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THE SOPHISTIC SCHOOL AND ITS HERITAGE IN THE
WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

- *The Sophists as precursors of Ethics, Epistemology and
Philosophy of Language* -

- Summary -

To state that, next to their discursive performance, the sophists have constituted an absolute educational system, in which one could find all the exact sciences and the philosophy along with its adjacent matters, would be to exceed the importance of the sophistic school phenomenon. On the other hand, to state that the colloquialism and the paradox were the only philosophical constructions that we've inherited from the sophists, would be to say far too little. The present study does not reflect, in any case, more than the establishment of the optimum interval of time in which the sophists' work can be understood and appreciated. It's the time frame in which, in the Fifth Century B.C Greece, the topics on the visible and the invisible universe start, the time frame in which philosophy embraces physics before engaging on a different path and where the ludicrous and untamed character of the word itself is challenging the thinker to tame and master it. And since in this age the poetry would have been poor without the encounter it had with the dramatic art, in which the art would have lived in solitude without democracy, in which the gods' temples would have been in vain if there weren't any schools around, we can not accept to look at philosophy by excluding the sophists' creation, for its purpose was merely to fill up the holes and doubts of the philosophical spirit.

The thesis that we propose suggests, in relation to some texts belonging to the main representatives of the Sophistic School and in relation to literary testimonies about them, that there is at least a significant, if not fundamental, contribution of the above-mentioned school to at least three segments of thinking: ethics, philosophy of knowledge and philosophy of language. Even though there are certain indices of the sophistic contributions in other objects of study that belong to philosophy, we believe that for the

three disciplines that we point out, not only the sophists' merits are incontestable but also that they weren't explained in detail in a dedicated, all-encompassing study. This text is, therefore, a synthetic result of our investigation, designed for those who would like to build a strong image on the Sophistic philosophy as a whole, as a concerted argument for one concept or another.

Regarding ethics, we kept in mind and exemplified the activity of five representative figures of the Sophistic School: Protagoras and Prodicus, mentors of the school, and also Calicles, Thrasymachus and Antiphon, secondary figures but nevertheless just as illustrative in picturing the Sophists way of thinking as the first two. We've kept them in mind not only in the light of the general ideas and common principles that have governed their philosophical thought – the critic of the laws, the social contract, the conflict between the passions and the virtues specific to the human nature, the criteria of individual's participation to the city life – as well as in the light of the particular thoughts that each of them expressed. This way we've read and interpreted the protagoreic theory of virtue that's transmissible through education, of *arête* as individual self-perfecting, as well as the ethic component of the man-measure fragment. We've tried to identify the terms in which Prodicus personifies virtue and, next to Calicles, he suggests a pattern for the superior man. At the same time we've explained how Thrasymachus' and Calicles' "immoralism" is more of a utilitarian ethics prototype, one that discusses the fallibility of the social laws and even corrects Protagoras' conception that *politike arête* (the social-politic conscience) is given to all the individuals. The so-called "immoralists" prove, with right motivation, that in reality *politike arête* is the object of an individual rather than a general phenomenon. And it is within the lines written about ethics where we've also interpreted *akrasia*, a term that describes the weakness of human will and which is connected, by the reputed philologist Mario Untersteiner, with the works of Antiphon the Sophists, some time before its first usage in a treaty signed by Aristotle.

The discussion about the sophistic theories related to the philosophy of knowledge has begun within a chapter that emphasizes the closeness between the

sophoclean tragedy, “Oedipus the king” and the sophists’ thinking in the Fifth Century B.C Athens. The play brings along, next to a irrefutable literary value, also the importance of a testimony about the sophists’ influence in the literature and the discourses of the moment. Oedipus, a Sophist by definition, famous champion of logic, author – along with the factual murder – to a symbolic patricide towards the tradition of the city that adopts him, an admirer of paradoxes and etymological games, character of a tragic nature who is, at a certain time, blamed by the public and shaded by the dramatic irony that Sophocles brings into the play, empirical investigator of the factors that sum up knowledge and awareness, a professional of dialogue, a master of rhetoric meter and, in the end, Tiresias’ partner in philosophic conversations. Tiresias himself becomes a symbol, as the blind man that sees further than the clairvoyant hero who becomes, to us, a philosophical model of Athens, the city in which the sophists are, at first, regarded with suspicion, then appreciated, adored just to be, in the final step, blamed for the turmoil that they’ve aroused with their presence.

As far as knowledge is concerned, the procedure of empirical investigation that Oedip uses will find its real correspondent in the relativism that surfaces from the man-measure fragment of Protagoras, a relativism that we don’t intend to consider as explicit as others believe, on the contrary, we will interpret it as a disputable view that is mostly emerging out of empirical subjectivism rather than true relativism. On this occasion we will also cite several interpretations that the contemporary philosophy brings to the text, as well as analyze the occurrence of the concept of truth (*aletheia*) in the works of Protagoras, Hippias and Gorgias. We shall find that, this time, the common thoughts of the aforementioned sophists don’t fill each other’s gaps, in a systematic theory, but rather they contradict each other. To Protagoras, truth is a sole instance that the individual will be able to acknowledge through the empirical contact with reality’s objects – keeping in mind that such a contact can not provide an absolute form of knowledge – while for Gorgias the truth is untouchable, an unknowledgeable notion that men will try to reach through opinion, as the formation and expression of opinions will be the only cognitive mechanism responsible, in the sophist’s view, for a certain knowledge, however insufficient for guaranteeing the truth. This is where we discuss in detail the thesis of

Protagoras and Gorgias, next to the prelude that Hippias of Elis imagines for the future platonic theory of participation to Ideas, that Mario Untersteiner regards as an original philosophical license of Hippias. In addition, we present the texts that have guided us in our interpretation (the man-measure fragment of Protagoras, Gorgias' paradox of the non-existent and the discourse "Defense of Palamedes" as well as the platonic fragments that reflect Hippias' position.

The last part of the study, dedicated to the philosophy of language, was conceived in the form of a temporal ark between the sophistic theme of Logos and the modern theories of language, given that the very philosophy of language is modern concept that starts around the second half of the nineteenth century and is built around analytic logic and referential theories. What we intended to emphasize was that if such philosophical matter is justified, the justification should necessarily start with the origin, which is the approach that sophists like Protagoras, Prodicus and Gorgias have made towards the language problem. Their contribution in Greek particularities of speech and the philosophical language of the moment made possible a first referential theory of meaning (the connection between names and things, like Prodicus states it), a first release of the language from the burden of polysemy (sustained by Prodicus, who gives its theory on the non-existence of synonyms an almost scientific aura), a first signal towards the erudite people of the city regarding the correctness of naming (pointed out by Protagoras, who also offers the Greeks a grammar treaty with the intention of disciplining the poetic language, of determining the lyrical authors of the time to give up the manipulation of words with the purpose of enhancing their literary style), a first ontological dimension of the *logos* (which, for Gorgias, is an explanation of reality itself: if man will connect to reality through speech, the language as first matter of the speech becomes, by means of utilization and reproduction, a criteria that proves reality's very existence) and a first theory about the importance of etymology in order to identify the origin of language, a question that will not only interest the sophists, but Plato himself, who makes out of it the main theme for one of his dialogues, "Theaetetus".

The literary sources we have used for this study were various, the most significant part being represented by the Platonic dialogues and the ancient fragments contained in the Diels-Kranz anthology, inherited from Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus as well as other philosophers like Heraclitus of Ephesus, poets like Hesiod, the notes of Aristotle from “Nicomachean Ethics”, “Rhetoric” and the “Sophistic refutations”, lines from Diogenes Laertios, Xenophan, Sextus Empiricus, Clement of Alexandria, Diodorus Siculus or the apocryphal text “Dissoi logoi”, next to comments of specialists in the history of philosophy like W.K.C Guthrie or George Kerferd, scholars like Mario Untersteiner, logicians like Edward Schiappa or philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche. The thesis of each chapter, followed by arguments, by theoretical demonstration and the comments was also joined by the author’s own conclusions, most of these converging to further support the statement that the personality of the sophistic school, often underestimated or left aside by the critics, often superficially treated by history, has always meant an expression of large impact and importance of the Western philosophical education.

Table of contents

Introduction: Representations of Sophistry.....	1
Chapter I: Who or what is a Sophist.....	11
Chapter II: The Sophistic school.....	22
Chapter III: Forms of the Sophistic speech: Mythos and Logos.....	35
Chapter IV: Attempts to a Sophistic Ethic: Protagoras and the concept of „arête”.....	43
Chapter V: Virtue between moralism and immoralism: Prodicus and Thrasymachus.....	58
Chapter VI: The Sophists’ opposition towards traditional Ethics.....	69
Chapter VII: Oedipus the king – a dramatic reflection of the Sophists’ model of knowledge.....	88
Chapter VIII: The protagoreic epistemology and the argument of Hippias.....	101
Chapter IX: Gorgias about opinion, knowledge and rhetorical truth.....	115
Chapter X: From Logos to language.....	127
Chapter XI: An avant-garde of the Philosophy of Language: Prodicus’ referential theory and the grammar of Protagoras.....	140
Chapter XII: Gorgias’ philosophy of Logos.....	162
Conclusion.....	176
Bibliography.....	181

Tags / Keywords

Sophistic, School, Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Logos, Plato, Aristotle, Concept of truth, Aletheia, Arete, Akrasia, Speech, Language, Existent, Non-Existent, First generation, Second generation, Virtue, Moralism, Immoralism, Critic of laws, Natural law, Model, Theory, Disciple, Athens, Fifth Century, Pericles, War, Historian, Relativism, Axiological relativism, Disclosure, Reality, Fundament, Gods, Asebeia, Eusebeia, Impiety, Religion, Synonyms, Referential theory of meaning, Diels-Kranz, Names, Things, Palamedes, Hercules, Helen, Man-measure, Text, Fragment, Uncovered, Paradox, Empirism, Knowledge, Opinion, Doxa, Nomos, Physis, Mythos, Epos, Thropos, Thropical, Prometheus, Animal, Politike arête, Politike techne, City, Democracy, Defense.