned with the topic of the title, concord (*homonoia*), both among citizens and among family members. The longest surviving fragment, for instance, discusses the difficulties and values of marriage and children.

Assume Antiphon of Rhamnus and Antiphon the sophist are one and the same person. In that case, Antiphon is another fifth-century polymath who taught oratory and perhaps a range of other subjects. But whether or not Antiphon the sophist is Antiphon the orator, neither seems to have been an itinerant figure, even though at least one was professionally engaged. Indeed, both are Athenians. Hence, the identification of at least one Antiphon as a sophist would require that we drop itinerancy as a condition of sophistry. That would leave professionalism of some degree as the differentiating condition between all of the figures discussed in this chapter and men such as Socrates, Plato, and, so far as we know, most of the so-called Presocratic philosophers. The distinction between an intellectual or philosophical life engaged in professionalism of some degree and a wholly nonprofessional one is culturally and historically significant, to be sure. Moreover, we recognize a similar distinction today between professionals and amateurs. But it at least deserves noting that if this economic criterion were applied in the terminological distinction between “sophist” and something else, say, “philosopher,” then Leibniz and Spinoza would count as philosophers and Kant, Hegel, and the rest of us would qualify as sophists.

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