Sophists Revisited, and Socratics

1. The Sophists

Plato. The sophists acquired a bad reputation through Plato, and ‘sophistry’ still denotes duplicity, argumentative tricks, and the attempt to make the weaker argument the stronger (cf. Aristophanes, *The Clouds*). Plato is obsessed with the sophists: many dialogues have them as their protagonists. Not highly thinking of them, he portrays Socrates as something like their defeater. Nonetheless, the sophists’ role in shaping philosophy is now regarded as important. Hence, a partial rehabilitation is in order.

The Name. The noun ὁ σοφιστές (ho sophistes) means anyone who is an expert, who is learned, or possesses theoretical or practical knowledge; anyone who is wise (ἡ σοφία, wisdom). Congruent with his attitude in the *Apology*, Socrates considers himself to be ‘only’ a lover of wisdom (a philosopher), and hence someone who longs for, but does not possess, wisdom. (This might be ironical.)

The Philosophy. The ‘Pre-Socratics’ (e.g., Thales, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Democritus) loom large as influences on Plato. And Anaxagoras seems to have had some influence on Socrates (cf. *Phaedo*, 96b ff.). The focus of these philosophers is on natural philosophy, or what we now roughly call science. In contrast, the sophists shift the intellectual focus towards human concerns. They introduce new and critical ideas about rhetoric and persuasion, language and logic (dialectic), epistemology (scepticism), as well as the role of tradition and religion, and ethics (even though Socrates is hailed as the founder of ethics; see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* I 14, 18). The main reason for this shift is the unique historical-political context of that period: the Athenian democracy. In a democracy, there is a need for broad and widely accessible education, and also for effective rhetoric and argumentation. This is the service provided by the sophists, and their contributions bring philosophy to a new level of ‘sophistication’. However, the textual evidence is thin; much depends on Plato’s reports, some of which can be validated.

*Protagoras* (c. 490–420). ‘Of all things the measure is man, of things that are not that they are not’ (DK 80 B1). (Moral) relativism or perhaps subjectivism; perhaps proto-Utilitarianism: virtue is what is advantageous for an individual (e.g., the stronger). Yet we all have a natural moral sense. For every issue there are two opposing and incompatible arguments. Agnosticism: ‘Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not, or what form they have […]’ (DK 80 B4).

*Gorgias* (c. 480–380). Mind-boggling refutation of Eleatic philosophy (esp. Parmenides): (i) Nothing exists. (ii) Even if something existed, it would be incomprehensible. (iii) Even if it was comprehensible, it could not be expressed and communicated (DK 82 B4). A surviving defence speech (DK 82 B11a) strikingly resembles the *Apology*.

*Prodicus* (c. 470–). Socrates: ‘If I attended Prodicus’ fifty-drachme lecture […], there would be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the
correctness of names straightaway. But as I have heard only the one-drachma course, I do not know the truth about it’ (Cratylus 384b). Natural history of religion: gods are invented for things that are beneficial to us (cf. DK 84 B5).

2. The Socratics: Some of Socrates’s Influences

- Parmenides (fl. 500)
  - Anaxagoras (600–428)
    - brings natural philosophy to Athens
    - tried and exiled
    - coming/ceasing to be is impossible
    - change is separation/differentiation
    - everything-in-everything; universal mixture;
    - predominance
    - cosmic principle: nous (see Phaedo 98b)
  - Empedocles (490–430)
    - no change, just four elements
    - cosmic forces: love and strife
    - reincarnation, cycles

- Socrates (469–399)
  - Plato (427–347)
    - The Academics
  - Xenophon (430–354)
  - Phaidon of Elea (fl. 400)
  - Euclides of Megara (450–370)
    - *Phaedo* 59b–c
    - Logic, dialectics: the force of arguments, analogies
    - unity of the virtues (*Phaedo* 68–9)
  - Antisthenes (445–365)
    - *Phaedo* 59b–c
    - studies with Gorgias
    - virtue is learnable against hedonism (‘I would rather go crazy than succumb to pleasure.’ (Diogenes Laertius VI 3)
    - against Ideas (‘A horse I see, Plato, but horseness I do not.’)

- Aristippus of Cyrene (435–356)
  - *Phaedo* 59b–c (absent)
  - receives payment
  - defends hedonism
  - some perceptual knowledge is incorrigible and private (e.g., sweet)

- The Epicureans
  - Epicurus (341–270)
  - Lucretius (99–55)

- The Stoics
  - Zeno of Citium (334–262)
  - Chrysippus (280–206)
  - Cicero (106–43)
  - Seneca (4–65)
  - Epictetus (55–135)