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The Sophists and Fifth–Century Athens

1. THE PERSIAN AND PELOPONNESIAN WARS

. . . as a city we are the School of Greece . . .

Pericles speaking of Athens in the “funeral oration,”
Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* II 41

In peace and prosperity both states and individuals are actuated by higher motives, because they do not fall under the dominion of imperious necessities; but war, which takes away the comfortable provisions of daily life, is a hard master, and tends to assimilate men’s characters to their conditions.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* V 82

Herodotus published the last part of his history of the Persian Wars around 430 BCE. Thucydides finished his history of the Peloponnesian War in 401. These founding volumes in the Western tradition of history spring from Ionian naturalism, and their view of human affairs reflects that origin. Herodotus relates how the Persians, blessed with virtue and good fortune, gained control of all of Asia, but then recklessly sought to gain Europe too—and so overreaching desire led to inevitable disaster. It is exactly what we might expect under the rule of Anaximander’s Justice, given humanity’s illimitable urge for power, and Herodotus retells the story in a hundred variations of other men and nations.

Thucydides takes a similar approach in his account of Athens. The city had fought with the utmost heroism in repelling the Persian armies from Greece. The affair began when the city helped the Ionians resist Persian rule, earning the enmity of King Darius. In 490 the Athenians, almost single-handed, drove his troops, who had landed on their coast at Marathon, back into the sea. When Darius’s son, Xerxes, renewed the fight a decade later with vastly greater forces, he seemed likely to conquer all Greece. But even though he captured and burned their city, the Athenians had evacuated the whole population to the offshore island of Salamis, and the Greek ships, led by the Athenians, destroyed the Persian fleet in the straits. The Greeks now controlled the sea, and Xerxes fell back on inefficient overland supply lines to support a much diminished army. In the following year, combined Greek forces, led by Sparta, destroyed his army utterly at Plataea. As a naval power and the leader of the Ionian states, Athens continued to prosecute the war enthusiastically, even though the

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other Greeks were glad to see the end of the fighting. Once Ionia was liberated from its sixty years of Persian subjugation in 478, the Ionians, together with Athens, formed the Delian League in alliance against Persia. Athens became immensely wealthy as the center of administration for the League. The fleet, built largely in Athens and manned largely by Athenians, kept in fighting trim by patrolling the eastern Mediterranean for pirates, and sea-borne commerce flourished under its protection. A considerable portion of the payments required from League members to support the fleet financed instead a great public construction program, and the wooden temples of the Acropolis burnt by the Persians were rebuilt in marble. Public moneys flowed into the hands of private citizens through a thousand channels, and Athenians became accustomed to new standards of luxury and comfort, as citizens of the most prosperous city in Greece.

And, Thucydides thought, this prosperity unbalanced the city's politics. When Pericles came to power, he democratized the constitution in a series of reforms beginning in 462/1 BCE, resting his power on a coalition of the commercial classes, the wage earners they hired, and small farmers. The first two groups prospered from the new trade and the expanding economy, but the farmers did not. Poor harvests often drove the less wealthy deeply into debt, and they could be counted on to support a democratic regime that gave them the power to effect public debt relief. All the citizens, that is, all those who owed military duty to the state, were to be involved in decisions on internal affairs.¹ Participation in the assembly and the courts, was, for the first time, made genuinely available to all free, adult males through subsidies for service in public meetings, so that independent wealth was no longer necessary to participate. Access to many public offices was provided to all through selection by lot rather than election, so that wealth and influence no longer decided who served. The Assembly ruled Athens—it could pass or rescind any law it wished whenever it sat, and it controlled the judiciary and executive functions as well as legislative ones. Conservatives hated these measures. Plato complained that they produced a population of drones living off public subsidies, and ridiculed the irrationality of assigning by lot offices that should go only to those qualified for them. But the power of the old families was broken by the new practices, while offices that required able men, and dealt more with foreign than internal affairs or involved military command, were filled by election, and the choice usually came from the upper

¹Women and slaves were excluded from citizenship, of course, and one's father had to be a citizen. Naturalization was an extraordinary procedure. "Metics," permanently resident foreigners, which included those living in Athens who were citizens of nearby cities almost to be identified as suburbs of Athens, also provided military service. Perhaps 10% of the total population of 400,000 had a right to attend the assembly.

classes.² Between 479 and 430, a good fifty years, Athens enjoyed prosperity and relative peace at the center of the Greek world. Nonetheless, Thucydides claimed the democratic government brought about the downfall of Athens, for demagogues easily swayed the people this way and that, making the city incapable of firm and considered policy. As he saw it, once Pericles, the one leader who could charm the crowd to reason, was dead, the Athenians careened wildly toward disaster without the steadying influence the old aristocracy and their institutions might have provided.

Athens had gained an empire when, like many another democracy, it discovered the commercial advantages of imperialism abroad. The city became a tyrant to the other members of the Delian League, enforcing membership, with its duty of monetary contributions to the League treasury, by military force. Then, in 431, commercial rivalry with Corinth, an oligarchy of wealth, and fear in Sparta that the Athenian Empire would soon become irresistibly strong, combined with a steadfast Athenian refusal to allow the oligarchic powers to trade within its empire, led Athens into war. Its naval power opposed the land-based Peloponnesian alliance. The conflict quickly became a class war between partisans of democracy and oligarchy. City after city was torn apart by civil conflict. The decision came only with an Athenian disaster in Sicily in 413. Alcibiades, a young and immensely popular democratic leader, representing the Athenian character at its most admirable and most reckless, proposed that his city attack and occupy Syracuse in Sicily, the leading city among the Italian Greeks. Given his military genius, he might have carried off this naked aggression. But his enemies trumped up charges of impiety, and after he had left for Sicily with the Athenian navy, taking most of the stauncher democrats in the assembly with him, the oligarchic faction obtained a recall so that he might be tried. He fled into exile, and Nicias, over-cautious and superstitious, not at all the man for the job, was left in charge. The entire expeditionary force, every ship and every man, was captured or destroyed. Within the year, Athens, left defenseless, fell. The Corinthians proposed to level the city, kill all the men, and sell everyone else into slavery. This was nothing more than Athens had done to smaller cities, but Sparta, to its credit, vetoed the proposal, and Athens was allowed to survive, stripped of power. In 411 a group of oligarches, the Thirty, overthrew the democracy and established an oppressive and murderous government that fell to a bloody counter-stroke a few years later. Things stabilized, and Athens became a third-rate power with a famous past,

²As Thucydides (II 37.1) had Pericles say in his funeral oration after the first year of the Peloponnesian War, "it is called a democracy because the conduct of affairs is entrusted not to a few but to the many, but while there is equality for all in civil affairs established by law, we allow full play to individual worth in public affairs."

and then evolved under new political conditions, created by Alexander the Great's Empire and then the Roman conquest, into a university town noted for its art and culture.

Herodotus and Thucydides were very different men, but both were children of the Greek Enlightenment. Herodotus, a congenial polytheist, much of whose material seems to have come from records in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, loved any good story, particularly if it involved the gods. He tells us, for instance, of Apollo's prophecy that Croesus would destroy a great nation if he went to war with Persia, and Croesus's grim discovery that the nation to be destroyed was his own. His book is full of wise men who understand the work of Justice, counseling self-restraint and warning against the corrupting influence of too much prosperity. That soft countries make soft men is but one of his variations on this theme. Thucydides, a more severe and scientific historian, would never countenance such priests' tales,³ but in the end, the structure of his story is the same. It is a morality tale of success, pride, reckless injustice, and the inevitable reversal of fortune, with ample opportunity to regret one's merciless and inhuman behavior when the wheel comes round to one's own disaster.

This is not the only way to view the events. What was it about the Athenian character, and the city's constitution, that led to defeat? Was Athenian indecision due to the democracy, or a milder form of the ideological warfare that plagued the other cities in Greece, a conflict actually attenuated by Athenian political institutions? Thucydides is fiercely biased against the demagogues who came after Pericles, whom he represents as a model of restraint, though Pericles in fact seems just as arrogant and unrestrained as any who came after him. But he was successful, and looked likely to continue successful, so he could not be arrogant and unrestrained and fit Thucydides's theory. On the same lines, it can be observed that Sparta's restraint arose not from the natural wisdom of an oligarchy of merit, but from the awareness that too much foreign adventuring might overextend the resources of the Spartan army, inviting the fiercely oppressed Helots at home to revolt. Sparta was far more oppressive in its domains than Athens ever was toward its allies in the empire. Again, might random events early on, such as the great plague of 431 that carried away so many citizens, Pericles among them, have had as much to do with the eventual defeat of Athens as any failure of virtue? Not every disaster is due to excessive ambition. Why was no *modus vivendi* arrived at during the several truces that

³Much of Herodotus's material came from the records kept at Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and the moral tone of the history is due to a considerable degree to this priestly material. We have seen already the shared moral and political perspectives of Delphi and the Ionian enlightenment. Thucydides was more critical of his sources, and tried to depend on eye-witnesses where he could, eliminating the tales of gods and marvels that Herodotus so rejoiced in.

punctuated the conflict? Was this due to Athens' refusal to moderate its goals, or rather to class war, irreconcilable ideologies and the bitterness generated by civil conflict? Sometimes a nation finds itself unable to break off a conflict through no fault of its own. Not that our historians' analyses of events lack all merit—for instance, that the Persian assault on Greece overextended Xerxes' lines of communication seems clear enough. But on many points their account is far from the only one possible, or even the most plausible, and however comforting one finds it to see justice working itself out in events, history may not honor our moral values as much as we hope, and compliance with those values may not be so sure a road to national security. Balance of power politics does not always work, and where Athens failed to gain empire in Greece, Macedon would, soon enough, succeed. The self-restraint, and appropriate boldness, needed to conduct a state is only in part a product of good character. It also requires accurate (and lucky) calculation, and it may even require injustice and other elements of bad character if one aims at successful statesmanship as the world accounts success.⁴

2. THE REPUTATION OF THE SOPHISTS

I know few characters in history who have been so hardly dealt as these so-called Sophists.

George Grote, *History of Greece* (1872)

We Athenians will use no fine words... We should not convince you if we did; nor must you expect to convince us by arguing that... you have never done us any wrong... For we both alike know that into the discussion of human affairs the question of justice only enters where the pressure of necessity is equal, and that the powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must.

The Athenians, addressing the Melians,
Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* V 89.

Even though Thucydides says almost nothing about them, **the Sophists of the 5th century**⁵ (say,

⁴See John Fine (1983), Chs. 8-11.

⁵For the Sophists I rely especially on Kerferd (1981a) and (1981b), Rankin (1983), and the third volume of Guthrie (1962-1981). Untersteiner (1949) is also of some value. He treats the Sophists as "anti-idealistic" thinkers who follow concrete experience, but avoid skepticism by taking the experience itself as reality, and so allowing a multiplicity of realities opposed to one another. All the Fragments and ancient sources (including those cited below) in the classical collection of Diels-Kranz are translated, with brief introductory discussions of each Sophist, in Sprague (1972). The Sophists were treated, until Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1833–1836) as a species of charlatan, whose thought was not worth serious consideration. Hegel thought the Sophists provided, in their pure subjectivism, the antithesis to the naive realism of the Pre-Socratics. Plato and Aristotle form a synthesis, in Hegel's view, capturing what truth is to be found in the opposed views of the Pre-Socratics and the Sophists.

460–380) have often been characterized with his history in mind, and given a position in events to suit Thucydidean moral drama. They corrupted men, teaching them to ignore the gods, the old values, and the truth, substituting persuasion by any means for honest argument, making the worse appear the better case, all in the service of injustice and naked self-interest. They educated the leaders of the Greeks, and convinced them that justice is only the interest of the stronger, that all values, even truth itself, are relative, destroying conscience and interest in pursuing public welfare.⁶

Now it should seem odd that this group of men should have it in their power to destroy their culture. The Sophists are harmless enough at first blush. Most of them were itinerant professional teachers specializing in rhetoric and politics, and professing a kind of pragmatic relativism in ethics, and skeptical views rejecting the Parmenidean realm of necessary being as a possible object of knowledge, nothing more. The name “Sophist” (“*sophistes*” in Greek) originally meant “teacher of wisdom.” Protagoras seems to have adopted it, well after the profession was established, to express his belief that he and his fellows enjoyed a special knowledge of the most important things, including the nature of human happiness, humanity’s place in the world, and the role of such major institutions as religion and the state in fulfilling human aims. In short, the name laid a claim to a practical philosophical wisdom. It comes as no surprise that many mocked these pretensions well before Plato,⁷ and for many the name must have carried ironic overtones from the beginning. Could this figure of fun really have been responsible for changing his culture’s view of the world? No one was forced to hand their children over to the Sophists. As Socrates makes it clear in his own case, the parents of the young men who associated with him approved of the association.⁸ Otherwise they would have been told to find some other way to occupy their time. The Sophists were not public school teachers, or college professors, whom you might have to study under willy nilly. Surely it is more likely that the Sophist’s thinking, like his students’, is no more than a symptom

⁶Grote (1850) first challenged this view, influential especially among German scholars, in an effective way. To take a minor point, he argues (pp. 507–510) that the Athenians were not corrupted in the course of the war at all, if by “corrupted” we mean “made selfish and unwilling to sacrifice for the public welfare.” They were as willing to sacrifice at the end, and even after the end, as in the beginning. And if we look for evidence of incorruption in a more exalted sense, Athenian willingness to seek reconciliation after the oligarchies of the Thirty and the Five Hundred may provide it—it at least provides a dramatic contrast to the internecine style of revolution pursued at Corcyra. But Grote may have missed his aim, for Thucydides saw as corruption among the Athenians not the breakdown of communal solidarity, but the breakdown of regard for other Greeks, so that they became overbearing and exploitive, no longer treating even their own allies as equals, and eventually lost their loyalty and support.

⁷Aristophanes’s mockery of the Sophists in the *Clouds* was produced in 423, when Plato was five years old.

⁸Plato, *Apology* 33d-34b, where Socrates invites anyone present who has been corrupted by him, or any relative of some young man corrupted by him, to come forward. No one does.

of new attitudes arising from new economic and political conditions. Plato himself, no friend of the Sophists, argued that those who studied under them were only getting the education fitting their own ideals, which is, of course, only what one would expect. One became a student of the Sophists because one wanted to know (or one's parents wanted one to know) how to persuade and how to manage affairs to his own benefit and that of his state, and the benefit of his state he would have identified with the benefit of his class—that is, one wanted to know how to gain wealth and power for himself and his right-thinking friends, and perhaps how to justify himself in his own mind, and in the law courts. Neither student nor teacher was thinking to seek out impartial truth or understanding for its own sake, nor was their first interest to know how to form policy to meet the legitimate demands of justice. The Sophists would have done little to change anyone's values, though they might have confirmed them.

The Sophistic profession was invented in southern Italy, and it quickly spread until Sophists were found everywhere in the Greek world, but Athens became the center of the movement in the course of the 5th century. There were a number of reasons for a Sophist to go to Athens. First of all, the education he provided was sought out by aspiring office-holders in this new, open political environment, in which always the task was to persuade, whether one sought power and influence in the assembly, or election to public office, or success at law. Nothing beyond reading and writing, arithmetic, and some literature, was taught in the basic education of the time, which ended around the age of fourteen. The Sophists stepped into the gap and offered, to those who could pay, a secondary education oriented to rhetoric, the art of persuasive speaking. In the second place, Athens stood at the forefront of the new economy. A trading nation, ruled by its commercial classes, it provided the most plentiful and stable currency in the eastern Mediterranean. So Athenians had money to spend on luxuries such as education, and sufficient liquidity so that a Sophist could expect pay in specie. Democracy, sea power and commerce, and the new money-based economy went together, and the Sophists fit well into the mix. In the third place, Pericles, the leader of the Athenian democracy, was strongly interested in philosophy and the arts. Damon, an Athenian Sophist, as well as Anaxagoras, were said to have been Pericles's teachers, and Pericles entrusted Protagoras, the greatest of the Sophists, with writing the laws for Thurii, an Athenian colony in southern Italy. The most noted of the Sophists were ambassadors for their cities, and had considerable political experience, and Prodicus, for instance, had made a study of the history and political institutions of Greece. Pericles also gave Hippodamus, a Sophist from Miletus, the job of planning the new Athenian port at Piraeus. Not only work teaching rhetoric was available at Athens, but also patronage and occasional odd jobs paid out of the public treasury. And finally, once a number of Sophists had settled in the

city, Athens became an intellectual center that one might visit simply to hear the most noted thinkers of the age.

But even in Periclean Athens, and before the disasters began, the Sophists suffered from public hostility both to themselves and the naturalistic world view they represented. Athens prided itself on allowing freedom of speech, but in the second half of the 5th century a series of actions were brought against intellectuals in the city, generally on the charge of impiety. Aside from Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Protagoras—who died in a shipwreck while sailing to Sicily after being exiled, and whose book *On the Gods* was burnt publically after private copies had been called in by a herald's proclamation—Aspasia, Diagoras,⁹ and Euripides were all prosecuted, though the prosecution failed in the last case. The sculptor Phidias was condemned for embezzlement, and Damon, Pericles's teacher, went into exile. Exile, the usual penalty, would probably have been imposed in Socrates's case, too, had he not been excessively stubborn, and brought the death penalty on himself. Some of this represented attempts by Pericles's enemies to get at him through his friends, but a conservative backlash of this sort often occurs in the midst of an ongoing intellectual enlightenment. Always, the intellectual architects of a new society promise more than can be delivered, and the poor form a natural ally of the older conservative forces driven from power, given their natural resentment of the new rich and their fancy, empowering education, and their disappointment when promised improvements in their lives do not materialize. These resentments form the root of such movements as Fundamentalism and Fascism in our own time. Or, to give more credit to the justice of these resentments, we might remark that the Sophists really served the rich, who could afford their education and had the leisure for it, within the democratic environment, in which skill at presenting one's case in populist terms is essential to success within the system—so a certain suspicion of their motives in presenting the latest intellectual fashions was natural and appropriate.¹⁰ In any case, these resentments, perhaps illegitimately extended to the more honest of scientists and intellectuals, found ready expression under a democratic constitution. Moreover, although the Sophists were at first associated with democratic tendencies, the potential of their doctrines for self-justification, as well as the utility of their instruction for a political career in the new environment, soon connected them with aspiring oligarches.

⁹Who professed there were no Gods because serious injustices go unnoticed by them (Aristophanes, *Clouds* 380), an apparent reference to the notorious treatment of Melos by the Athenians when the city revolted against the League (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* V 116). He, too, supposedly died in a shipwreck going into exile. Apparently Poseidon did not much like atheists.

¹⁰Catherine Osborn (2004) Ch. 7 describes the Sophists as “spin-doctors,” like the populist apologists for the wealthy in American democracy with their “think tanks” and intellectual pretensions.

The Greek Enlightenment was seen, using its own favorite myth, as human reason overreaching itself, expecting to do more than it possibly could, and suffering disaster in the end for its reliance on its own strength and its rejection of traditional ways.

The Sophists were blamed on all sides for the Athenian loss of morality and restraint. Moderates and democrats blamed the Sophists for the career of Critias, an intellectual member of the Thirty. The conservatives blamed them for the career of Alcibiades. The real targets, of course, were not the Sophists, but their students. The trick is to associate one's enemy with the well-known atheists and moral relativists, drawing attention away from the fact that one has no more morality or restraint than the opposition. Once the word is out that the Sophists corrupt their students, all one's enemies, especially those who are least reputable, and so most vulnerable to this sort of attack, must be identified as their students.

There were other reasons for politicians to attack the Sophists. The human desire for wealth and power does its work whatever philosophers teach, and politicians in no time and place have been much moved by high ideals. But it is convenient and useful, and perhaps necessary for self-esteem, to *profess* high ideals, and the scholar's tendency to look at the realities of politics, even if it is with the practical intent of learning how to succeed in the business, is for that reason embarrassing to the politician. It is a nice move, then, to besmirch the teacher as a cynic who corrupts the youth when he gives an objective description of your own policies and behavior. After all, one must be a cynic, and an altogether nasty fellow in general, to doubt others' good intentions.

This is all familiar from our own politics. Other, and even more important reasons for attacking the Sophists are a little harder for us to see. Perhaps most important—it irked the better class of person that the Sophists should accept pay from anyone who might offer it. Philosophy and science had ceased to be entirely a hobby of upper class intellectuals, and begun to be, at least for the Sophists, a profession. People made a living at it chiefly by taking on private students and giving public lectures, sometimes with the help of patronage from the wealthy. Usually they had to move from city to city seeking out students, though a fixed school, like that of Democritus in Abdera, could be established around a medical curriculum. In any case, most Sophists could not afford to be picky about whom they taught. They had a living to make. By contrast, in the old days a philosopher would have made a living, if he were poor enough to need to make one, by joining a rich household, serving his patron as advisor, tutor, perhaps as scholar or poet in residence. He might, like Xenophanes, maintain a certain independence by moving from one patron to another, but it would remain clear that he was a satellite of the landed classes he served. But old ways were changing. Now even poets lived off

commissions and public performances, and advertised their wares by reciting at large public festivals. The economy was developing apace with the increased availability of liquid capital (coinage was only recently invented), and even established landed wealth tended more and more to hire labor rather than retain householders. The rise of teachers for hire was natural enough, then, but it engendered considerable hostility among the old aristocracy, nonetheless.

Plato, generally a sophisticated spokesman for the aristocratic viewpoint, complained that a truly wise man would want to make others wise out of love of the good for its own sake, and would never demand a fee for the work. The good teacher's students, having been made good by him, would support him out of gratitude and friendship for the good, since friends have all things in common—but the teacher would not request this support, even though it is the only honorable way for him to live off his wisdom. This idealizes the old practice in wealthy families of keeping a wise man as a household retainer. Though Plato is not being entirely realistic in his criticism of the Sophist, it is well to remember that the relation of patron to client remained fundamental in every area of life despite the new liquidity, and something like what Plato recommended was possible, with luck. Socrates, with more than a touch of irony, hinted that the Sophist might do well to educate *all* the citizens free of charge, for one can expect justice only from neighbors who are wise. He suggests, moreover, that one who could make citizens wise might be kept at *public* expense, out of a just gratitude for his students.¹¹ Thus, the whole state becomes the wise man's patron, in the way that modern democracies become patrons of scholarship and the arts when the disadvantages of relying on aristocratic wealth become apparent. The reasoning in both thinkers, of course, is reinforced by the view that a truly wise man does not require much in the way of riches, so noble is his pure love of his craft. This is generally the view in modern democracies, too, and artists and scholars kept at state expense are generally expected to be devoted enough to their work not to require much personal wealth.

Plato and Socrates might have thought a truly wise man would not cheapen his vocation by offering his wisdom for sale, though he would accept modest support freely offered in gratitude for his teaching, but

¹¹Plato, *Apology* 25, where Socrates suggests to Meletus that it is absurd to suppose that he would deliberately make his fellow citizens unjust, since he must live among them, and *Apology* 36, where Socrates proposes that the appropriate sanction for his teaching in Athens would be free meals in the Prytaneum, where public banquets were offered in honor of Olympic victors. He needs the food, he says, whereas the Olympic victor generally doesn't. Wealthy patronage supported most philosophers in Hellenistic and Roman times, and the schools in which they taught depended utterly on the upper classes for their continued existence. Only with the advent of the Christian Church did more broadly based institutions take over the patronage of philosophers. By the way, all this could be seen as an anticipation of Plato's ideal state in the *Republic*, in which philosophers not only teach everyone, but, as is necessary if they are to genuinely be in charge of the education of the citizens, rule, and are paid to do so. Plato's ideal state is a natural result of the thought that the citizens should commit their education to those who know what justice really is.

this was not what really bothered the ordinary conservative member of the upper classes. His objection was that the Sophist sells, and is obliged to sell, to *all sorts* of people, to whoever comes along with the requisite fee.¹² The Sophist's new status as a wage earner made his rhetorical and political expertise available even to the *nouveau riche*, those commercially successful upstarts from the lower classes with their bad taste, overbearing manner, and democratic tendencies. (There was no danger of the Sophist imparting his skills to the impoverished, of course. The contest was between the old landed wealth and the new commercial wealth.) This may be personally distasteful, since it means a rather personal connection, that of teacher to student, with low people, but chiefly, it posed a threat to the old distribution of power, aiding and abetting the merchant classes, and the mass of poorer citizens led by them, those who served in the fleet, in gaining control of the state.

One often sees the Sophistic doctrine characterized from the portrayal of the negotiations between the Athenians and the Melians in Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian war. As Thucydides presented it, skepticism about the gods, and a self-interested rejection of the absolute authority of ethical principles in favor of a frank recognition that the strong do what they will, led the Athenians to deal out harsh and unjust treatment to the rebellious Melians, which they could now expect to receive in return in their own moment of disaster. The Athenians reason purely in terms of national self interest, with no recognition of moral obligations to others. But such reasoning is typical of politicians and public servants, whose jobs hang on serving the public interest, not on making morally required public sacrifices on behalf of the state in the interest of other peoples.¹³ Moreover, Thucydides represents the teacher here not as enlightened philosophy, but as the harsh exigencies of war, which leads men to distrust just and conscientious behavior when they see it so often ineffective, and prompts them to set aside every aim other than the welfare of their own state, seeking total victory, at any cost, as the only source of national security. These lessons, moreover, had been much reinforced by the plague of 430-429, which killed upwards of a third of the population of Athens while everyone crowded within the walls to avoid the raids of the Spartan army. Thucydides tells us that

fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to

¹²See Plato, *Hippias Major* 232d, Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I 2.6, I 5.6, I 6.5, I 6.13. The Sophist becomes a slave to whoever has the money to pay him. A decent Sophist, of course, would rather teach only the better sort of people. That wisdom should be imparted with nothing beyond gratitude and friendship given in return—*Memorabilia* I 2.7-8.

¹³Thucydides, *Histories* V 84-115. To help bring the discussion here into focus, the reader should consider that the official doctrine of the U.S. State Department is that nothing but national self-interest should determine U.S. foreign policy.

be just the same whether they worshiped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offenses, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little.¹⁴

The Sophists, if they taught the relativistic opportunism they are often supposed to have taught, told people nothing more than what they wanted to hear. At the worst, they provided them with a rationalization for doing what they were determined to do anyway.

But we might still hold the Sophists responsible for providing that rationalization, one might still accuse the Sophistic doctrines of undermining self-restraint and reasonable behavior, or at least one might accuse the oversimplified and distorted version of these doctrines held by cynical politicians of doing so. After all, our theoretical views surely have some effect on our behavior. Even if we use them only for justification after the fact, we are more likely to do something if we trust we can justify it after the fact than if we suspect we can't. We shall see that the older Sophists argued in favor of traditional moral constraints, and, in particular, in favor of the Delphic ethic of self-restraint, but they nonetheless based their defense of traditional views on rational, pragmatic considerations alone. Perhaps ordinary men need the restraints of religion and an ungrounded sense of moral obligation to keep their behavior reasonable. Once they are allowed to reason each point out for themselves, confident that a purely pragmatic justification for their actions is acceptable, a natural curb on their excessive actions is lost, and young men do make succumb readily to the natural tendency to overestimate their chances of success and underestimate the chances of disaster. Reason, perhaps, ought not to govern people's actions, since people are such bad reasoners. Or perhaps pragmatic calculations of the sort the Sophists suggested in fact lead to the conclusions drawn by the Athenians before Melos, even if the Sophists themselves did not draw those conclusions—a different sort of rational calculation may be needed to justify our traditional ethical rules. Or it may be that no form of rational calculation does better than the Sophistic form, so that moral restraint cannot be rationally justified at all. In that case, should moral restraints, or reason itself, be abandoned? The questions raised here are fundamental both for ethics and for the whole program of the Greek Enlightenment. Does reason lead to the acceptance of traditional moral values? And however we answer that question, should we allow ourselves to be guided by reason, or rely instead on tradition and properly formed passions such as the moral sense? Is the reliance on human reason, in the end, just another form of overreaching, bound to lead to disaster?

¹⁴Thucydides, *Histories* II 53-54. Translation of R. Crawley, 1876. See Fine (1983), p. 464.

3. PLATO ON THE SOPHISTS

...let us reckon up between ourselves in how many guises the Sophist has appeared. First, I think he was found as the hunter of rich young men to hire him... And secondly as a sort of merchant of learning as nourishment for the soul... Thirdly... as a retail dealer in the same wares... fourthly as selling products of his own manufacture... His fifth appearance... an athlete in debate, appropriating that subdivision of contention which consists in the art of eristic... sixth... as a purifier of the soul from conceits that block the way to understanding.

Plato, *The Sophist* 231 d-e.

In the philosophical sphere, as well as the political, the relativistic pragmatism of the Sophists drew fire, especially from later thinkers influenced by the thought of Plato and Aristotle, both dyed-in-the-wool Absolute Realists. Aristotle has nothing but scorn for those who would deny the existence of reality and truth, or the possibility of knowing either, and, following Plato without Plato's restraint, he defines a Sophist as one who makes money from apparent, not real, wisdom. Plato, though more often cited for his hostility to the Sophists, is actually more tempered in his criticism.¹⁵

In his dialogue, *The Sophist*, Plato professes to succeed in saying exactly what a Sophist is only on his seventh attempt, but his inadequate preliminary definitions remain instructive. They do not reveal the essence of the Sophist, Plato thinks, but they do identify characteristics that follow from the essence, and so give a clue to what that essence is. The first five all emphasize that the Sophist is one who makes a living by selling something, in itself a rather shameful activity for a member of an old landed family such as Plato belonged to. Traditionally, the best citizens, the backbone of the city, were supposed to be gentlemen farmers living off their estates. Commerce was considered intrinsically corrupting and dishonest. So Plato describes the Sophist as a kind of hunter, whose prey is young men with sufficient wealth to pay him.¹⁶

¹⁵It might be noted that Isocrates spoke of his group of rhetoricians as 'philosophers' and refers to Plato and his people as 'Sophists'. He seems to follow the definition of Aristotle, which captures the ordinary sense of the word. Plato's definition of the particular wisdom taught by the Sophist might not have been quite so universal as our rather selective sources suggest.

¹⁶Plato's Sophists may seem a special creation of his own prejudices projected upon the simple teachers of rhetoric about whom he speaks, and Grote (1850) 483-4 charges as much. But Plato does not really wander so far from the commonplace meaning of the term as that. All his conclusions follow from the Sophist's profession of rhetoric *as the highest art*. A teacher of rhetoric who did not claim that rhetoric is the highest art, someone like Aristotle, say, would not be a Sophist by his definition. The profession, he will argue, is self-limiting because of its insistence that what it teaches is the highest art, so that a Sophist must work from ordinary men's beliefs, and might, at best, criticize ordinary beliefs, as Socrates does, by detecting inconsistencies within them, but he cannot discover the truth, unless he abandons rhetoric for dialectic, and once he recognizes this fact, will presumably be forced to become

But this is an inadequate definition, for what makes one a Sophist is not his skill at selling, but what he sells. What, then, are the Sophist's wares? Perhaps he sells goods that are not of his own making, that he has picked up in foreign cities, that is, doctrines that he has learned from other Sophists abroad. But what sort of doctrines? The arts that could be taught are, first, practical arts such as theater and music, second, perhaps, virtue, and third, theoretical disciplines such as astronomy. Now the Sophist sells the art of rhetoric, the means to political power. Where is rhetoric found among these three? Plato identifies it as virtue rather than a practical art, since the Sophists claim that rhetoric will make one a fine person, someone to be respected. Now that may seem crazy, but Plato is never just crazy. A landed aristocrat would not identify the knowledge of rhetoric as virtue, of course, but this is because he thinks of virtue as something that cannot be taught. Essentially, he thinks of virtue, the means to political power, as something inherited. Good enough, we might say, wealth and connections are inherited, and political skills are learned from one's parents and their friends—but that would be too close to the naked truth for comfort, and the aristocrat would insist that one also inherits character, a character that makes one worthy of wealth and connections, and which, in one's ancestors, no doubt first created them. The Sophist's virtue is only the aristocrat's virtue redefined for new circumstances. Inherited land and influence no longer suffice for political effectiveness. They no longer make one a fine person to be respected. Nowadays it takes a knowledge of rhetoric to do that. Plato thinks this conception of virtue as whatever it is that makes one a fine person to be respected, that is, gives one power, influence and a good reputation, is the ordinary person's conception of the thing. The Sophist need only state our everyday thoughts baldly, and he makes his point.

But, of course, Plato did not think the Sophist *really* taught virtue, so he does not want to define him as one who sells virtue. Trying again, Plato suggests that the Sophist sells goods that he has fabricated for himself out of material provided by his customers. The point here is that the Sophist only systematizes the opinions of ordinary men, teaching virtue as ordinary men conceive it, not as it is in itself. The Sophist's techniques of investigation give the central place to "eristics" or "elenchic debate," a game of question and answer in which the respondent is to defend a view, and the questioner is to seek out any inconsistency or absurdity he can in what his respondent says. The questioner may ask any question that can be answered with a yes or no, and the respondent must answer, allowing any valid inferences from his answers the questioner might draw. The game provides excellent training for the law courts, and we shall see it was used by Socrates

either a relativist or a skeptic. Plato classifies Socrates as a Sophist, because his highest technique is rhetorical refutation, and Socrates, of course, is no relativist.

for investigation into the truth. But Plato noted that the end result of this game is not usually the discovery of truth, but only the systematization of whatever it is that one most strongly believes. The reason for this is that the game works from our existing beliefs, and even if our beliefs are found to be consistent with one another, or are made consistent after questioning, this does not guarantee that we have the truth, for a set of beliefs containing falsehoods might well be consistent with itself. So if the Sophist teaches men that they should seek only their own self-interest, defending his view through elenctic debate, and succeeds in convincing them he is right, he can have done nothing more than say what they already implicitly believed. If they had strongly believed anything else to start with, they would have been faced with the inconsistency between those stronger beliefs and the proposition that they should seek only their own self-interest, and they would have chosen to reject the latter position. So they had believed it all along, but had not realized they did, or had been ashamed or afraid to utter it aloud. The Sophist does not introduce corruption, then, but he may make it more acute by removing the restraints of traditional belief inconsistent with it, and that does no small harm. Most men, Plato thought, are fundamentally wrong about what is in fact valuable and good, and are prevented from the worst crimes only by their inconsistencies.

The Sophist, then, is like a cook who sells men what they like, unhealthy pastries and the like, rather than what is good for them. Every retailer, of course, must look to his customer's taste to make a living. There is more to the landed aristocrat's bad opinion of commerce than one might think at first. At least the gentleman farmer can live on his own, and need not associate with low types he doesn't respect, or worse, pander to their false conceptions of the good. The Sophist sells people what they take to be virtue, namely power, not virtue as it really is, knowledge of what is truly good. When the Sophist uses elenctic debate for a noble end, the pursuit of truth, he can purge the soul of a false opinion of its wisdom, but he cannot, having made his student properly modest, then go on to impart true wisdom without introducing new techniques, for he cannot introduce anything into the student's mind that is not already there. Such a noble Sophist might well rest in skepticism, satisfied for the moment with his new-found modesty and willing to grant that only the gods truly know anything,¹⁷ but most Sophists are not of the noble sort. Instead, seeing that their techniques will not obtain the truth, and seeing no other technique that will help, they deny the existence and relevance of objective truth altogether, and retreat to a relativism that makes whatever works for a given person, whatever seems true, the truth for that person. Plato's last word is that the Sophist is to be defined by his belief that we

¹⁷Plato clearly has Socrates in mind here.

deal only with appearances. He is someone who sees the pursuit of consistency in the appearances, while holding on to our most strongly held beliefs, as the only way to approach an objective truth, if there is one, and sees that it is inadequate to obtain it. He might then be of the noble species, who continues to believe in the truth, and admits his ignorance, or of the less noble species that opts for relativistic pragmatism. In the first case he may prepare the ground for true philosophy, chastening his student and bringing him to a recognition of his ignorance. In the second, he effectively inoculates the student against true philosophy, and confirms him in his own bad opinions while removing any possibility of their correction. This is true even if, like Protagoras, he is himself a noble fellow who believes in self-restraint and justice.

Let us compare the Sophist to the Philosopher. A teacher of true philosophy might well hunt young men, but the goods he sells are truths that grow of themselves in his own soil, not opinions he manufactures from the contributions of others. Moreover, he grows them first of all for his private use, not for sale. (One can't help but notice how like the land owner, working his own land, he is.) The art of question and answer is only a preparation for what he has to teach, which requires a direct insight into reality itself. (We shall see later how Plato thought such insight possible.) The corruption of the Sophist rests in the denial that such a direct insight can happen, or that such a reality can be found. In the end, Plato thinks, unless we grant that ethical norms can be grounded in genuine knowledge how things really are, we wind up abandoning such norms altogether, for the only other effective standards for our behavior lie in our strongest opinions about what is good, whatever those opinions might be, and almost always those opinions suggest that it is better not to be too punctilious about such things as the obligations of justice.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOPHISTIC RHETORIC

SOCRATES: Tell me, then... What is the subject matter of the words employed by rhetoric?

GORGIAS: The greatest and noblest of human affairs, Socrates... for it brings freedom to mankind in general and to each man dominion over others in his own country.

Plato, *Gorgias* 451d, 452d.

Rhetoric as a self-conscious craft was invented in Syracuse, we are told, by **Corax and Tisias** in the first half of the fifth century. It should be noted that a teacher of rhetoric need not be a Sophist. He would have

to claim to teach wisdom, to become a Sophist.¹⁸ Indeed, many identified as Sophists in a loose manner of speaking are not sophists at all, since they do not profess to teach wisdom, whatever relativistic or political views they might hold. So Gorgias is certainly not a Sophist, given his skeptical bent, for he did not think he could teach anything. But here we will continue to use the word loosely for those philosophical thinkers who took an interest in rhetoric, and had views in semantics resembling or apparently inspired by the views of Protagoras.

With the death of the tyrant Hieron in 466, a spate of legal activity broke out in the newly established constitutional democracy in Syracuse. Corax had been influential in Hieron's court, and so, having lost his position of influence, he may have decided to trade on his skills in presenting a case, skills which had decayed in the general population, by taking up theory and teaching. Empedocles followed them in the art, and then **Gorgias of Leontini (b. ca 490–480 BCE)**, who studied under Empedocles, and Gorgias's student, Polus. Gorgias's brother, like Empedocles himself, was a physician, and Gorgias is said to have assisted physicians by using the art of persuasion on their patients. He held public displays at public games, speaking impromptu on whatever question was proposed by the audience. In Athens in 427 on a diplomatic mission, he impressed the citizens in his address to the Assembly, and persuaded them to ally themselves with Leontini against Syracuse. He never claimed to teach virtue, but only to make men persuasive speakers.¹⁹ Other pupils included Alcidamas and Antisthenes, and Socrates appears to have been influenced by his thought as much as anyone else's. Though he moved about a good deal, and never married or became a citizen, he lived in Athens for quite a while. He died very old at the court of Jason of Pherae in the north, some time in the 380's.

The study of rhetoric among the Sophists involved attention to all the sciences of language—grammar, philology, etymology and usage, and semantics. Of special interest here is **Prodicus**, who was born in Ceos, the home of the poet Simonides, probably between 470 and 460, and died after 399. He often visited Athens on official missions, and seems to have been a friend of Socrates, who remarks in Plato's *Theaetetus* that he passes on to Prodicus and the other Sophists those students he finds are not pregnant, that is, who are not able to think for themselves and so profit from Socratic questioning. Prodicus was an expert on the use of words, and held that no two words ever had precisely the same meaning. He is credited with a dialogue between virtue

¹⁸This, at least, seems to be the usage of the Greek word *sophistes* at this time.

¹⁹In Plato's *Gorgias*, when Socrates argues that an orator must have virtue to do good using his art, Gorgias seems not to have thought of this, and allows by the way that if this is so, then the Sophist must teach virtue as well as rhetoric, something that, he seems to think, would not be hard to do.

and vice before Heracles, in which each tries to draw the hero down her road at a parting of the ways. Virtue's road is hard, vice's easy, but both disputants appeal to the welfare of the agent. Virtue argues that her road pays off better in the long run because the hard work of virtue enriches its rewards with pride in accomplishment, a sense of desert, and the like, while unjustly gained rewards are accompanied by shame, bad reputation, fear of enemies and so on.²⁰ Prodicus is also reported to have taught that death, which he takes to entail the end of experience, not an after-life, is desirable, for it enables us to escape the evils of life.²¹ Death is in itself nothing to the living, since they are not yet dead, and likewise nothing to the dead, since they are dead, and so in no way benefit or suffer from it.

It seems clear that Sophistic rhetoric presupposes in its students a knowledge and perhaps a habit of reading, with the awareness of language that comes with that. By the end of the 5th century it seems booksellers in Athens had their own section in the agora for their stalls, though most of their customers must have been fairly well off. In the following century an overseas market for Athenian books in philosophy had developed—a member of the Platonic Academy in Athens could pick up a bit of money by selling copies of Plato's dialogues in Syracuse, and private libraries were to be found in wealthy houses.²² Rhetoric also included practical logic, in particular, the use of probable arguments to show a conclusion most likely true. For instance, if a big, strong fellow is accused of assaulting someone, then he should say that he would be crazy to do such a thing since he would be the first to be accused. If he is small and weak, then he should point out that he would be crazy to do such a thing since he would most likely get beaten up for his trouble. Tisias and Corax and those after them prepared handbooks of such arguments, usually taking both sides of set questions, and an orator was expected to have arguments at hand no matter what question was raised. Excellent examples are found in the speeches constructed for his characters by Thucydides, laying out the considerations for and against actions and policies that shaped events. This sort of thing remained a part of oratory until quite recently, and could be enjoyed not only in political speeches, but in fine literature. Shakespeare's characters, like the characters of Euripides, indulge in many a rhetorical combat, cleverly constructing plausible arguments on either side of a question, for the pleasure of the audience. Among politicians, the imitation of the common man and common sense, and

²⁰Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II 1.21–34, summarizes the dialogue, claiming that Socrates borrowed it to instruct his own students.

²¹In the Pseudo-Platonic dialogue, *Axiochus*. Socrates suggests in the *Apology* that if death is merely a cessation of experience, then it is like a sound sleep, and so a good.

²²Casson (2001) 27–28.

among writers, the desire for natural and realistic dialogue, reflecting psychological processes believed to have little to do with reason, have rendered this aspect of fine writing largely obsolete in our own day, considerably impoverishing popular thought. The handbook of Corax and Tisias may be taken as the first book of “commonplaces,” standard arguments to be memorized by the student and applied to whatever topic might come along. The point of learning the commonplace arguments in a field is, perhaps, not to find out the truth, but to learn to defend whatever viewpoint one wishes to defend, but it certainly provides assistance in finding good arguments for one’s position if they are there, and so is useful even to the honest person interested in getting it right rather than mere persuasion.

We have already noted the use of elenctic debate in rhetorical training to teach quick thinking. Such debates generally involved a time limit, so that the respondent could win by avoiding entrapment in an absurdity for half an hour, say, and rules were developed to govern the exchange. The respondent had to answer every question, though he was allowed to divide a question, giving different answers to its different parts, or to raise objections to trick questions of various sorts. In particular, he could demand that any ambiguity be clarified. (Here is where Prodicus’s instruction might come in handy.) Inferences had to be stated so that the respondent could agree that they followed or else hold they did not. The aim was to learn how to avoid contradicting oneself or drifting into implausible positions an audience would reject, while driving one’s opponent into precisely those errors. Socrates was a master at this sort of thing, and such debates are at the center of most of Plato’s dialogues. Like the learning of commonplace arguments, the technique has its honest uses, indeed, training in it is essential if one is to be any good at honest investigation.

The use of rhetorical training is often, perhaps in response to the critiques of rhetoric in figures such as Aristotle and Plato, imagined to be of less use in practical policy-making than it in fact is. It is imagined that rhetoric’s use is to further the ends of someone who has already settled on his policies and notions of justice and the public weal quite independently, and not through philosophical reason, of course, and so clearly in view of his self-interest. But as a matter of fact the study of such matters makes one a better investigator into what is in his own interests, and when it is that one should set his own interests aside. Moreover, it improves one’s skills at negotiation, which is certainly useful for diplomats and mediators as well as more ordinary folks, and is an important part of the stock in trade of the legal profession. The lawyer has no reason to apologize if he uses rhetorical ability far more than philosophical reasoning or scientific investigation in settling disputes between litigants. Settling the dispute is a matter of arriving at an agreement everyone can live with, which is quite difficult enough to do so that one might seek out experts in the process, without taking much interest in

philosophical issues. Usually our instinctive, culturally biased notions what is fair will have to stand in for *real* justice, if we want an agreement that can actually be implemented—and it is enormously important that the agreement can be actually implemented. Negotiation must *shape* the agreement, and rhetoric is important here. It does not help, often, to focus on imposing the *right* agreement, or taking a good deal of time figuring out what the *right* one is, if one cannot get one party or the other to accept it.

And if it is objected that the effective rhetorician may have a deep knowledge of human nature and desires, but it takes a philosopher to know what is genuinely to be pursued, well, we ought not to underestimate the importance in negotiation of *understanding* people's *actual* values and goals, culturally biased as they are, and the structure of their actual relationships to one another, culturally bound and perhaps indefensible as they are, if we are to get actual agreement. The reformer often seems to produce a great deal more strife than agreement because she refuses to work within people's assumptions and goals, and insists that they change them, instead. The reformer is needed, often enough, but reform is impractical until enough people of the right sort are convinced it is necessary, and until then we must work within existing customs and views, while successful negotiations will remain of the utmost importance in politics, commerce, and daily life.

The reformer is interested in negotiation as a way to achieve his reforms, and the philosopher is interested in rational discussion, sometimes in the form of a kind of idealized negotiation with a specialized aim, to determine what it is most rational to do or believe—it ignores the usual necessity of allowing irrational people input into our decisions. Neither reformer nor philosopher is interested in *practical* negotiations aimed at implementable results for their own sake. But often the actual outcome of such negotiations is of the greatest importance, if cooperation is to take place, or warfare to be avoided. Sometimes philosophy may lead us to appreciate better what sense there is in everyday views about fairness and other values, even if they are not rationally ideal or true, and we see Plato, for instance, undertaking precisely this task when he considers what sort of state is actually practical, reflecting the ideal state, which isn't actually practical, as closely as may be. Indeed, a philosophical ideal is strongly suspect if it is not weakly reflected, at least, in common practice. And philosophy is a useful tool of rhetoric for dealing with those who are philosophically inclined and engaged in negotiations with others who perhaps are not. But Plato's insistence, like the wise physician's insistence, that we first agree to do it his way, the *right* way, is not a recipe for successful negotiations even if he *does* have the right way, unless it is common practice to respect the physician or the philosopher. Plato is well aware of this, and in his ideal states the rulers employ every rhetorical technique they can to bring even unreflective people somewhat given to vice to a respect for those in fact wiser than they are. The philosopher, policy expert,

scientist or physician, needs to bring along a rhetorician as his ally if he is to do any actual good in the political arena.

The influence of Sophistic rhetoric is apparent in a number of medical treatises in **the Hippocratic tradition**.²³ The extreme cases are *On the Art*, a defense of the practice of scientific medicine, and *On Breaths*, a treatise defending the view that all diseases are caused in one way or another by bad air. These works seem to target an inexpert audience, and their medical knowledge is superficial—it has even been suggested that they were not written by medical practitioners at all, but by Sophists as exercises in rhetorical technique. However that may be, the science in them has certainly been suborned by rhetoric, filling them with exchanges with imaginary opponents, studied antitheses, and stock arguments. Many of the best medical writings of the 4th and 5th centuries also display Sophistic rhetoric, deployed with more circumspection, for instance, *On Ancient Medicine*, *On the Nature of Man*, *On Regimen in Acute Diseases*, and *On Diseases I*. Such treatises discuss rhetorical techniques for building a clientele and increasing the prestige of the profession, as well as persuading patients to follow the regimens prescribed. They also reveal the use of rhetoric in public debates between doctors, and between doctors and their priestly competitors in the healing temples. The debates between doctors seem to reflect a more general practice of public discussion of philosophical and scientific topics.²⁴ Scholars of this literature have remarked on both positive and negative influences on scientific investigation. On the one hand, the necessary habit of responding to the other view is fostered, so that competing explanations are considered together, each on its merits. On the other hand, these works betray the Sophistic habit of sharply criticizing one's opponent while turning a blind eye to problems in one's own views, as though a scientist, no different from a lawyer, should be chiefly concerned to arrive at a decision, now, making as little trouble for himself as he can in doing so.

Plato must have followed many of the other critics of the Sophists when he complained that they were more interested in persuasion, making things seem to be true, than they were in discovering what is in fact true. Such complaints were often nothing more than the grumbling of those unable to stand up to the Sophist's

²³For this paragraph, G.E.R. Lloyd (1979) 88-98.

²⁴See, for instance, the repeated reference to such debates in *On Ancient Medicine*, and in *On the Nature of Man* Ch. 1. The latter treatise defends the view that people are composed of the four humors, attacking his opponents' views as various sorts of monism, each identifying just one element making up the human body. One might plausibly relate it to Empedoclean and other responses to the Eleatics, then, though the dispute can be traced back even to Anaximander's proposal of the Indefinite, a mixture of elements, to replace Thales's single element, water. The former repeatedly expresses its respect for an inexpert audience, holding that one must be able to make one's views clear to the inexpert, and refute the views of one's opponents, some of whom are here identified as Sophists.

arguments, but Plato himself cannot be accused of such motivation. In fact, he has little use for the fellow who cannot handle himself in Sophistic debate, and insists that anyone who really knows something to be true will consistently avoid refutation by the Sophist. Plato's worry is that the art of rhetoric gives one power, but really does not tell one how to use that power. Gorgias had emphasized that rhetoric enables one to soothe the passions and perform other valuable services, but Plato asks how one knows when a service is valuable. The art of argument taught in rhetoric does not help here, since its only aims are the appearance of truth, and the apparent refutation of one's opponent. Plato is interested in the *truth*, not getting to some practical agreement how we are to think about things. Knowledge what is good is the master art, which should rule the use of rhetoric, and this cannot be arrived at by rhetorical technique. But the Sophists and their students think of rhetoric itself as the master art, and agreement an end in itself, as though power itself, even when unregulated by a correct conception how it should be used, were a good in itself, and not the greatest of evils.

It is with **Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490 - ca 420 BCE)** that we first find a frank defense of the position that rhetoric, rather than Plato's knowledge of the absolute good, is the master art. Protagoras was the first to call himself a "Sophist" and charge fees for his instruction, and it seems, also the first to claim philosophical wisdom, as opposed to mere skill in rhetoric. He was a friend of Pericles, and is said to have spent an entire day with him discussing the question who would be responsible if a man were accidentally killed by a javelin in an athletic contest. Would it be the one who hurled the javelin, the organizer of the games, or perhaps the javelin itself? (A javelin *could* be tried and convicted under Athenian law, and this amounted to denying that it was anyone's fault. Something had to be responsible since removal of the pollution resulting from the killing required exile of the one responsible, and so a legal fiction developed. One would exile the javelin if everyone seemed guiltless in the affair. No doubt, Protagoras was happy to say that the Javelin did it, as long as that was the most useful view.) As Plato presents him Protagoras comes off well, displaying urbanity and self-control in the face of real provocation, including some openly sophistical arguments, from Socrates. His morality is high, and his contributions to the discussion, if marked somewhat by vanity, are all intelligent. He professes to remit his fees if a student is dissatisfied with what has been learned, and he carefully avoids association with any political party.

Protagoras defended the autonomy of rhetoric by arguing that ethical and political standards are established by convention, not nature. The problems that arise in a community are not due to having the "wrong" standard, but due to lack of agreement on a standard, a lack of agreement best remedied by the rhetorician, who can persuade all to the same standard. Given his political views, discussed below, Protagoras

probably held some standards to be better than others, not because they could be discovered to be the true standards through some Platonic science of the good, but rather because people could agree on them and stick to them. That is, they did not decisively work against the desires of any major group, and their general adoption would result in social harmony and some advantage to most over time. He may well have thought it was precisely the rhetorician, accustomed to consider all sides of a question and the perceived interests of everyone concerned in it, that could best discover such standards, and persuade others to adhere to them. The seeker after the absolute good tells at least some people that what they want is simply bad or wrong, and they just can't have it. That is no recipe for removing conflict—it only intensifies it.²⁵

Protagoras's defense of rhetoric as the master art becomes even more interesting when we turn to his reasons for saying there are always good arguments on both sides of every question. He points out that the good appears in different ways to different people, and since it is merely a matter of appearance, there being no absolute truth about what is good, there is no way to judge which of the appearances are correct. One can only judge concerning the strength of appearances, that is, which appearances are likely to maintain themselves, and which are likely to be rejected, when arguments are presented against them, or events play themselves out, and this is the province of the rhetorician.²⁶ The rhetorician realizes, moreover, that the same appearance may prove very strong in one person's mind, and rather weak in another's. If the first person is more willing to reject anything that contradicts the appearance than the appearance itself, and the second finds himself in the opposite condition, the very same arguments may prove convincing to one and not the other. In the absence of any known and agreed on objective truth about the matter, one can only say that the arguments on one side prevail for one person and those on the other for the other. One cannot decide which set of arguments is correct, but only which set is correct *for oneself*. Truth is relative.

²⁵In the "Contrary Arguments," a brief work from the 4th century summarizing the arguments for Sophistic and opposed (usually Platonic) positions on various central questions, the Sophistic argument for the importance of rhetoric is given. The man who knows the art of rhetoric will speak correctly on whatever subject he speaks on, and so he must know every subject he speaks on, and so must know everything. It sounds like a straightforward equivocation, particularly when the premise is defended with the remark that he knows all the forms of speech, and so knows how to speak well on every subject. One wants to reply that he only knows how to speak well in a certain respect, namely, how to speak grammatically, how to frame artistically adequate speeches, how to speak persuasively, and the like. The rhetorician does not necessarily know how to speak well if this means saying what is true and theoretically significant. And so the reply (drawn from Plato) is given that one must in fact know the truth about it to speak well on a subject. But if truth is not an issue, then speaking well may include speaking persuasively, and that may be exactly what is needed to bring like-mindedness to a community. "Contrary Arguments" (*Dissoi Logoi*) is found in Sprague et al. (1972) 279-293.

²⁶One might, of course, question if it is not rather the province of the scientist, especially when it is a matter how appearances will play out.

It is the task of the rhetorician, then, to determine which of the contrary beliefs is *more advantageous* to the community, not which one is true, and this will perhaps be clear, where politics is at issue, to someone who genuinely has the interests of the whole community in mind and not merely the advantage of the few. Then, if the arguments for the more advantageous belief are weaker, the rhetorician must somehow make them the stronger arguments, so that they carry the day.²⁷ Since this is in fact the only way people are ever brought into agreement, the rhetorician needs to recognize this, and make himself skilled at doing it, if he is to benefit his community.

Isocrates (436–338), the apparent target of Plato's criticism of Sophistic rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, had studied under both Prodicus and Gorgias in Thessaly, and might well be regarded as the last of the Sophists, though he himself disliked being called one. He lacked the confidence and voice to speak to a large audience, but worked as a speech and letter writer for Timotheus, as well as publishing his own letters and speeches quite deliberately in written form. Because of the influence of his works on Greek politics, his conservatism, his fine and influential style, as well as his care to see it reproduced in written form, most of his work survives, unlike the work of others in the movement. His family was wealthy, and as a youth during the Peloponnesian war he studied under conservative enemies of the democracy. He turned to writing speeches for use in the courts in the 390's, and then established a school of rhetoric. His *Against the Sophists*, *Helen*, and *Busiris* seem to have been set pieces intended to advertise his wares. In 380 he published the *Panegyricus*, advocating that Greece unite under a shared hegemony of Sparta and Athens. In 375, due to the successes of Timotheus, something like his proposal was adopted. Isocrates then began to address pleas for an attack on Persia to influential men, and in 373, when Thebes seized Platea, urged reprisals in his *Plataicus*, apparently sensing that the Athenian/Spartan axis was threatened. In 355, after the Athenian failure in the Social War, and in view of the obvious financial embarrassment faced by the city, Isocrates advocated peace in his *On Peace*. In the *Areopagiticus* he advocated conservative (and uncharacteristically quixotic) constitutional reform, returning the Areopagus to its ancient position as arbiter of affairs. In 354 he was challenged in an *antidosis*, a proceeding in which a person assigned the duty of paying for a public liturgy or trireme would claim that someone else was in fact

²⁷So the accusation that Sophists "make the weaker argument the stronger" made by Aristophanes in the *Clouds* 111-116 (see also Plato, *Apology* 18b, Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II 24) receives its basis in the actual opinions of Protagoras. Aristophanes was talking about making an argument that is really not very good look much better than it is, in order to deceive people, but Protagoras did not intend this. No argument is "good" or "bad" in itself, and he wants to make the best arguments (those giving the best results) the strongest (most influential). If one looks for a view of things closest to Protagoras in recent thinkers, it would be Pragmatism, which, like Protagoras, can, in William James, at least, be associated with a defense of traditional values and beliefs against more recent criticism.

richer than he, and had not been assigned suitable duties. One could either confess that he was in fact richer, and take over the duties, or claim he was not, and exchange all his property with the challenger. Isocrates lost the case, and wrote the *Antidosis* in 353 as his apology in the matter. His *Phillipus* in 346 urged Philip of Macedon to take the lead in Greece, campaign against the Persians, and establish colonies there to relieve the economy. Despite two further letters to Philip he made no progress, and his last great work, the *Panathenaicus*, did not address current affairs, but rather served as apology, and a glorification of Athens at Sparta's expense. In 338 Isocrates starved himself to death, being 98 years old.

Isocrates argued that the moral quality and reputation of a speaker was essential to his success, and it would be natural to think that teaching of virtue would be a part of his teaching of rhetoric, but like the other Sophists, he did not think the development of a theoretical account of virtue and the good to be of any real use. In his treatment of practical politics Isocrates aimed not at impossible reforms of the state, as he thought Plato and Aristotle had, but aimed at usable advice, and professed to work pragmatically within the possible.²⁸ His school aimed to train people for practical affairs, and avoided science and dialectic, while emphasizing rhetoric and a practical study of politics. He thought his position here a matter of common sense, and disdained giving elaborate theoretical defenses for his anti-theoretical position, as though he were a skeptical *philosopher* rather than a practical statesman, but some arguments do emerge from his writings.

For one thing, he pointedly remarks that there can be no reliable knowledge of future events.²⁹ As often happens in Isocrates, the conclusion is left implicit. Presumably it is that a theoretical knowledge of the Good would be of no help deciding what to do. This presupposes a Socratic approach, where the good would have to be sought in the future. One could argue that the good is a certain state of mental health, more on Plato's line, and then one would not have to wait for the future to have it. But Isocrates was probably not thinking about this. Perhaps more to the point, one might easily argue that we are doomed to guesswork if he is right, but surely we need at least to try guessing how to get at outcomes that are in fact good, as long as we can guess right a bit more often than we guess wrong. To remove all point from knowing what is good, one would have to make the future so uncertain as to remove all point from deliberation at all.

He also argued that no precise knowledge is possible of the occasions on which general principles about

²⁸The *Areopagiticus* represents the exception here, and may have been due to an unusually high level of frustration brought on by the Social War.

²⁹*Against the Sophists* 1–3.

what to do can be applied.³⁰ Again the conclusion is only implied, but surely it is that such knowledge is useless, though it seems sufficient for it to be useful that *sometimes* we can know it applies, even if we can't always know. Moreover, it might be suggested that if we cannot know on a certain occasion, then we ought not to feel certain about what we ought to do, and that might be useful information.³¹

Again, it is argued that just living cannot be taught, for no art enables us to “implant sobriety and justice in depraved natures.”³² Perhaps it does not follow that knowledge what virtue is is useless, for Isocrates did think one could strengthen natural virtue, and even if theoretical study did not help with that, it would help one identify which traits were to be strengthened. In any case, Isocrates could reasonably claim not to be a Sophist given that he did not think virtue could be taught, and did not offer to teach it.

Isocrates also points out that a likely conjecture about useful things is better than exact knowledge of the useless.³³ This seems right, but to apply it to the case, it has to be shown that exact knowledge of justice and the like is of something useless, and that requires something like the first two lines of argument proposed.

In any case, Isocrates thinks, the definition of true advantage and right conduct ought to be worked out socially, taking regard of the best interests of individuals within the state as they conceive it.³⁴ This is necessary for human survival:

Because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is not an institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust and things bad and honorable; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another.³⁵

The view is of a piece, it seems, with that of Protagoras, discussed below.

³⁰*Antidosis* 184.

³¹For these two points see Cooper (1985).

³²*Against the Sophists* 21–22.

³³*Antidosis* 281–282; *Helen* 5.

³⁴*Against the Sophists* 180 ff.

³⁵*Nicoles* 5–7. Compare *Antidosis* 253–257.

5. PROTAGORAS AND RELATIVISM

Man is the measure of all things—alike of the being of things how they are and of the not-being of things how they are not.³⁶

Protagoras, quoted in Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a.

He says too that the explanations of all the appearances are present in the matter, so that the matter is capable, as far as lies in its own power, of being everything that appears to everybody.

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Empiricism* I 218-219.

When I know the relation of myself to the outer world, I say that I possess the truth. And thus each may have his own truth, and yet truth is ever the same.

Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*.³⁷

That is enough of approaching the Sophists from the standpoint of their claim to have a useful art to teach people, especially if they are involved in politics and legal matters. Let us turn to what they said about philosophical matters, bearing in mind that many of them took this sort of thing rather lightly, and would probably have been annoyed at the amount of time we are about to spend on them.

Relativistic themes were, from the beginning, commonplace in Greek ethical thought. It was generally assumed that nothing is good without qualification—to be good is to be good for someone or to a certain end, though usually some agreement was expected on the good among judges of the same kind. All fish find water good, and all men need air. One might expect a defense of relativism in values, then, even in thinkers who insisted on an absolute truth when it comes to facts about the world, and no doubt most Greek intellectuals took such a view of things. But the Sophists took advantage of the developments we have seen in the philosophy of science, in particular, the theory of perception in Democritus, to assert relativism in a wider context.

³⁶The translation here is suggested by Kerferd (1997) 230. It's import would be not to suggest that appearances to human beings determine whether things exist or not, but rather what phenomenal properties they have.

³⁷Cited in Ueberweg.

Protagoras was the most noted defender of the view among the Sophists,³⁸ though he did not reject the notion of a fixed reality. In fact, he assumed that there is a real sensible world that produces all the appearances of which we become aware, including contrary appearances in various people, or in the same person at different times. He did not question the existence of a definite reality,³⁹ but asked, instead, how it is that anyone could assert a falsehood about such a reality. Say I am talking about Socrates, and I maintain that Socrates is honest. Perhaps you know better, and see that it is Socrates's skill as an actor that makes me think him honest, not his honesty. In order to make your case, you will have to show how Socrates's skill as an actor might produce the appearance of honesty. This is clear enough, but the "reality" *presented* to us here might well be considered as nothing but further experience, that is, as those experiences of Socrates that would verify that he is indeed only a good actor. How could one make clear an assertion about, not, say, the totality of our experience, but the reality lying *behind* our experience? We never experience ultimate reality just as it is in itself. So how do we know what reality produces a given sensible appearance, say, sweetness? Is it the presence of large, smooth, round atoms that produces that appearance, or a certain mixture of fire and water, or the dominance of the quality sweetness? Surely we cannot know without at some time checking on what the reality is like just in itself and then seeing what appearances such a thing will produce. But we can *never* check on experience directly, what the reality is like in itself. We assume that the same reality, whatever produces the sweet taste, is there whenever we experience that taste, but the taste does not tell us what that reality is. Indeed, it does not even tell us it is the same reality each time, but only that the same taste is produced. If we do not experience it, how can we form any notion what sort of reality might produce the various appearances we deal with? We can imagine something, but there is no reason to believe our mere imagination gets things the way they are. So what reality do I mean to refer to when I say the apple is red? Clearly, I cannot say—but we can assume that I mean to indicate *whatever it is* that produces the appearance that it is red. And what I indicate or refer to is there. It must be, since the appearance is there.

In fact, even if we could somehow tell what reality is like in itself, whether Democritus or Empedocles

³⁸For Protagoras, see Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e ff., and Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Empiricism* I 216-219, as well as Plato's *Euthydemus*. See John Gibert (2013), "The Sophists," in Shields (2002) for a sophisticated and intelligent treatment of Protagorean relativism.

³⁹Though he did, it seems question the existence of the perfect unchanging reality of geometrical beings—Aristotle, *Metaphysics* III 2, 998a4, states that in his refutations of the geometers he pointed out that a hoop does not touch the ground at a point, nor do the movements in the heavens seem to match the perfectly even circular movements constructed by theoretical astronomers, nor are the stars points. So the real world is the one revealed by the senses.

is right, say, we have not yet done so, and most people are ignorant of physics and have not even formulated the possible theories. They do not mean to refer to configurations of atoms, or any other such thing, when they say something is red. If they are honest, they will recognize that they don't know what they are talking about, they have no idea what it really is to be red. To understand them we must employ the Principle of Charity, the principle of interpretation that tells us to read a person's intentions in the way that makes them most reasonable. This principle suggests that what they mean to speak of is whatever it is that produces the appearance of redness on which they rely for their evidence that the thing is red.

There are in fact three independent lines of argument to three different conclusions mixed up in Protagoras's considerations. In the first, and more plausible line, Protagoras argues that *whatever appears to us through the senses is so*,⁴⁰ that is, whatever proposition receives support directly from a sensory appearance, its meaning being tied, as it were, to a sensory image, is true, for whatever reality produces the confirming sensory appearance is sufficient to make it true. So, if something appears blue to us, it does not matter what reality produces the blue appearance, *that* is the reality we must mean to refer to when we say it is blue, and so it is in fact blue, despite the fact that the reality is, perhaps, nothing like the appearance (the visual image) it produces.

The second argument has a more adventurous conclusion, namely that *whatever seems to be true to us at all*, that is, whatever we believe, *is in fact true*, for it can only have reference to the reality that produced the belief, which must, of course, exist. So, if it appears to us that Socrates is honest, he must be so, for whatever the reality is that causes us to believe that, that is the reality we must mean to refer to when we say he is. Here it might readily be objected that his skill as an actor is not at all what we meant to refer to, it was rather his possibly nonexistent honesty. What that honesty is, exactly, we perhaps do not know, but if it turns out he was acting, his honesty was not to be found in reality, so it is not true that *whatever* reality produces the appearance

⁴⁰Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X 1, 1053 b1–4, suggests another reading of the proposal that man is the measure of all things, namely that since man is the one who knows things, man's knowledge is the measure of what things really are. Aristotle observes that this is a triviality, and seems to think that Protagoras means something else, but trades on this possible meaning to gain plausibility for his dictum. Grote (1850) 501 note, observes that this truth is not so trivial, giving it a Kantian twist when he goes on to identify Gorgias's unknowable nature as the "noumenal" opposed to the empirical. He has a point. If the end of all our researches is simply a more complete collection of appearances, then the appearance to the one who knows, which can only be the one who has completed all the necessary researches, is simply the truth. Something like this consideration may have motivated Protagoras, but note that he does not restrict truth to the appearances at the end of investigation, but extends it to all appearances, even those that will be set aside later in favor of other, better appearances.

of honesty must be accounted honesty.⁴¹ This line of response might be turned to account in the appearance that the object is blue, as well, if it turned out the appearance was produced by stage lighting, and the object was white.⁴² We shall see how Protagoras might have responded to such arguments shortly.

In the third place, Plato reports in the *Euthydemus* that Protagoras held that *whatever can be said meaningfully is true*, on the ground that it cannot be meaningful unless it has some reference in reality, but that reference is sufficient to make it true. This argument is clearly related to Parmenides's notion that we can only speak of what is, but Parmenides does not seem to have argued that we cannot say something that is false of what we speak of. Protagoras, one suspects, misconstrues how a sentence means, and we shall see that this is how Plato straightens things out in his later dialogues.

To clarify the first line of argument, consider once more the question what the sentence, "the apple is red," says. We could approach this from the side of its descriptive content—it says that the apple is red. In that case we might decide it is true just in case there is a real apple and it has the real quality of redness. Let us say in such a case that the sentence is "descriptively true." The problem with descriptive truth is that we have discovered that the appearances here may be entirely misleading, for they may be produced by a reality very different from them, and what reality produces them, we cannot say.⁴³ If we think of truth as descriptive truth we can never have any idea if a statement is true or not. Truth is utterly unknowable, so utterly useless and

⁴¹Notice that Protagoras, as long as he follows this line of argument, would hold that a statement that is actually believed must be true. If it does not appear to be true, but one utters it anyway, as an example of a falsehood, say, and it appears to no one else to be true either, then Protagoras could not insist it is true unless he moved on to the third line of argument laid out immediately below. Also notice that Protagoras is prepared to say that "Socrates is honest" is true as long as it appears to be so, even if "Socrates is dishonest" is also true (true not merely for someone else, but just true, full stop). One could evade Protagoras's argument with a pragmatic theory of truth, holding that "Socrates is honest" is true if and only if it will somehow survive all tests based on appearances, and ultimately establish itself as true when all appearances are in. But Protagoras takes it that truth in a sentence resides in its relation to Reality, not to appearances, and though he takes an interest in "pragmatic truth" he does not identify it as truth, but only as useful belief.

⁴²One could say that we do mean to refer to what produces the appearance of blue *under the usual circumstances when our vision is working correctly*, but allow that on a particular occasion the appearance might be produced by something else. Perhaps Protagoras's argument could then be turned to the issue what this usual producer of the appearance is. One could make a mistake then about whether it is blue or not, and discover the mistake if she discovers that the appearance was produced by something other than blueness under unusual circumstances. Could one be mistaken about the theoretical account of blueness? Presumably so, but note that the ordinary speaker has no such theoretical account available, though, with Parmenides, he may hold that there must be one, for blueness has to be *something*. So one might couch everything in terms of appearances, but only on the assumption that these are caused by realities, though without specifying how they are so caused.

⁴³The perceptive reader might note here that we assume that the only way appearances can provide a clue to reality is if they *resemble* reality. One would have to examine other possible ways they could provide a clue to establish that nothing else will work, of course.

uninteresting. How should we think of the truth of “the apple is red,” then? We could set aside the descriptive content of the statement, and look to its reference for its truth. What is it that is being talked about if the statement is uttered, say, by a sophisticated atomist? He will confess that he does not know precisely, since he does not know exactly what configuration of atoms is involved here, but what makes the statement true is not that there is a red apple, since that is just appearance. What makes it true is that configuration of atoms which in fact produces the appearance of a red apple. Let us call this sort of truth “referential truth.” But, of course, we do not even know if it is a configuration of atoms that lies behind the appearances here. Perhaps it is something else. All right, then, what makes the statement (referentially) true is *whatever* produces the appearance of its truth. The truth of the statement has been tied to its reference. But a true description of its reference, it is argued, is something we can never have good reason to believe we possess, even if we did happen to get hold of it by some accident. So a statement’s (referential) truth has nothing to do with its descriptive content.

One upshot of this referential view of truth embraced by Protagoras is that two statements with contradictory descriptive contents can both be true referentially, as long as each appears to be true (to *somebody*, on the second line of argument) or is meaningful (on the third line), and so refers to something (not necessarily what it describes) that produces the appearance of its truth or provides its meaning. Such statements are not in fact contradictory at all, considered as regards their truth. They cannot be. They have contradictory descriptive contents, but the descriptive content of a statement has nothing to do with its truth. In fact, one cannot deny the truth of what anyone thinks or says at all, one can only deny its descriptive content. Any attempt to deny the existence of the reality referred to in the statement, the reality that makes it true, must fail, since one cannot *describe* that reality as it really is in order to deny it, and one’s denial cannot *refer* to any reality except that which produces the appearance that the denial is true, which is necessarily a different reality than the statement denied refers to.⁴⁴

Now if *all* beliefs are true, as Protagoras sometimes says, with an eye on referential truth, truth is a

⁴⁴An anonymous Sophistic document, the “Contrary Arguments,” suggests that a true statement is the same as the false because they are both expressed in the same words. What is meant is hard to make out. Perhaps it is that the words arranged one way make a true statement, arranged the other they make a false one. So “the cat is on the mat,” and “the mat is on the cat.” The two statements refer to the same things, the cat and the mat, perhaps the relation of “on-ness,” and the references made in the statement is falsely supposed to be enough to settle the meaning. Sprague et al. (1972) 287.

useless property.⁴⁵ What interests us is not true appearances, but appearances that it would be useful to accept, not the unknown reference of our statements, but the descriptive content, which tells us only how things appear, not how they are. We substitute trust in one appearance for trust in another because the new appearance, that the apple is yellow and the stage lighting did it, or that Socrates is dishonest, but a good actor, leads us more reliably to future appearances. To put it differently, we try to accept statements with descriptive content that will lead us to other statements with descriptive content that in fact matches the appearances we experience. What the reality is, I cannot say. Perhaps atoms, perhaps the four elements of Empedocles, perhaps something else. But if I take the appearances as the basis of my calculations, I may be able to anticipate other appearances. I choose the more useful appearance, the one that will enable me, given my other opinions and the ways in which I predict appearances from my various opinions, to predict future appearances reliably.

At this point we have laid out Protagoras's chief opinions and his likely arguments, but it remains possible to take all of this in two different ways, in application to the beliefs of individuals, which is the way our sources, especially Plato, insist on taking it, and in application to beliefs natural to humanity in general. In their application to the beliefs of humanity in general, Protagoras's views may well have amounted to a sophisticated and not implausible form of pragmatism well designed for meeting the skeptical challenges emerging from 5th-century thought, and even quite consistent with Democritean views. (After all, Democritus did not think that reason could provide the details of the realities corresponding to sensible appearances, and allowed that a number of different accounts of the arrangement of the atoms in the void might explain any given appearance equally well, as far as we can know, so that we cannot tell which, if any, is accurate.) If we trust our sources, we must conclude that Protagoras moved on from here, though, and applied his doctrines to individual beliefs as well, where it becomes much less plausible. Perhaps we ought not to trust our sources. Individuals using Protagorean arguments to justify themselves might easily have confused the two applications. It would not be the first time that a master got a bad reputation from the behavior of his students. Moreover,

⁴⁵The "Contrary Arguments" (Sprague et al. (1972) 287) suggests that all statements may be both true and false. For the first argument, see the previous note. Interestingly, the treatise also argues that any given statement will be true under some circumstances (in respect of a certain situation) and false in others, and so the statement is both true and false. In particular, the statement "I am an Initiate in the Mysteries" is true or false depending on who says it! The situation is parallel to that with the good and the bad. Everything is both good and bad, good for some people or animals, bad for others. Therefore, since the *reference* of 'good' and 'bad' are the same, it concludes that "the good and the bad are the same." (Sprague (1972) 279) Here the conclusion will be that the true and the false statement are the same. (One can evade the conclusion by arguing that different utterances of the statement have different truth values, but the statement cannot be assigned a truth value at all, unless, perhaps, its meaning remains the same in every circumstance of its utterance, as does, perhaps, "2+2=4" or "The first President of the United States was six feet tall." So, taking a token of a statement to be a particular utterance or inscription of it with its surrounding circumstances, it is clear that the same statement can often have tokens with different truth values.)

Plato and others might have felt it reasonable to make this second application because they felt it was implicit in what Protagoras said (Plato certainly shows no compunction in the *Theaetetus* about attributing to Protagoras views he thinks implicit in his doctrine). But it also seems that Protagoras might have seen that the extension of his arguments to individual beliefs could be pulled off, with enough cleverness, without involving oneself in contradiction or opening up any possibility of decisive refutation. The shock value of this new move, and perhaps a confused misapprehension that it was unavoidable, might have led him to make it.

How would the more reasonable application of his views, to the beliefs natural to mankind in general, work? First of all, as I have laid out his doctrine, Protagoras should not be said to hold to a pragmatic theory of truth, though he does reject the Descriptive Theory here. He holds to what I have labeled a referential theory of truth, and as a result, he thinks that considerations of truth have no practical consequences, and should be ignored. We should, instead, work within the appearances, and aim to have things come to appear to us in ways that are most useful, because they enable us to predict best how things will appear in the future, given the various things we might choose to do. The world we live in is not a world of truths (or perhaps it is, but that is of no use to us), it is a world of appearances, and we need to manipulate and predict appearances, not realities. (Of course, we do affect realities in dealing with appearances, but we have no idea how we do so, and it doesn't matter as long as the appearances come out right.) The problems raised by the causal theory of perception have been resolved by withdrawing from any attempt to understand the *real* world, and pointing out that nothing we ever actually did to understand the world was really an attempt to understand the real world to start with. All we were ever concerned with was the appearances.

The most famous argument against Protagoras is the “table-turning argument” in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.⁴⁶ Protagoras was wont to say that each thing is to a person as it appears to him, and that what appears true to someone is true for him. Let us call this “Protagoras’s principle.” Plato suggested that Protagoras cannot be right in claiming that whatever appears to be the case to someone is the case for him, since it appears to Plato that Protagoras is wrong about this. Since it appears to Plato that he is wrong, he *is*, by his own principle. How would Protagoras answer this? An answer can be developed out of his referential view of truth. It appears to

⁴⁶See Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Schoolmasters* VII 389, who claims that Democritus said Protagoras’s position is self-refuting; Plato, *Theaetetus* 170a ff. as well as the *Euthydemus*; Democritus, Fragments Diels-Kranz A 113, B11, B69, B156. Burnyeat (1976), provides an excellent discussion of this difficult argument, and my own somewhat idiosyncratic line on Protagoras’s intention may conceal how much I learned from him. Plato, by the way, does not appear to think that the argument is unanswerable, in the *Theaetetus*, and probably conceived that something like the reply to it I develop here was available to Protagoras. He does, however, go on in that dialogue to present a second argument against Protagoras that he thinks much more conclusive, as we shall see.

Plato that Protagoras's principle is wrong. That appearance must have a cause, and the statement that Protagoras is wrong has reference to that unknown cause, and so is true. But Plato's opinion does not in fact contradict Protagoras's. It simply reports a different reality than Protagoras's does.

But that way with the argument may be too quick. Protagoras's principle uses the notion "true-for-X," which is not the same as the notion of referential truth. Whereas referential truth has nothing to do with the descriptive content of a statement, apparently "truth-for-X" does have something to do with such descriptive content. What does it mean to say that a statement is "true-for-Joseph," then? Apparently only this, that it is true as far as Joseph can tell, that is, it appears thus to Joseph, so that Joseph accepts the descriptive content of that statement. With that in mind, let us look again at the table-turning argument. Protagoras's principle is this, that what appears so to a person *is* so for the person—and now it seems to be a mere truism. If there is any point to asserting it, the point must be that nothing beyond appearances can challenge the appearances. What appears so to a person is not going to be set aside by the person's discovery of the real descriptive truth, the statement whose descriptive content can be ascertained to correspond with reality, for no such discovery can be made. Appearances are all there is, as far as we are concerned, for they are all we can get in touch with, and so for us the appearances will simply have to serve in place of this unknowable descriptive truth. Of course, it may be that one set of appearances will be replaced by another at some time in the future, as new evidence comes to light and we change our mind. But then what we have is, not the truth, but a new set of appearances, which will, like the old, take its turn at standing in for the truth, until something yet better comes along.

Protagoras is not dealing in truth when he advances his principle, then, and we should not assume that he means his principle to be true. When he says that what appears true to a person is true for him he must mean, at best, that the principle is *as good as true* for Protagoras, that is, true for all that Protagoras can tell, and he surely cannot mean that it must be true, that is, as good as true, for anyone but Protagoras that the principle is (as good as) true for Protagoras. Maybe for Plato it is not as good as true that the principle is as good as true for Protagoras. In particular, if Plato does not accept Protagoras's notions about truth, Plato might then think that Protagoras can somehow escape from opinion and get at the real truth, and then the Sophist's opinion would not seem as good as the real truth to him. Plato's opinion here, contrary as it is to Protagoras's notions about truth, can still be accepted by Protagoras both as referentially true, and as an opinion that is as good as the inaccessible descriptive truth for Plato, until some apparently better opinion comes along. One can recognize, if one accepts Protagoras's philosophy, that what one believes to be a false appearance is as good as true for another for as long as it appears true to the other.

Perhaps Plato can still make a point, though. Does Protagoras think that his current opinion about his principle is as good as true only for the moment, leaving it open that something better may come along? If he does not, then he surely cannot think that Plato's opinion that the principle is false is as good as true for Plato permanently—Plato's opinion will do for the moment, but is in danger of refutation in a way that Protagoras's is not. If that is Protagoras's view, then Plato can reasonably claim that he *does* believe in the absolute truth of his principle after all. So we will have to insist on Protagoras's behalf that something is true for a person (that is, as good as true for the moment) who believes it to be true, even if the belief is unstable and likely to decay as further appearances present themselves.⁴⁷ Then, for Protagoras, the Protagorean principle can hold, and it can even be true for Protagoras that it holds for Plato, even though it does not hold for Plato in Plato's view, and Protagoras recognizes this and concludes that it is not true for Plato that the principle holds for Plato. Notice, by the way, that the mere fact that Plato rejects the principle, so that it is, for Plato, false for Plato, does not mean that Protagoras knows this. He may think that Plato believes his principle, and in that case, for Protagoras, Plato does believe his principle, and, for Protagoras, it is true that the principle is true for Plato. Even so, it is not true for Plato that the principle is true for Plato.

What Plato imagines is that there are descriptive truths, not mere appearances, about what appears to people and what is good for them, and that Protagoras relies on access to these truths when he asserts that a statement such as his principle is true for him. He means to say that his principle truly appears true to him, and that it is truly useful to believe it. But Protagoras need not admit that any statement about appearances can be known to be descriptively true, and he need not rely on knowledge of such truths. In the end, he relies on appearances (to himself, of course) that are left, for the moment, unquestioned, to decide what the appearances are to another person, and what is useful or good to a person. However hard it would be for Plato to imagine it happening, Protagoras intends to speak *purely* in a language of appearances, without any assertions at any level about what the appearances truly are, but only assertions about how they appear to be. So, it is strictly misleading to say that Protagoras thought it true for Protagoras that his principle was true, as though it would be true for everyone, including people who misapprehended Protagoras's views (or, rather, apprehended them

⁴⁷Given Plato's further arguments in the *Theaetetus*, it seems likely he may find some problem with this. In justification, it might be pointed out that if "as good as true for the person" means that it will never, or never ultimately, after all the investigation is done, appear false to him, then we no more have a way of knowing if something is as good as true than we had a way of knowing if a given account of something in fact fit the reality as it is in itself. This is clear, since, of course, the investigation never will be done (something we shall see Socrates was acutely aware of). So, if we are to know that something is as good as true for a person, the fact that it appears to the person true at the moment must be enough to establish it.

differently), that it is true for Protagoras that his principle is true. And if we say it is true for Protagoras that Protagoras thought his principle true for Protagoras, that is misleading too, for not everyone might think it so, and so it might not be true for everyone. For Protagoras whatever is said is said from a viewpoint, and for that very reason *the viewpoint from which it is said can never be specified within what is said*.⁴⁸ So whatever we imagine Protagoras saying (and no matter how many “true for Protagoras” phrases we might attach to it), we have to imagine that he means it to be true only for the speaker whose opinion it expresses, Protagoras.

Another way to get at this: Plato, like most of us, was well aware that we often say things that are both true and false, because they are unclear and ambiguous. We shall see that such ambiguities formed a cardinal point in Plato’s proof that there are separated Forms, in Chapter 5. But Plato, again, like the rest of us, did not suppose that such ambiguities could never be resolved. Add enough qualifications, and the sentence is no longer ambiguous, it says just one thing, and is either entirely true or completely false as it stands. In effect, Protagoras does not allow that this will ever happen. *All* sentences are left ambiguous in an indefinite number of ways, and all of them are both true and false, depending how they are read, and hence, given the principle of charity, *all* are true. He accomplishes this by insisting that there is always another viewpoint, that of one’s later or earlier self, for instance, from which appearances can be assessed, and denying that it is possible to assign to a sentence any definite, public reality that it represents and might get wrong. Plato’s handling of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, as we shall see in Chapter 5, penetrates to the core of this strategy, and undermines it brilliantly.

Why did Protagoras hold that things are for a person as they appear to him? Not because it was true. Every view is referentially true, including Plato’s absolutism, and every view is as good as true (for the moment, at least) for the one who holds it. Rather, he must have thought it the most useful view. For one thing, experience and argument persuade us to it. Although we never have knowledge that a statement is descriptively true, that does not mean that we cannot find persuasive arguments for accepting an appearance (that is, the descriptive content of a statement), based on other views we hold. Appearances that experience recommends to us are more easily squared with Protagoras’s view than Plato’s, for Plato’s view presses us into the abandonment of appearances and the impossible search for descriptive truth. Moreover, persuasive arguments for Protagoras’s views can be constructed from the appearances, as we have seen. An interest in absolute reality fades as we come to the opinion that no knowledge, or even well-founded opinion, about such a reality is possible, and this opinion arises as we examine the appearances about such matters as sensation.

⁴⁸I think this is the point intended in Barnes (1982), pp. 547-553.

More than this, though, Protagoras's view disabuses us of the notion that there is some standard of justice, or truth, to which we must all adhere, some single vision of the truth that will work no matter what the circumstances. This notion is especially damaging in morals. Protagoras's principle makes us flexible, opening up the possibility of a rational reassessment of existing standards of justice, and the guidance of the wise. Plato's view predisposes one to dogmatism and the conviction that the truth as it appears to us is what everyone must believe, so that we are unwilling to make those compromises necessary to the formation of an effective community.

6. GORGIAS: SKEPTICISM AND TOTALITIES

Gorgias declares that nothing exists; and if anything exists it is unknowable; and if it exists and is knowable, yet it cannot be indicated to others.

Pseudo-Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias* 5, 979a11.

We have already noted the contributions of **Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 490 - after 410)** to rhetoric, but his most remarkable philosophical work was *On Nature, or What Is Not*, written 444-441 BCE. We have two summaries of the book, from which it is possible to reconstruct his thought with reasonable certainty.⁴⁹

He begins by arguing that neither what is not, nor what is, can possibly be what exists. His arguments make the most sense if we assume that when he uses the phrase, "what exists," he means to refer to the totality of what is. Gorgias's arguments are probably to be taken as a response to Melissus—not even the One turns out to be.

The two assertions to be refuted are that "what is not" constitutes this totality, "is what is," and that "what is" constitutes this totality, "is what is." What is not cannot be what is, Gorgias says, since then it would be, and so would not be what is not. It is assumed, it seems, that the totality of what is, if there is such a thing, must have members, members which *are*, and so if what is not constitutes this reality, what is not is such a member of it, and so what is not is. But this is a contradiction.

This assumes that the totality of what is is made up from what is, so what if it is not, but is only made

⁴⁹The summaries are in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Schoolmasters* VII 65-87, and the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias* 5 and 6. Some crucial passages in the latter are corrupt enough in the manuscripts so that we depend a good deal on the former to reconstruct them.

up from what is not? Then the contradiction just developed does not follow. But then, Gorgias argues, if what is not is all that is, nothing that is can be what is. It seems at first sight that this just does not follow, and many rude remarks have been made about his logic, but it follows well enough if we take him to be discussing the question whether the *totality* of things (= what is) is to be taken as constituted (entirely) by what is, or (entirely) by what is not.⁵⁰ It cannot be put together entirely from what is not, for then each and every thing in it would be what is not and, as he says, nothing that is, nothing that is a member of the totality of things that are, would be, and so nothing could be what is. So if what is not constituted (entirely) the totality of existing things, there would be no such totality. Put another way, this totality *cannot* be constituted by non-existent things, by what is not. It can only be constituted by what is.

So far we might, shrugging off residual confusion, say that Gorgias has shown that the totality of things, what is, cannot exist, if it must be constituted by what does not exist, that is, if nothing exists. But that is presumably all right, for it is not the case that nothing exists, and so the totality of things exists, and is constituted by what is.

Gorgias's next, and much more difficult task is to show the impossibility that the totality should consist of what is. It would seem dead obvious that the totality of what exists consists precisely of what is, with no admixture of those things that are not. But let us consider this totality of what is, and ask a few questions about it. Is it sempiternal,⁵¹ or did it at some time come to be? Were it sempiternal, it would have no beginning, of course, and so would be without temporal limit. When does it exist then, that is, during what period of time? The time during which it exists would have to be an indefinite period, one that could not be specified. If we said that it existed Tuesday, then our answer would have to be rejected, for Gorgias wants to know about the *whole* period of time that what is occupies. He assumes that in order to specify a period of time one must give its beginning and end, so that all specifiable periods of time are finite. If, of course, what is comes to be at some time, we can then specify at least one defining limit of the time in which it is, but then we have the question what was before what is, and it seems that nothing came before it. But nothing can come to be out of nothing.

⁵⁰Could the totality of what is be constituted partly by what is and partly by what is not? That would mean the membership of this totality, the totality of what is, would include some things that are not. Surely that is to be rejected. The only reason we might think it could be constituted entirely by what is not is that it occurs to us, perhaps, that nothing at all is, in which case the totality of what is would have to be an empty set, containing nothing, but even then it seems best to say that it does not contain what is not, but only fails to contain anything that is. But this is the case under consideration, and seems to be Gorgias's point.

⁵¹Strictly, what is eternal is outside time entirely, and what is sempiternal is what always was and always will be. It is best in philosophy to keep this distinction in mind.

Similarly, *where* is this totality? To assign it a place, we have to postulate something outside it defining or setting a limit to the place, so it seems to exist in no definite place. The totality of what is, then, cannot be assigned a place or time within which it is, if it is constituted by existing things, and that, Gorgias suggests, means that it cannot exist.⁵²

The argument seems to assume the Principle of Sufficient Reason, that there must be a cause of or reason for everything that is true, as well as the Parmenidean notion that everything real is definite. The argument might be put like this: if the totality is limited, there is no explanation of it, since it is ungenerated. If that is what is intended, then the argument is not effective against Parmenides, for Parmenides, as we have seen, rejected the Principle of Sufficient Reason. He held that there are truths that have no reason why they are so, or else it turns out that there are things that are indefinite (*apeiron*), that is, unlimited (*apeiron*), and that can't happen, of course. Of course, it might be pointed out against Parmenides that, if he wants there to be nothing unlimited, he had better allow that the totality has a beginning, so there *is* a point to be made against him, but this is not the point the argument stresses. Perhaps the target of the argument, then, was someone who held to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Might that have been the Atomists? We have seen that they supposed that particular situations obtaining at a definite time that do not always hold must have a causal explanation, while situations that always hold are known through perception (there is change) or else deducible from such (there are atoms and the void), by seeking the only possible conditions under which the perceptible general truths can hold. But that means that, like Parmenides, they too reject the Principle of Sufficient Reason, since the perceptible situations that always hold are not known through their necessity, and could, it seems, be otherwise. It is logically possible that there should have been no change, and there is no cause, preceding change in time, for this change, either. (The Atomists accept a more limited version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, namely that any change must have a causal explanation why it occurs, including changes in motion, but that would not be sufficient for Gorgias's conclusion.)

The only hypothesis left (and it too may be wrong) seems to be that Gorgias meant to take his form

⁵²I have been excessively kind to the argument, perhaps, for in Sextus's version, at least, it seems to argue that if something has no beginning (in time) it is unlimited, and if it is unlimited (in space?) it is nowhere. This is clearly an equivocation on "unlimited." But it seems that what I have attributed to Gorgias here was probably what he intended, for he goes on to argue that what is unlimited is not enclosed by anything, and so is not anywhere. This would apply to spatial as well as temporal unlimiteds, which would not be spatially enclosed in the one case, or temporally enclosed in the other, so that temporal unlimiteds would not be anywhen. That's no better Greek than it is English, so perhaps he intends "anywhere" to cover "anywhen" as well. The mistake, if it is in Gorgias, seems to be the same one made by Melissus according to Aristotle. Is Melissus perhaps Gorgias's target in all this, rather than Parmenides? If so, he might have felt comfortable that Melissus would have to grant him his inference, or he might even have made the inference ironically.

of the Principle of Sufficient Reason from Melissus. It seems he might have read Melissus's arguments thus: there must be an explanation why the totality of what is has any boundaries, whatever they may be, external or internal, in time or space, and so no explanation can be provided without supposing something that is outside the totality of what is. Therefore the totality of things is one, in the sense that it is entirely without limits of any kind.

Now we might object at this point that what is does exist, and does constitute the totality of things—it just has a few odd properties that limited, finite beings do not have. But that would probably underestimate the importance of Gorgias's point. The totality of what is is not something we could usefully speak about within a scientific explanation, for instance, since it has neither a time nor a place where it is, and enters into relation with nothing else outside it. It does not cause or affect anything, and is not caused or affected by anything. It stands outside the entire natural order in the simple act of embracing the entire natural order. So a scientist has no business talking about it (unless his business extends beyond the giving and systematizing of scientific explanations), any more than he has business talking about what is not, which also, as Xenophanes and Parmenides argued, cannot enter into a scientific explanation. Real science always concerns things acting on one another within a wider context. It never concerns the totality of things as such. Indeed, Gorgias's point here is related to Philolaus's view that whatever we can refer to as an object of experience must be limited, that is, in some way distinguished from other things that are.

But is the notion of the totality of reality the only target of Gorgias's attack here? It seems likely that he means also to attack the notion of any sort of experienced reality at all. After all, if Philolaus is right, and it is all right to speak of experienced, and limited, realities of specific kinds and with specific structures, then it must be all right to speak of the totality of all these realities, as well. But it turns out that, on Philolaus's own ground, it is not in fact possible to speak of this totality, since it would be effectively unlimited. So the mistake of positing any reality at all now becomes clear—if one could speak of any reality at all one could speak of the totality of realities,⁵³ and one cannot.

Gorgias next presents an argument that what is can be neither one, nor many. What is cannot be one, since it has extent, and can be divided. But it is not many, since it is not composed of ones. After all, any component part of it will have some extent, and be further divisible, and so will not itself be a one. We are asked, then, to envision a reality that is not a unity in itself, but also has no parts which are unities in

⁵³This inference, obvious as it seems, can be challenged, but this is not the place to discuss that matter.

themselves, a reality which, if it is many, is an indefinite many. Zeno concluded at this point that reality is composed of indivisible unities and has a finite maximum extent. Gorgias, however, accepts that space and time are indefinitely divisible and indefinitely extended, and so he concludes that reality is not anything at all. Of course, this line of argument cuts against the existence even of limited things that are, not only that of the totality, since such limited things are unlimited in respect of division. The problems here seem to arise, again, from the insistence on talking about the totality of what is taken as such. If one asks what the parts of a house are, it would seem natural to name bricks, even if bricks are themselves divisible into smaller parts. But once we ask what the parts of “what is” are, taken simply as what is, no part we name, however small, will do, since we are looking for the *ultimate* parts, if we want *the* parts of what is, the parts that have no further parts.

Having established, as he thinks, that the notion of real totality, and so the notion of existence or the real as such, is incoherent, Gorgias went on to argue in Protagorean fashion that even if there were a reality, this cannot be what we know, that is, knowledge is not always or necessarily about reality, as Parmenides had held. Indeed, we can have no knowledge about reality at all, for reality is never grasped as it is in itself. We cannot escape appearances. He takes it to be an absurdity that, as some seemed to argue, the person who thinks about chariots racing in the sea actually has some unknown reference for his thought. He assumes that the descriptive content of our thoughts must describe what we think about (at least in the usual case), and so argues that since there are no chariots racing in the sea anyone who thinks about such a thing must think about what is not, not something that is. So thought is not of what is, grasping realities as they are in themselves, else no one could think of such unrealities as chariots racing in the sea. Thought must grasp mere appearances (mere possibilities?) alone, just as the senses seem to.⁵⁴ He may have Democritus in mind, and his account of the

⁵⁴In Aristotle’s *Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*, 980a9-19, has: “. . . For all objects of cognition,” if there *is* such a thing as cognition, of course, “must exist, and what is not, if it really does not exist could not be cognized either. For the objects of sight and hearing,” in contrast to the objects of cognition, “are for the reason that they are in each case cognized.” That is, they are what we should nowadays call intentional beings—for them, to exist *is* to be perceived, for they are mere images, mental states, produced by the process of sensory cognition. “But if this is not the reason—if just as what we see is not the more [ie. does not exist] because we see it, so also what we think is not the more for that. . .” The consequence of this assumption is missing in the text, but a reason for accepting it is given, namely “were it otherwise, just as in the one case our objects of vision would often be just the same, so in the other our objects thought would be often just the same.” That is, if the objects of perception are realities, rather than appearances or images, then it would often happen, where in fact there are different objects of perception, that those objects would *not* differ. Cases in which the same thing presents different appearances to the senses in different situations, or for the sensory organs of different people, would not occur, but the same object would always appear the same, under all conditions and to everyone. So, the same water would not appear warm to one person, who puts a hand into it that has been chilled, and cold to another, whose hand has been heated beforehand. In any case, the conclusion apparently drawn from this assumption that the object of knowledge, like the object of perception, is an appearance produced by the process of knowing, is that “of which kind the true things are is uncertain, so that even if things are, they would be unknowable by us. The text is quite corrupt in the manuscripts, it should be remarked, no doubt because the copyists had little idea what it all meant, and so this is more a reconstruction of it than a reading of it.

senses, for he asks if thought somehow grasps reality while the senses do not, and considers Democritus's opinion that one can think truly something that is not sensible at all. But he insists that just as the senses do not grasp reality as it is, neither does thought. Democritus has no business claiming to know about reality.⁵⁵

Gorgias's view is pragmatically equivalent to Protagoras's. It restricts the content of thought to the role of describing appearances alone. If Protagoras says all thoughts concern what is, and Gorgias says that no thought concerns any reality, but only the apparent, this disagreement has no practical consequence. It really does not matter if all statements are true, or if none can be said to refer to anything at all. In either case, one must reject the practical bearing of truth and falsehood, of reality, and consider appearances instead.

Finally, Gorgias argues that even if reality were somehow to be apprehended in thought, one could not convey what one had discovered to another. What a person does when she describes what she experiences to us is to present us, not with her experience, but with words.⁵⁶ It seems Gorgias was not a complete skeptic, but held that we can apprehend reality in our own case. One could know, with no chance of a mistake, how things appear to oneself. But this does not mean that one can pass this knowledge over to another. The problem is that the listener cannot experience how things appear to the speaker, and so is not in a position to know what appearance in fact is indicated by any given form of words. It is impossible to know the speaker's rules of usage (although one might guess at them and even guess right) unless one can see, on some occasions, what actual appearance corresponds to the speaker's words, and one can never do that.⁵⁷ So one cannot know what the speaker might mean, though, perhaps, one *might* be caused to form a correct belief about the speaker's experience through his words.⁵⁸ Thus Gorgias is the first to state what modern philosophers call the "problem of other minds." But it should be noted that even if it turned out that one succeeded in conveying to another through her speech how things appeared to her, it does not follow that anyone could ever convey how things

⁵⁵Perhaps Gorgias himself preferred the physics of his fellow Sicilian, Empedocles, if we go by Plato, *Meno* 76c, where he is credited with explanations of the operation of the sense organs in terms of their pores, which only certain effluxes from things fit.

⁵⁶So in the *Palamedes*, para. 4, 24, 33, 35, and in *Helen* 11, and *Encomium* 2, Gorgias discusses opinion and knowledge, and claims that all speech is deceptive concerning the truth, for it claims to *be* the truth, but the truth is not speech. The meaning seems to be that the reality is not presented to us, but only words in its place, which somehow present themselves as if they were the reality.

⁵⁷In fact, it seems that we at least think we can do that, by assuming that appearances to the speaker are roughly what they would be to us in the speaker's situation. Mom draws our attention to the object somehow, and says 'red,' and we assume that she means to indicate the appearance we are experiencing, and that she in fact enjoys the same experience. Gorgias, in his skeptical way, asks us how we know this about Mom, suggesting that we can give no adequate account.

⁵⁸So in the orations cited just above, it is suggested that the best speech, though deceptive in itself, causes one to grasp the truth, but, of course, that does not mean that one can tell when speech is doing this. One may form true beliefs, but not knowledge.

are in themselves, for this is not a matter of appearances, and so unknowable to start with.

Aristotle remarks, before laying out his summary of Gorgias's book, that he begins by stating his own proof, not relying on assumptions from Melissus and Zeno, that it is not possible for anything to be or not to be at all.⁵⁹ This independent stretch of argument, which seems to be directed against Parmenides, though a Parmenides interpreted along the lines of Melissus's thought, falls into three movements. (1) The first establishes that what is not must *be* what is not, so there is in fact something it is, and it is just as much as what is, and so things, it turns out, are no more than they are not. That is, the conclusion of Parmenides that only what is, is, "this shall never be proved that things that are not are,"⁶⁰ must be rejected, and presumably the further point, that only what is is knowable, is also to be rejected. What is not is knowable, inasmuch as we can say what it is to be what is not, and so draw conclusions about it, if that is our criterion for knowability. Or better, one assumes, what is *not* knowable, since it in some way is not. (2) The second establishes that, in the same way, what is, in fact, is not, given the conclusion of the first argument, again attacking Parmenides, who said "that it is, and it is not possible for it not to be, is the way of persuasion."⁶¹ For what is not is, and what is is the opposite of what is not, and so is not what is not, and therefore what is is not. So what is cannot wholly be, in no way admitting of what is not, as Parmenides claimed, and there is nothing that wholly is to form an appropriate object of necessary knowledge. (3) But perhaps what is and what is not are not opposites, but the same thing. In that case what is not is what is, as before. If we assume there are only things that both are and are not (sensibles, say), then, of course, knowledge of the Parmenidean sort is not to be had, and we have only the grasp of appearances provided by the senses.

It seems that the Sophistic movement was engaged then, first of all in an attack on the Parmenidean notion that knowledge is possible, because one can know with certainty necessary truths, but is not to be gained from the senses. There is no object to be found for such knowledge, for everything with which we are acquainted turns out to have contingent characteristics that could have been otherwise. There is only acquaintance through the senses, none through some special faculty of rationality that knows necessary truths

⁵⁹Aristotle, *Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 5, 979a21–33. The passage is analyzed quite perspicuously in Palmer (1999), 71–72, though Palmer seem to miss the philosophical force of the argument.

⁶⁰Parmenides, Fragment 7. Note that Parmenides just a few lines later insists that reason, not the senses, be the judge of what is the case, here. So Gorgias can insist on the same thing. It does not matter if his views are suggested by our sensory experience, but only if the argument follows.

⁶¹Parmenides, Fragment 2.

concerning what wholly and necessarily is what it is. This sounds very like later 18th century Empiricism. The Sophists represent, in their time, one of the two major streams of philosophical reflection on the matter of knowledge. In our consideration of their thought we must resist the temptation to think, with Plato, that they are taking an absurd position. Plato himself developed his thought in answer to their powerful arguments, as is evident in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, and the skeptical and pragmatic tendencies they represent have driven developments in modern philosophy as well. The Sophists are important philosophical thinkers. They may be, in fact, closer to the truth than Plato, and in any case the development of more dogmatic movements such as Platonism can only be evaluated and understood if we see how they react to Sophistic arguments.

7. CRATYLUS AND ANTISTHENES

You will never get anywhere with any of them; for that matter they cannot get anywhere with one another, but they take very good care to leave nothing settled either in discourse or in their own minds. I suppose they think that would leave something stationary—a thing they will fight against to the last and do their utmost to banish from the universe.

Plato, *Theaetetus* 180 ab.

A number of figures about whom we know a good deal less, and who did not claim to be Sophists themselves, nonetheless are influenced by Sophistic theories of language to draw radical conclusions in philosophy. **Xeniades of Corinth**, for instance, held that *no* statement is true rather than insisting that all are,⁶² perhaps on the ground that the descriptive content of a statement is intended to say how things really are, but can in fact describe nothing but appearances. How would he have argued that appearances cannot, as it happens, precisely resemble reality? We don't know that, but he did insist, it seems, that no sensory appearance is perfectly accurate.

Cratylus, a younger contemporary of Socrates who was called a Heraclitean, held that nothing existed outside the sensible world, that contrary appearances arise from the same reality, and that everything is always changing. The last opinion, as explicated in Plato's dialogues, asserted that everything has contrary appearances from different points of view, the "change" in question being the change that occurs as one shifts from one to another perspective. Possibly he thought that no one ever maintained the same perspective on anything for even

⁶²Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Math.* VII 53, which also remarks that he said that all things arise from nothing, and pass into nothing. Perhaps he meant somehow to reject arguments to the cause or best explanation of observed phenomena.

the shortest period of time. In the end, Aristotle tells us, he would only wag his finger, and avoided speaking altogether, since nothing he could say was strictly true. Possibly there is some attempt to get his students to attend to the appearances alone here, based on the conviction that only the appearances are, and speech always attempts to assert a reality behind appearances. Plato speaks of a school of Heracliteans in Ephesus, who refuse to engage in ordinary argument, answering every question with a new metaphor and never leaving any matter settled. Here again one detects the attempt to avoid references to any reality, and dwell entirely with appearances.

The view we have attributed to Protagoras, that every statement is true, was held by Antisthenes as well, and he and Prodicus both held the related view that two statements about reality cannot contradict one another.⁶³ **Antisthenes (ca. 445–365 BCE)**,⁶⁴ a student and admirer of Socrates, and probably the most influential Socratic for a decade or so after Socrates's death, was the son of an Athenian father and a Thracian mother who resided in Athens. He was obliged to fight in the Athenian army during the Peloponnesian War, but was denied citizenship by Athenian law. He was bitter about this, and among his surviving remarks is one to the effect that the local snails are just as much born of the soil of Attica as the Athenians are. Eventually he did obtain citizenship, probably as a reward for distinguished military service.⁶⁵ He taught at the Cynosargia, a gymnasium outside the city frequented by native non-citizens like himself, and wrote a large number of works in every area of philosophy, including Socratic dialogues and diatribes against Plato, as well as commentaries on Homer in the Sophistic style. He inherited some wealth, but was disciplined and ascetic in temperament. Wary of physical pleasure, he found the good life in toil, accomplishment, and a self-sufficiency that directed him away from politics, though he did pursue Socrates's accusers, Anytus and Meletus, in the law courts until he brought them to ground. Personally, he resembled his master, but was more this-worldly, grouchier, direct in his refutations and exhortations, lacking Socrates's gentler ironic bent, and, it seems, also more dangerous. In his *Cyrus*, which, like Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, uses that Persian King as an example of superlative virtue, his hero remarks that "the most kingly characteristic is to act well and have a bad reputation," intending probably that

⁶³For Prodicus, whose argument for his position is the same as Antisthenes's, but perhaps less developed, see Denyer (1991) 26-27.

⁶⁴For Antisthenes's life and views on metaphysical and epistemological topics, see especially Dudley (1937) Ch. 1, Guthrie (1969) 209–216, 304–311, Rankin (1983) 219-228 and Denyer (1991) 27-33.

⁶⁵This whole thing was perhaps exaggerated in the sources, or even made up, because of the supposed antipathy between Plato and Antisthenes as rival successors to Socrates, and Plato's adoption of the Attic myth of birth of the citizens from the soil for his ideal states in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*.

a good King is feared, even though he is in fact a good and just man.⁶⁶ Antisthenes doubted that one could be virtuous and at the same time conventional, and a fierce independence from common social norms was for him part of the virtuous life.

Antisthenes is often represented in later doxography as a philosopher hostile to pleasure, who thought virtue the only good in itself. So Diogenes Laertius says he viewed toil as a good, and pleasure as an evil,⁶⁷ and he may have said that he would rather go mad than feel pleasure. But there are other late references that suggest we must be careful in our interpretation of these remarks. Stobaeus claimed the Antisthenes did not reject all pleasure whatever, but only easy pleasures that do not result from hard work,⁶⁸ and Athenaeus claimed that he held that only those pleasures that one had reason to repent were to be avoided.⁶⁹ Taking all this together with Xenophon's report that Antisthenes objected to intense pleasures,⁷⁰ it seems most likely that he held a view akin to that advanced by Socrates in the *Protagoras*, that pleasures are to be rejected when they bring about more pain than they are worth. Antisthenes, and presumably Socrates as well, would have identified virtue as a source of pleasure in itself, the activities of virtue being intrinsically pleasurable, even though they are also often hard work. But sometimes we tend to take only the easily gotten, intense pleasures of sense stimulation as "pleasure," and these are presumably what Antisthenes wishes to reject as unhealthy for the body and soul. Aristotle argued that virtuous activity is intrinsically pleasurable to the virtuous, and if it is not pleasurable to those who lack virtue, well, neither are the pleasures of the vicious pleasurable to the virtuous.⁷¹ It seems possible, then, that Antisthenes followed Socrates in his version of hedonism, and was identified as a student of Socrates on that ground.⁷²

⁶⁶The same notion is approached in American Urban slang, when one says approvingly that someone is "bad" (with emphasis) or "bad news."

⁶⁷Diogenes Laertius VI 2, IX 101. For Antisthenes's ethical views I have used McKirahan (1994) 369–377. See also Dudley (1937) Chapter 1.

⁶⁸Giannantoni (1990) 5.a.126.

⁶⁹Giannantoni (1990) 5.a.127.

⁷⁰Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.37–39. Xenophon presents Antisthenes as Socrates's lover (at the spiritual level) in his *Symposium*, and perhaps regards him as Socrates's true successor.

⁷¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

⁷²It is also possible that the good pleasures that follow from hard work are those associated with learning and perception, and that the view of Antisthenes on pleasure is close to or the same as that Plato in the *Philebus*. His reputation of opposition to Plato in that case would result from his views in philosophy of language, and no doubt from the assumption that he must disagree with Plato

Antisthenes seems also to have held to Socrates's view that virtue is a kind of knowledge, for he was said to have claimed that a fool may become wise, and thus virtuous, through education, that one must learn something to overcome a vice, and that once this learning is acquired, it cannot be lost.⁷³ But he also may have said that not only wisdom, but also strength of will, is needed for virtue,⁷⁴ and this seems to reflect the Platonic revision of Socratic views. He regarded virtue as the same for a Greek or Barbarian, man or woman, and took it very much to be a kind of emotional strength.

To the extent that Antisthenes concerned himself with politics, like Xenophon, who seems to have been strongly influenced by him and provides a sympathetic portrait in his *Symposium*, he was a conservative admirer of the Spartan constitution.

Antisthenes was said to have written a book *On Opinion and Knowledge*. Perhaps some of its content is revealed in remarks in Aristotle:

Each thing has in a sense just one *logos* [account or definition], the *logos* of its essence, and in another sense it has many *logoi*, for the thing is in a way identical to the thing-plus-quality: for example, Socrates is in a way identical to Socrates the cultivated. And a false *logos* does not, in the unqualified sense, belong to anything. This is why Antisthenes was being simple-minded when he judged that a thing can be spoken of only by its own proper *logos*,⁷⁵ one to one—from which it follows there can be no such thing as contradicting, and more or less follows that there cannot even be such a thing as speaking a falsehood.⁷⁶

This suggests that Antisthenes accepted that each reality has its own *logos*. Thus “the pale Socrates” will be one thing, referred to when we say “Socrates is pale,” and “the educated Socrates,” presumably referred to when we say “Socrates is educated,” having a different *logos* or defining expression, another. Thus “Socrates is pale” will

to establish a competing Socratic school.

⁷³Diogenes Laertius VI 12–13, 105, Giannantoni (1990) 5.87. Moreover, the wise man is self-sufficient, and the wealthiest of men.

⁷⁴Diogenes Laertius VI 11.

⁷⁵The proper *logos* of a particular is perhaps a definite description of it by which it is identified. A denial that there is an essence or nature of a particular thing that necessarily belongs to it and other things of the same kind seems implied. The same thing would be identified with different definite descriptions in different situations, one assumes, and a different fact would be indicated in these different situations.

⁷⁶Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V 29, 1024b29–34 (translated in Denyer (1991) 28—square brackets indicate my additions). My interpretation of Antisthenes is taken from Denyer (1991). At *Topics* I 11, 104b20–1, Aristotle tells us that Antisthenes held that there is no such thing as contradicting. Presumably he means to imply here that he also held there is no such thing as the speaking of a falsehood.

refer to one thing, and “Socrates is educated” will refer to another. Of course, Aristotle supposes that both sentences refer to Socrates and say different things about him, so that if these sentences (or the corresponding accidental descriptions such as “the pale Socrates”) are *logoi*, then there are several different *logoi* referring to one thing. Antisthenes did not distinguish, it seems, referring to something from providing a defining description of it, or the way in which a word might mean something by referring to it within a sentence, and the way a sentence means by stating something about what is referred to in it. Nor did he conceive what the sentence is about as a constituent of some sort of the state of affairs the sentence reports.⁷⁷ The reference of the *sentence*, as it were, becomes all that is relevant to its meaning, as Antisthenes sees it, and there is only one thing referred to in a given sentence, the whole, indivisible state of affairs reported by it. Presumably, he thought that the notion of a persisting, repeatable subject that enters into various states of affairs at various times was illegitimate, along Heraclitean/Cratylan lines. From this position, Aristotle holds, Antisthenes deduced that one cannot contradict anything that is said, presumably because in so doing one would have to make reference in one’s contradictory statement to the thing whose existence one wants to contradict, or else fail to make such a reference. If the first occurs, then one has simply restated what one intended to contradict, since each statement makes but one reference, which determines its meaning.⁷⁸ If the second occurs, and one fails to make a reference to the thing whose existence is contradicted, one cannot contradict its existence, since one has to refer to something to deny that it exists. To speak a falsehood would be to state a fact that is not so, that is, to refer to a something that does not exist. We are told that Antisthenes assumed that each state of affairs has exactly one *logos* that expresses or refers to it,⁷⁹ and the question is, is there any *logos* that does not refer to a state of affairs at all? It is only such a *logos* that could be false, of course, since we can’t say anything false in a *logos* about something else referred to in it, but a *logos* that does not refer will in fact be meaningless, and so not a *logos* at

⁷⁷All of these distinctions were worked out by Plato. Antisthenes seems to have followed the older generation of Sophists. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not provide his arguments for rejecting Plato’s distinctions, though that probably means they were of no great import.

⁷⁸Alternatively, some Sophists might argue that one’s statement must be false. But the line taken here would seem to be supported by Parmenides’s claim that one cannot speak of what is not.

⁷⁹Presumably it is meant that a single *logos* will have a single meaning, but the meaning may be expressed in different ways, so that “Bob hit Tim” and “Tim was hit by Bob” would count as one *logos*. The point of “one fact or thing, one *logos*” is not that different words cannot be used to express the fact or refer to the thing, but that the fact or thing cannot be mentioned and then talked about. Once it is mentioned, one is done, and different *logoi* cannot be formed by saying different things about it.

all, for it says nothing at all. So no *logos* can be false.⁸⁰

Elsewhere, we are told that the followers of Antisthenes had a certain difficulty with the notion of definition.⁸¹ It would seem that a definition has parts which are united into one account, so that the thing to be defined, say silver, might be said to be a metal, and then, further, to have some quality differentiating it from other metals. But this means that we make reference in the definition to two different things, the metallic silver, and the silver in possession of some further differentiating quality. That, as we have seen, would be impossible. To say that silver is like tin is to state a fact, though, for it refers to the tin-like silver (not the metallic silver). But, paradoxically, even if we can say that silver is like tin, we do not mention some reality that might be mentioned later a second time, neither silver nor the tin-like, nor tin, in saying it, unless we just say “silver is like tin” again. Thus Antisthenes seems to have rejected the existence of real universals on roughly the same grounds on which he rejected the existence of things persisting through time.⁸² There are, of course, very serious problems with this position, but we do not know how Antisthenes proposed to handle them.

8. HIPPIAS

Gentlemen here present, I think that you are kindred and connected and fellow citizens all of you, by nature and not convention. Like is akin to like by nature... Convention tyrannizes over man enforcing many things contrary to nature.

Hippias speaking in Plato's *Protagoras* 337c.

There is some evidence in Plato that **Hippias of Elis**,⁸³ a Sophist of note in Dorian cities and Socrates's

⁸⁰All of this is dealt with in Plato's *Sophist*, though not under Antisthenes's name.

⁸¹Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VIII 3, 1043b25-28. The argument against definition is reconstructed in Denyer (1991) 30-31.

⁸²He was said to have remarked, “O Plato, I see a horse, but I do not see horseness” (Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 208, 28–32.; 211, 15–21; and also in Ammonius, Elias and David's commentaries *On Porphyry* and *On the Categories*). Plato replied, “you have the kind of sight by which a horse is seen, but have not yet attained the kind by which horseness is beheld.” Palmer (1999) 57.

⁸³For Hippias, see especially Rankin (1983) 52-58. Hippias produced a list of Olympic victors which underlies Thucydides's chronology, wrote a history of geometry, and was co-discoverer of a curve that enables the squaring of the circle. He also produced a history of thought, the *Synagoge*, which seems to be our ultimate source for Thales's views, as well as the notion that one line of thinkers made all things one, while another made all things the offspring of motion, which Plato employs in *Cratylus* 402a–c, *Theaetetus* 152d–e, and *Sophist* 242d. So he may well have been the first historian of philosophy. Aside from these considerable accomplishments, one might also attribute a political theory to Hippias, since Xenophon (*Memorabilia* IV 4.1-25) reports that he said law or convention (*nomos*) tyrannizes over man, and that there was an unwritten law from the Gods which is always just, and by which written laws could be judged (at least he accepts that suggestion from Socrates in the text), and that written laws arise from covenants among the citizens. If he has thought through these commonplaces, he would presumably be a contract theorist. His notions about justice must have been

rough contemporary, perhaps thought that reality was a single whole, and that people must err whenever they speak of a part as though what they said did not also apply to the whole, or, more reasonably, have implications for the whole.⁸⁴ His view would apparently have been rooted in a consideration of Anaxagoras's opinion that reality is in itself continuous and unbroken, and we introduce, through our conceptualizing, both spatial divisions into Ones that correspond to no reality, and qualitative divisions into kinds that have no reality in themselves, since every quantity of material contains *all* the qualities that can appear to us. Conceiving the whole of reality in Anaxagorean terms as a boundless stuff everywhere the same, he asserted that everything truly attributable to any part of the whole must be attributed to the whole as well, and vice versa.⁸⁵ Plato tries to use these assumptions to construct argument for the Forms, for if several things are fine, then by this principle, all of them together are fine as well, and if we then ask in virtue of what they are fine, it cannot be anything they do not share with the whole. The Fine, then, the whole, is to be taken as what shares all the properties in virtue of which the parts are fine, and *there must be some such set of properties*, which define the fine. What Hippias has been denying, or at least refusing to grant, at this point in the dialogue is that there is any such set of defining properties of "the whole" of the Fine Itself.⁸⁶ Different things may well be fine in the same sense, for different reasons, he thinks. Hence, Hippias's doctrine is introduced with ironic intention. The dialogue concerns the real definition of the beautiful or fine (*kalos*), and the resolution of its difficulties requires the recognition that all things whatsoever are beautiful, to the extent that each partakes in the Form of the beautiful, by sharing in the

on traditional lines, since he was able to speak about such matters even in Sparta.

⁸⁴For the present doctrine our evidence is found in Plato, *Hippias Major* 300d-301b, though it must be admitted it is weak enough. Hippias has been asserting that whatever is true of both of two things is true of each, and Socrates wants to hold that, for instance, the both of us are two, while each us is one, not two. He is trying to get Hippias to consider what it is to be two or one, and so to grant that essences of these things are to be found. In his defense Hippias says "you don't look at the entireties of things . . . you knock away at the fine and other beings by taking each separately and cutting it up with words. Because of that you don't realize how great they are—naturally continuous bodies of being."

⁸⁵If it is objected, as Plato objects, that the whole might be two, and the parts each one, if the whole has two parts, the natural reply would be first to point out that the whole and the parts are each of them one, else we could not speak of one whole, and the parts, on Anaxagorean grounds, would have to each of them consist of two further parts, since all things are divisible. Whether we regard them one way or another is a matter of what concepts we choose to apply, and all looking at the reality will do is to establish that both can be applied by us in each case if we wish.

⁸⁶There is clearly some confusion about what a whole is in this context. Is it the extensional whole, the collection of all fine things? This is perhaps a fine thing because it is constituted of fine things (though we might wonder if a collection of fine things might not be rather a poor collection of them, i.e. incomplete, unrepresentative, poorly integrated with one another and so on, and clearly there can be a fine collection of things that are not fine, say ugly things). Or we might consider all the fine things as a single, extended thing. Surely fineness could consist in some sort of organization which each of these things has, but the "whole" does not have. Each dog is a carnivore, but the object put together from all dogs is surely not a carnivore, at least in the same sense.

essence of which it is a paradigm, a truth Hippias apparently misses because of his continuous embroilment in materially characterizable particulars, despite its close relation to the Anaxagorean view he accepts.

This embroilment is expressed in the first place in his insistence that wisdom is the mastery of all the particular arts, rather than knowledge of the single Master art that deals with the unitary Form of the Good that lies behind everything that is. Hippias professed to be expert in all the arts and crafts, boasting of his skill not only in rhetoric (to which he contributed a special art of memory), but also in weaving, carving, cooking and the like. This approach must have had some theoretical foundation. Probably, in a typically Sophistic manner, he rejected the existence of any overarching Good of a Platonic sort, a Good for everything that is, insisting instead that there were many unrelated goods, different goods for different creatures and even for the same person in different circumstances.⁸⁷ He would have held that a good life consisted in security with regard to all these various goods, so that only one who was self-sufficient, that is, a master of *all* trades, could reasonably be assured of the good life. Despite Plato's irony, there is no reason why such a view of the multifarious nature of the good should not be consistent with a holistic approach to reality. Moreover, there is no reason why one seeking the good should not seek those things that he sees are good, given his situation, without worrying about what might be good in every situation, if there even is such a thing. Hippias appears obtuse in Plato's caricature, but only if we buy into Plato's project of arriving at knowledge of necessary truths concerning the real natures of things such as goodness and beauty.⁸⁸ It is worth noting, moreover, that Plato's convictions on such matters seem to have gone hand in glove with his insistence that the wise man is not a tradesman, and that each person who is a tradesman would do well to focus on only one trade so as to be as good as possible at it, and by the way, so as to remain amenable to direction by his betters without obstructive, false sense of self-sufficiency provided by mastery of a number of trades at once. The search for what virtue really is seems to amount, in Plato, to a search for the peculiar skill of the fellow who is suited to be in charge of everything, and Plato does not question whether there is in fact such a person and such a skill, and whether it might not be better to let each person handle his own affairs as best he knows how, and settle community affairs in consultation and negotiation with

⁸⁷A similar view is presented by Gorgias in his *Helen*, where the *kosmos* (beautiful or well-ordered) is said to be manliness in its citizens for a city, beauty for a body, wisdom for a soul, virtue for an action, and truth for speech. In Plato's *Meno* 71d-72a Meno presents Gorgias's view that virtue in a woman, a child, a slave and a free man are all different things. Again, see the *Contrary Arguments* I.

⁸⁸For this point and the following paragraph, I depend on Palmer (1999) 59–66, which identifies Hippias as the prime representative of Plato's "sight-lovers" in *Republic* V, who love the practical arts, and, though they confess there are many beautiful things, are unable to understand what it might be for something to be beautiful in itself and in every respect, and thus cannot understand the Forms.

the others.

In the *Hippias Major* Hippias consistently understands Socrates's questions with reference to fine things, but not to the fine itself. When asked to identify "what is the fine," he gives a number of instances of beautiful things, and is not particularly disturbed when it turns out that these things are, none of them, perfectly beautiful in all respects. They don't have to be, it seems, to be beautiful, nor does anything else have to be for them to be beautiful. Socrates tries to make his meaning clear, and asks what is it that always appears fine to everyone, everywhere. Hippias could have answered that nothing does, of course, but he tries to come up with an answer, and suggests that everyone regards wealth and such things as fine. That suggests that what appears so to everyone (perhaps after reflection) would be so, and that the only way to reach what is objectively so is through what appears to be so, say, in the final analysis. (Of course, there may be no final analysis, for perhaps one can always analyze a little further if one cares to.) Again, Socrates asks what it is by which fine things are fine, that is, what is it that always makes that to which it belongs a fine thing. Hippias replies that gold seems to be like that, though he backs off when Socrates suggests that gold, when added to some things, may not make them finer, after all. Gold may be irrelevant to the way in which they are fine, say (as with fine actions). Hippias allows that, but remains puzzled as to what Socrates is seeking, or, more to the point, why he supposes there must be such a thing, given that he is so aware of the difficulties with any answer provided. This may be stupidity, but if so it seems to be a canny stupidity, and perhaps it really reflects how Hippias would have handled someone pursuing this vision of absolute knowledge of the absolutely fine and beautiful.⁸⁹ Hippias, one may assume, is not dumb, he just sees no reason to give Socrates the assumptions he wants.

Plato thinks Hippias's inconsistency reveals itself in his particular interest in his own welfare and that of his friends, as opposed to that of the city or of humankind in general. This criticism may seem unfair if it takes Hippias's theory as its target, for, on Plato's own evidence, Hippias held that since different human beings are but aspects of one reality, they should all live together in harmony. At least, it is on that ground that he intervenes in the *Protagoras*, with the others present, when Socrates and Protagoras seem to become angry with one another, pleading in his own way that they make up their quarrel and proceed with the discussion.⁹⁰ Plato's

⁸⁹Similar strategies are used nowadays, producing much frustration, by Wittgensteinian thinkers, professing themselves confused as to what their questioners could mean when they proceed on the basis of metaphysical assumptions Wittgenstein would reject.

⁹⁰*Protagoras* 337c, the passage cited at the opening of this section. But perhaps too much is attributed to Hippias here. His point may be the more mundane one, that the Sophists present are like one another in their interests and natures, since they are all *Sophists*, and so should be able to come to agreement. The unity of all mankind may not be in the offing at all in that case.

criticism here concerns, first of all, Hippias's interest in self-sufficiency, for it might well seem, given his principles, that self-sufficiency would be both impractical, since we can only carry out our lives within the context of the whole, and less than virtuous, since it betrays too much concern with one's own welfare rather than that of the whole, a concern that would likely be rooted in a the misconception that one is somehow independent of the whole. Moreover, it is hard to see how Hippias's holism can lead to communitarianism as long as he does not recognize a community of the good. If we are all but aspects of one reality, or share a common nature, but what is good for me still conflicts with what is good for you, what reason do I have to take an interest in your welfare?⁹¹ Only if our essential oneness entails that there is only one good for the two of us does it follow that we ought to live in peace with one another, but it is exactly this entailment that Hippias apparently rejects. On the other hand, what if he thinks that as a matter of fact the things each of us finds good cannot be obtained without cooperation with the others? Self-sufficiency may be what personal virtue is, but even a self-sufficient fellow needs others to curb the others' hostility, and one reason his self-sufficiency is helpful to him is that he has something to offer the others in negotiation. Why does an argument for the communal basis of a good life have to depend on a recognition of one single good, which is the only truly good thing, and the same for everyone?

9. SOPHISTIC ATHEISM

Concerning the gods, I am unable to discover whether they exist or not, or what they are like in form; for there are many hindrances to knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life...

Protagoras, Diels-Kranz Fragment 4

Does any man say then that there are gods in heaven? No, there are none. If any man says so, let him not be fool enough to believe the old story. Let not

⁹¹An answer can be imagined to this: perhaps the one self distinct from other selves that is the object of our self-interested attentions is illusory, and no part of reality, which is all one. (One does not have to be a Platonist to fall into confusions concerning 'reality.')

This sort of argument certainly gained currency in India, and among Neo-Platonists later on in the Mediterranean. If that is what Hippias thought, he gets closer and closer to Plato's notions of the good life, and does so, rather inconveniently, *without* Plato's notions of the Forms. In the end Plato attributes this to his obtuseness, wrapped up as he is in the assumption that only the material thing is a real existent thing. But however much he may disapprove of Hippias's metaphysics, he would presumably approve of the basic drive of his ethical views.

my words guide your judgment, look at the matter for yourselves. I say that tyranny kills thousands and strips them of their goods, and men who break their oaths cause cities to be sacked. And in doing so they are happier than men who remain pious day after day. I know of small cities that honour the gods, and they are overwhelmed in battle by numbers and are the subjects of greater cities that are more impious than they.

Euripides, *Bellerophon* fr. 286⁹²

Greek notions concerning the gods never had the unity that we are used to in our culture, with its official theologies and the priests in charge of maintaining their purity and refuting their opponents. The plethora of cults did live within a common atmosphere of belief shaped by Homer and Hesiod, but fundamentally, one could not really complain of impiety if a person expressed odd or skeptical views concerning the gods, at least as long as he was punctilious about observance of the cults. One could prosecute another for impiety, since the maintenance of the state cult was conceived to be necessary for the preservation of the state, but was on shaky ground if the accused was well known to observe the cults, whatever the fellow's opinions might be, for his mere opinion was no immediate threat to the state.

Moreover, it was reasonably common for an intellectual to hold somewhat higher views of God or the gods than the common people, and to deny many of the old myths on the ground of their depiction of the gods as liars, adulterers, thieves, murderers and cheats. We have seen Xenophanes and Heraclitus do this, and it became typical of philosophers, even those, such as Plato, who favored traditional observances. One might puzzle whether this sort of skepticism is due to impiety, or an unusual respect for the gods. An Orphic devotee, for instance, would have regarded it as a sign of piety. Perhaps it is a sign of a certain style of religion, that style which regards the Good and the Ethical as the ruler of the world, and will entertain no god who is not benevolent and just. There was another style, as we have seen, which taught a recognition of the frailty and dependence of humans, and the relative unimportance of their good in the scheme of things. The opinion that justice, even among ourselves, requires, not an egalitarian distribution of goods, but a distribution of goods in accord with merit, together with the usual habit of assessing merit by strength, power, and ancestry, tended to reconcile these two approaches to religion, and make sense of the traditional view that there was no injustice in the gods' receiving unmixed good while we lived short and desperate lives. But this view of justice was not held by everyone, and it was often uniformly rejected by intellectuals. Once it was rejected, the plain facts

⁹²Translated in Kerferd (1981), p. 170.

suggested that benevolent and just powers did not run the world, and either some fancy reasons needed to be found to reinterpret the facts, or else atheism became plausible. Plato held there were two sorts of atheism, denial of the existence of the gods altogether, and the claim that the gods took no interest in human beings. They are the same thing, to Plato's mind, for they involve equally a denial that the world cares about justice and the welfare of human beings.

In a way, the most mature view might well have been that of traditional religion, as it was expressed in the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. These playwrights faced up to the fact that the world did not have human concerns at its center, for all that it had given human beings justice and the laws to govern their affairs. They saw clearly that good people often fail and bad people often succeed, and that even the good person's virtue may shatter before a challenge that exceeds her insight and strength. Their reverence for the powers behind the world, and their sense of belonging and meaning within the world, did not hang on an insistence that for these powers human beings, and the happiness and justice and justice they desire, was the very reason why the world exists. They looked into a mystery when they asked what place human beings and their values held in the world, and were prepared for answers that would cut human pretensions down to size. In comparison with their search, the clever intellectual insistence that the gods be benevolent paragons of virtue, righting all the wrongs that human beings left unrighted, seems puerile. The atheists' recognition that the thing could not work was an advance, no doubt, but so long as the atheist's thought is dominated by the disappointment, and constitutes a rejection of things as they are, it too falls short of the traditional view as an emotionally adequate response to the world. In the end the mature atheist came around to much the same position as traditional religion, which had always left it open for its more advanced practitioners to regard the gods as impersonal forces, much along the lines of Ionian science. Both aimed at an emotional understanding and acceptance of his place as a human being making his human way among far greater, inhuman forces.

Setting aside these larger issues, the Greek Enlightenment's attempt to understand the origins of popular religious belief, given the apparent lack of evidence for it, was bound to undermine the intellectual justification for popular piety and traditional practices. Even the statement of Protagoras, which professes only agnosticism, not atheism, is dangerous enough. Clearly he had rejected traditional accounts how religious knowledge was gained, and professed to find no substitutes. If we cannot in fact know whether there are gods, or what they are like, how did the traditional beliefs arise? Protagoras used myths about the gods at least as a literary device, and we might suppose that he saw himself as imitating traditional sources here, making moral instruction the point of the old stories. In a famous passage from a satyr-play, *Sisyphus* (probably by Euripides, though it has

traditionally been attributed to Critias), this theme is given a more cynical twist when one character suggests that the stories of the gods were invented by wise men to frighten us into avoiding injustice even when we could get away with it. Democritus thought one source of belief in the gods was fear of violent natural events such as thunderstorms, which led one to pray to the threatening object for mercy. Prodicus, on different lines, remarked that the things that nourish human life were the first to be honored and worshiped as gods, out of gratitude coupled with personification, so that Demeter personifies the grain, Hephaistos fire, Dionysus wine. He also remarked that human beings who discovered new crops or otherwise benefitted mankind came to be recognized as gods. This last view was later advanced by **Euhemerus of Cyrene (active ca. 317-297 BCE)**, who proposed that the stories of the gods had evolved from legends of great men in prehistoric times. The hypothesis was natural given the importance of the Greek Hero cults, which had indeed evolved from ancestor cults of earlier times, and made notable men into minor gods. It was not unusual even in historic times for famous men to be declared Heroes and have cults set up to them after their deaths, as occurred not only with Alexander the Great, but also with Aristotle at Stagira. (Generally the founder of a city would be thus promoted, as the patron god of the city, and both Alexander and Aristotle enjoyed this status.) The suggestion that even the Olympians evolved from Hero worship apparently caused a stir at the time, though. The view is still called “Euhemerism.”

In Plato we find one logical outcome of these trends. He makes himself a friend of traditional worship, though his real opinions are those of the Enlightenment, and he rejects the old stories about the gods out of hand. He recognizes the role of religion in holding the state together and leading the less intelligent to virtue, and so freely invents religious doctrines, benevolent lies, for the city-states he constructs. Though he outlaws poets who tell the old disreputable tales about the gods, he also outlaws atheists. Religion, to his mind, serves a function, and it must lie to do so, so its lies must be permitted and defended.⁹³ But they have to be the right lies, and Plato is less tolerant of the religious impostor, the fake prophet and pseudo-priest, than he is of the upright atheist, and although he would merely imprison and instruct the latter, he would execute the former.⁹⁴

⁹³It is ironic that Plato seems to take the attitude of the Sophists toward truth here. What matters is not the truth, but that the citizens agree in beliefs that foster unity and virtue. He takes this view of religious belief as early as the *Republic*, and even if we allow my apology for the practice in the remainder of the paragraph, it reflects his consistent contempt for the masses. Rhetoric is useful enough in persuading the many, and the dialectical pursuit of the truth is only for the elite.

⁹⁴*Laws* 908b-e, compare *Republic* 364b-e, where he speaks of spurious Orphic books. He is especially upset by the promise of release from divine punishment to those who performed the correct rites, for this, of course, undermines the moral effectiveness of religion. He does not say so, but he must not have much approved of that great Athenian institution, the Eleusynian Mysteries. One man's impostor is another's saint, of course, and the impatience with the Mysteries is rooted in Plato's conviction that sufficient virtue

Of course, the cleverer fellow will view the lies as symbolically true, portraying genuine philosophical truths about the world's status as an image of the Good, but in a form that a layman can grasp. So one does not really lie, though one does not let on to the ignorant that it is all mere symbolism, either. This model for "liberal religion" would persist, and plague the more orthodox among both Christians and Moslems, for millennia.

10. NATURE, CONVENTION AND JUSTICE

If the same thing were to all men by nature
fair and wise, there would be no disputes or quarrels
among us. But as it is there is no consistency
or impartiality where mortals are concerned.
It is all names, without reality.

Euripides, *The Phoenicians* 499 ff.

. . . do you agree that there is a kind of good which we would choose to possess, not from desire for its aftereffects, but welcoming it for its own sake? As, for example, joy and such pleasures as are harmless . . . And again a kind that we love both for its own sake and for its consequences, such as understanding, sight and health? . . . And . . . a third form of good under which fall exercise and being healed when sick . . . and the making of money . . . ? For of them we would say that they are laborious and painful yet beneficial, and for their own sake we would not accept them, but only for the rewards and other benefits that accrue from them. . .

In which of these classes do you place justice? . . .

In my opinion it belongs to the fairest class, what which a man who is to be happy must love both for its own sake and for the results.

Yet the multitude . . . do not think so, but that it belongs to the toilsome class of things that must be practiced for the sake of rewards and repute . . . but that in itself is to be shunned as an affliction.

Plato, *Republic* II 357b - 358a⁹⁵

Aristotle tells us that the distinction between nature and convention was a widespread commonplace

is within our power so that mercy from the gods is not necessary.

⁹⁵Translated by Paul Shorey

among the men of old. The word for convention here, “*nomos*,” was used by Empedocles and Democritus to indicate those things that only appear to be so, but are not found in reality as it is in itself. So Empedocles says that the things that seem to be, such things as wine, or the cup holding the wine, are only by convention, for in truth there are only the four elements variously arranged, and Democritus holds that colors are only by convention, by nature there are only atoms and the void. But the distinction soon came to be applied in ethics, and it is suggested by Archelaus that justice and baseness occur by convention, not by nature. The intention seems to be that justice and baseness may be on the same plane as sensible appearances for an Atomist. There could well be a real basis for our perception of justice, but that basis does not resemble what we seem to perceive. As David Hume would later remark, the mind tends to paint the scenes it witnesses with its judgments, so that even though an unjust action seems to exhibit its despicable nature to us, in truth we see only what we have projected upon the scene. Nonetheless, it could be that the same paints are always applied in the same situations, and that we all paint the same acts as just or unjust. A more radical position would hold that justice is conventional in the further sense that its perception arises from one’s education and upbringing, not from underlying human nature, so that different things appear just or base to people brought up differently in different cultures. That leads to the central question: is it more reasonable to follow the lead of nature in our judgments concerning the relative value of various actions, or ought we to follow the lead of the conventions or norms of our society?

Some were in favor of following societal convention. They generally argued that our position in the world is due to our wits and social cooperation. The first people were unsocial, and as a result, constantly in great difficulty. In the end they made a success of it only by combining to protect themselves against wild beasts (suggests Protagoras), to share the benefits of a division of labor (suggests Plato in his *Republic*), to serve the needs of procreation and family life (Aristotle), or whatever, and after this they invented agriculture, language, and the various arts and crafts, and larger and larger communities organized themselves.

This view of things was part of the Ionian naturalism. It is first to be detected only in the 6th century, and one finds quite a different view, for instance, in Hesiod, who takes the present state of affairs to be a decline from a golden age, and claims that the crafts and skills of men were given them by the gods. The older view persisted in the opinion that men would do better to follow the old, divine conventions, given us by Zeus, than to follow conventions of human contrivance. So Sophocles’s *Antigone* points out that technical achievements are of little use if the divine conventions are not observed. Protagoras, adorning his point with a tale, tells how Zeus gave men justice only after observing their inability to live together and protect themselves. Socrates,

reinterpreting the old religious views in a different way, argued that the Gods respect the conventions of justice because they see them to be good. Apparently he did not think them contrived by anyone, but prescribed by nature itself. One could hold that the necessary conventions were divinely inspired, due to the contrivance of wise law-givers, or concluded through social contract, or even all three together if the wise man were inspired by divine wisdom, and the community at large voted to adopt his laws after examining them.

The view of Protagoras, Democritus, Euripides, and probably most others associated with the Sophistic movement was in fact the view belonging to Ionian naturalism all along. It had only become rather more self-conscious. The effect of convention or law, whether contrived by men or recommended by a god, was to lead us to self-restraint in competition with one another so that cooperation becomes possible and rivalry does not destroy the state. Herodotus remarks that the Greeks are superior to the Barbarians (that is, non-Greeks), for Greeks conform to convention out of a rational understanding of the need to do so, and do not require a king to drive them like cattle to do what is for their own good. The Greeks seem to have prided themselves on this difference from the Barbarians, for one finds the same point made in Aeschylus, Thucydides, and Plato.

A quite different reaction to the conflict between convention and nature favored the dictates of nature, conceiving that if things go naturally, the strong will overcome the weak, and viewing this as the best possible outcome. The weak contrive conventional laws to rein in the strong, but the rational thing for the strong to do would be to ignore convention, and go their own way. The view is often presented in the speeches of Thucydides's protagonists, and Thucydides clearly thinks that this approach leads to the breakdown of the social order, and, when applied in foreign policy, leads to the destruction of the state that applies it. In fact, the view is advanced almost always in application to foreign policy, and it seems to be tacitly presupposed that relations between fellow citizens within the city should be governed by convention. With the growth of class warfare, though, one's party became one's city, and Plato's presentation of extreme forms of this view in Thrasymachus and Callicles (who are not at all representative Sophists), suggests that once people adopted the view in foreign policy it came to impress some that it was right at every level. One outcome here is an admiration for tyrants, absolute rulers who comes to power as a populist leaders in the course of civil strife. The Greeks always admired the strong and competent fellow who can manage to overcome everyone else, and so were ambivalent about tyrants—however much they condemned them, they found plausible the view that the successful tyrant was the best and happiest of men. Like the gods, the successful tyrant is admirable for his personal excellence, which accounts for his success in all his endeavors, and he is admirable for all that he is a disaster for those around him. Indeed, a truly excellent person is always trouble for those around him, for he will defeat others whenever he

comes up against them, and he *will* come up against them, since he will demand power and recognition commensurate with his excellence. The very name of Homer's Odysseus means "trouble," not because of his own troubles, but the trouble he inevitably causes for others, though his superior character does mean that he undertakes great deeds at the limits of his ability, and so makes trouble enough for himself, as well.⁹⁶ It is best to note, however, that there are more social aspects to traditional views than this, and even in Homer loyalty to one's friends, for instance, is valued for its own sake. Plato often seems to be arguing from the worst possible starting point to establish the rationality of the altruistic virtues, on the assumption that if he can show it on *those* assumptions, it must surely be true.⁹⁷

In Plato's *Gorgias* **Callicles** holds that rationality requires us to seek our own good, and the only right to be found in nature is the right of the stronger to take what he wants. It is shameful to do injustice according to convention, but according to nature, what is shameful is to suffer injustice, and to do it with impunity is admirable. He goes so far as to suggest that it is bad for the many to interfere with the strong individual through communal effort, leaving Socrates his opening—he is immediately taxed with the fact that the many are stronger than the "strong" individual if they in fact constrain him, and so have a right, by nature, to do so. Callicles does not like it, but Plato makes it look like he has no ground ever to complain of the way things in fact turn out, since the strongest must always be the one who won.

Callicles was admired by Nietzsche, and he takes a typically Nietzschean position when he grants that self-control is a good thing only insofar as it is necessary for the weak, who cannot afford to go after what they want without risking disaster, and is not a good thing by nature or in itself. This, of course, repudiates the Ionian, scientific view of the matter, and Homeric religion would point out that even if what he says is true, Callicles must recognize that every human being is subject to disaster, and so needs self-control. Callicles is aware he is saying something that sounds absurd. He has to be pushed into such views, and seems uncomfortable with them even if Socrates can show they follow from his position. Probably Callicles took a traditional stance, holding that the strong were the old landed classes, who should rule, by nature's laws, and have only been tricked out of their rights by the introduction of convention, that is, the naturalist's notions about justice and the right way to organize the state. He looks very much like someone whose party is out of office, and reminds one of such phenomena as the Nazi view after World War I that the weak and contemptible Jews had somehow

⁹⁶Adkins (1960), (1971).

⁹⁷Here, see Creed (1973).

contrived the defeat of the naturally superior Aryans.

Thrasymachus, in Plato's *Republic*, Book I, takes a different, and more sophisticated approach, arguing that the norms of justice were in fact invented by the strong, that is, the rulers, not the weak, and that they function to aid the strong in controlling the state. (The strong might differ according to the constitution, of course, different groups of people being favored under an oligarchy, a tyranny and a democracy—the point would be that the laws of the state favor the ruling class, whoever they might be, and that the rule of the ruling class is maintained, in the end, by the threat of violence.) When Socrates probes his position, suggesting that the laws rulers actually make are sometimes not in their interest, but in the interest of the ruled (which is as it should be, of course), Thrasymachus responds that if this occurs it is because the rulers are not behaving like rulers, either through unwise intent or lack of skill. Justice is specified only by laws well-calculated to gain advantage for the rulers. (Thrasymachus notes that the just man is precisely one who sets aside his own advantage for the sake of others. This is strictly irrational, in his view, and only the weak subjects, not the strong rulers, will in fact be just. The rulers, who institute justice, and behave rationally in doing so, benefit from it, and so are not just themselves.)

A third approach to justice tried to strike a balance between the two accounts just described, taking justice to be conventional, but a good thing for the just, though not a good thing absolutely, but only given human weakness and incapacity. This is, of course, the traditional Greek religious view, though stated with embarrassing straightforwardness. A god, it is suggested, might find it reasonable to ignore justice, in the way that Thrasymachus suggests a ruler ought to, but no human being is safe in doing so. The position is presented in Plato's *Republic* at the beginning of Book II, so Socrates can refute it. Justice is commonly thought to be a good, but a troublesome sort of good that is sought, not for its own sake, but only for the sake of its results. *Ideally* one would be unjust, reap the benefits of one's injustice, and never suffer any punishment for it. But even the best of men cannot in fact accomplish this ideal, and so men strike a bargain with one another, each promising to be just if the others are. Thus the advantages of injustice are foregone, but the disadvantages are also avoided. Whereas Callicles made justice a tool of the weak to control the strong, and Thrasymachus made it a tool of the strong to control the weak, this view makes it a tool used by each, insofar as he is weak, to control the others. Justice becomes rational, since being just is part of keeping a reasonable bargain that one will suffer for breaking. (But Plato suggests that if we follow out this line, what is really rational for the individual is injustice to the extent that one can manage it without getting caught.)

This social contract view was taken by the Sophist **Antiphon**,⁹⁸ who seems to hold, in the fragments we have from his works, that we cannot go against nature, that is, act in a way that we see clearly to be against our own interests. So people who are just must be so because it seems to them in their interest to be just. It is foolish to be just in all circumstances, and for that reason laws and the enforcement of laws are necessary to make it reasonable to be just, lest one be caught, and also, of course, to guarantee that the just man is not put at a disadvantage by his adherence to justice. Antiphon is careful to specify it is not always against nature to follow justice, for it is often clearly in one's interests. But it is sometimes against nature, and then it is irrational. For instance, it would be irrational to refuse to strike first if one's enemy follows no such restriction, or to be good out of filial devotion to malevolent and nasty parents.⁹⁹

Antiphon pointed out that there are two common notions of justice—that it consists in obeying the laws, and that it consists in neither harming those who have not harmed you, nor suffering harm to go unreciprocated when you have been harmed. The two are at variance with one another, for the city's laws are bound to require us to harm others who have not harmed us personally. They may ensure non-aggression, but do so only by setting up patterns of aggression, albeit aggression on behalf of others who have been attacked.¹⁰⁰ We do not know how he developed this thought. One might point out that by convention we come to regard harm done to any citizen of our city as harm done to ourselves, and so adapt the natural notion of justice to our purposes, or he may have intended to point out that an ideal of just behavior is in fact no more practicable than the ideal of perfect, unpunished injustice advanced by such people as Callicles.

We must reconstruct Antiphon's thought from the slim evidence of a few chance fragments of his

⁹⁸The Sophist here seems to be the same person as Antiphon of Rhamnus, born in 470, and a member of the 400 who held power in Athens in 411. He was executed when the oligarchy was overthrown. Like other Sophists, he was a polymath, taking an interest in astronomy and geometry, and rhetoric, as well as politics. The fragments from his *On Truth* were only discovered in 1915 and 1922. He may have been the first rational psychotherapist, for he wrote a book on the art of avoiding distress, and set up a room near the agora where he treated those in distress by asking them questions about the causes of their distress. This would probably have been an attempt to place traditional psychotherapy done by the priests on a sound scientific basis, parallel to the work of scientific physicians. In one fragment he notes that sick people don't have to work. Possibly he identified psychosomatic illness. Interestingly, he also wrote an *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he opposed the notion that they involved direct perception of daemons or another world, or provided any signs of the future. He did hold that they provided signs, often meaning the opposite of what they seemed to mean, presumably signs of the mental state of the dreamer. See Dodds (1951) 117-121.

⁹⁹Antiphon suggests concerning temperance (fr. 58 at the end) that it is a matter of not yielding to momentary passions in a way one would later regret. His recommendation that one master one's desires for the foul and evil so that his behavior can be well-ordered (*kosmion*) (fr. 59) can be squared with this if we take it that such desires are momentary. He clearly identifies the rational with a careful consideration of long-term aims.

¹⁰⁰Antiphon, Fragment 44.

writings. We have rather more for **Protagoras**, since Plato gives an account of his view in his *Protagoras*. On his account of justice convention is good since it enables the state to hold together, and unless men combine into cooperative groups they have very poor chances in the world. The wise legislator produces laws everyone will agree on, thus establishing a common standard of justice. If he does his job well, the laws will be efficient in advancing cooperation and preventing internal conflict. Probably he held the laws were genuinely useful only if, as a matter of fact, no more than a few come to regard them as otherwise. In any case, he seems to hold that it is in fact shameful to disobey the laws and a wise and fine thing to obey them, as long as the citizens think this is so. Protagoras's innovation is to eliminate altogether the question whether it is good *by nature* to be just. What is good and what seems good (what seems good over the long haul, at least) are the same.

Other contract theorists include **Hippias**, who remarked that the laws are covenants in writing, but change rapidly and are not to be taken too seriously, and Socrates. We will examine Socrates's views in more detail in the next chapter, but for now we can note that he argued it is an objective truth that the citizens have an obligation to obey the laws of the state, since they have implicitly contracted to do so by living within the state and benefitting from its organization.

Protagoras's view may in fact be closely related to Socrates's. It has been observed that Protagoras's tale in Plato seems to have some deliberate oddities.¹⁰¹ He speaks of the distribution of various qualities to the beasts so that they can defend themselves and survive, and tells us that Epimetheus unwisely used up all the available qualities by the time he got to human beings, so that the gods had to provide justice and the technical arts to us so that we could live. This is an odd picture, suggesting, as it does, that a creature can exist without carrying on its characteristic strategies of life, those only being added later. What would a rabbit be that did not have long ears and sharp hearing, a taste for onions, wariness, and speed to escape predators? Surely any given sort of creature comes into being as its way of conducting its life, its peculiar strategies and talents, are assigned it. The same must be true for us, but that implies that it is part of being human to have standards of justice that enable us to live together, and technical arts that enable us to make our living in the world. Euripides seems to have the same point in mind when he tells us that Hecuba, having abandoned all human norms in her overwhelming desire for revenge, was turned into a dog. She ceased any more to be human. This brings us close, if such hints in Protagoras are deliberate, to Socrates's view expressed in the *Crito*, to the effect that we owe our formation as what we are to the state that educated us in its laws. Socrates makes the point to suggest

¹⁰¹Nussbaum (1986), 100 ff.

that we owe the state the duties we owe a parent, but surely it also suggests that to abandon justice is to abandon ourselves. As Aristotle would say, human beings are “political” animals, animals designed to live in a city-state (*polis*), or society.

The *Anonymous Iamblichi*, a contemporary text, duplicates Protagoras’s reasoning, arguing that we cannot live together without law, and must live together since none of us is self-sufficient, and “because of these constraints law and justice are made king among human beings, and will never be displaced, for their strength is ingrained by nature.”¹⁰²

Each of these approaches to justice assumes that the function of the state is to ensure cooperation, and the way to do this is to induce each group to recognize and make room for the perceived interests of the other groups in the state. Plato and Aristotle, we shall see, disagreed with this assumption, abandoning the traditional Ionian position, and arguing that the state should actually make the citizens virtuous. Of course, this was, in a way, already the view of Sophists such as Protagoras, since they argued that the state trained children up to recognize and obey the conventional standards of justice. But since Plato and Aristotle took it that there was an objective truth about the nature of virtue which was not commonly recognized, they held out for an ideal form of the state rather different from the forms that actually existed.

An intermediate stance, destined to become important in Stoic thought, held that a proper state enjoys a certain like-mindedness (*homonoia*) among its citizens. Democritus pointed out that without like-mindedness a city cannot be great, since it will waste its resources on internal bickering, and Plato criticizes injustice in *Republic I* on the ground that it destroys like-mindedness. Democritus suggests that the rich should aid the poor to establish like-mindedness, and Socrates argued that the laws are more likely to be obeyed where like-mindedness rules. This like-mindedness should be taken as a perceived community of interests, and common notions about the aims of the city, and the nature of a good life. Protagoras would have valued like-mindedness even in the absence of any expectation that it might reflect the truth about what is good.

11. POLITICAL REFORM

Everywhere inequality is the cause of revolution, an inequality in which there is no proportion [that is, an unjust inequality] . . . and always it is the desire for equality which arises in rebellion.

¹⁰²*Anonymous Iamblichi* 6.1.

Aristotle, *Politics* V 1, 1301b26-9

Though the dispute between oligarchy and democracy was prominent in the political affairs of the 5th century, there was little or no attempt to show that one form of government or the other is actually illegitimate, somehow involving a denial of an inalienable right to rule oneself or others. Rather, the relative merits of the different options are compared. Plato and Aristotle favor oligarchy in its ideal form, but argue that the right sort of oligarchy, one in which the virtuous and knowledgeable rule, is hard to maintain, and if, as likely will happen, we have to live with a corrupted form of government, democracy is superior, since it gives least room for one group to exploit another. They take the Ionian political theory as a stop-gap to be applied when an ideal form of government, the rule of the truly virtuous with the intention of educating the citizens in virtue, is unattainable. Protagoras argued that the craft of justice is one that all must learn, just as all must learn Greek, and so no one should be deprived of political power, even if we make the art of ruling a prerequisite for such power, for everyone in a civilized state knows that art. Other than these views we have little in the way of pro-democratic political theory, possibly due to a selective preservation of our sources. But we get a glimpse of common thoughts in Herodotus,¹⁰³ who provides us with an imaginary debate among the Persian nobles over the merits of the various forms of government. It is suggested that equal political rights for all, that is, democracy, will avoid the problems that might arise should a king become unjust and corrupt, and begin to exploit his subjects. But then it is pointed out that the many can easily become unjust and corrupt themselves, so that an oligarchy of the virtuous makes more sense. This too is rejected in the end, because civil wars are inevitable in such a state, given the personal ambitions of the oligarches, and monarchy, of course, is eventually settled on.

Once a society defines a political theory, the theory often suggests radical reforms of the existing social order. Such reforms seem never to have gained a wide following in Greece, but some are proposed on the fringes of 5th-century political debate. So one **Phaleas of Chalcedon**, at the end of the 5th century, proposed that citizens should have equal possessions and education in order to eliminate crime.¹⁰⁴ With something of an eye to practicality, he proposed setting up such a state as a new colony, or, in an established state, accomplishing the aim gradually by having the rich give marriage dowries to the poor, but not vice versa.

¹⁰³Herodotus, *Histories* III 80-82.

¹⁰⁴Aristotle, *Politics* II 7-8.

It was commonplace for intellectuals, even those who favored oligarchy, to attack the rights and pretensions of the well-born, but, despite the fact that many were slaves by birth, the institution of slavery was not generally brought under attack. The liberal position was to argue against enslaving fellow Greeks, which was already more reform than could be effected, but even liberals argued that barbarians were incapable of self-rule and should be slaves for their own good. The more radical view that no one was by nature a slave was expressed, but held no serious place in political discussion. Antiphon, with his usual acumen, noted that no one is adapted to be a slave by nature, but only through upbringing, but this need not imply that he thought those already possessed of a slave mentality because of their upbringing ought to be freed.

The political position of women was entirely subordinate in Greece, and no woman could be a citizen. But a few argued for female equality, most notably Plato.¹⁰⁵ He asserts that women differ from men only in being designed to raise children, and in being, on the average, somewhat weaker in body and intellect. Otherwise they enjoy the same distribution of talents as men do. Thus, many individual women are stronger than the average men in body, mind, or some specific talent, and it would be wrong to deny qualified women the education and rights of citizens. Plato's education functions to discover one's abilities, and so he insists that men and women should receive the same education from the beginning, expecting only that more women than men will fail to reach the higher levels. Partly in order to liberate the better women from the duties of family so they can take their rightful place as citizens (or "guardians") of the state, Plato proposes that their children be regarded as belonging to the state, and be raised communally in ignorance of their biological parents, and that they not be joined in marriage to particular men, but cohabit equally with all the other citizens. (The "community of women and children" is intended chiefly, it seems, to prevent the formation of family interests among the citizens, so that the soldiers and rulers will not be distracted from their duties to the whole state by family loyalties. This, and the proscription against the citizens possessing private property, is supposed to prevent the degeneration of the state to an oligarchy.) Citizenship implied military duty in the Greek mind, and Plato proposed that his woman citizens should serve in the army. Such proposals were much too radical to have any practical effect, but feminism is to be witnessed elsewhere, for instance, in Aristophanes's comedies, the *Lysistrata* and the *Parliament of Women*. In the latter play Praxinoia presses a communistic vision similar to that in Plato, and the former strongly suggests that if women were given their rightful role warfare would be much less popular. Bitter feminist complaints are to be found in Euripides's plays, in particular the *Medea*, in which

¹⁰⁵Plato, *Republic*, Book V, 451c ff.

the heroine laments her subjection to her husband, and looks forward to a time when laws will be different. Presumably there were lost utopian writings behind Aristophanes's not unsympathetic parodies, perhaps writings by intellectual women. There were women philosophers throughout the Ancient period—most notable in 5th-century Athens was Aspasia, the friend of Socrates and Pericles—though almost nothing has been preserved of their thought.

Tragedy and Comedy, and philosophical, sophistic, thought in the intellectual and artistic community. Zeller, *Socrates and the Socratic Schools* (1877) pp. 4 ff.

Literature in general as an exploration of the human predicament, the question how life ought to be lived, questions of meaning of life. Literature provides many of the explicit examples that move us in moral reflections. Since Tragedy regards unresolvable conflict, it represents moral demands and the interests that refuse them, and impossible choices between values, and so is a natural place to present reflections on these matters. Since Comedy mocks and satirizes, it too gains considerable moral content, and presents many a serious argument more effectively than tragedy could. So between literature and moral reflection in philosophy there is a continual interchange. The technicalities of the Philosophers, and their more subtle and complex theories, may not gain entry to literature, but the "basic ideas" do, and often literary criticism of these ideas is considerable, and, sometimes, due to the very freedom from technical apparatus that goes so far to make Philosophy effective, it penetrates more surely into what is wrong with a view than the Philosophical opponents of it do. (But, I insist that the Philosophers do all right in this interchange, and much of literary philosophizing is pretty weak stuff, and many an intolerable conflict presented in literature is in fact easily enough resolved. Not every psychologically unavoidable conflict is rooted in reason, and not every strong feeling or emotion is to be credited as valid, nor is psychological inevitability the same as validity.) Greek tragedy and comedy, in particular, is a religious literature, intended to raise the most difficult questions, and to recommend adherence to the most difficult ideals.

The classical account of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Aeschylus — earnestness, less irony?, Zeus the one God who matters, failure of respect for the divine powers and holy duties imposed on us, hybris, stepping out of our place, the root of problems. But Zeus himself helpless before Fate. "That man mistake not his position, that he learn not to overrate what is human, that he be not indignant with the Gods when in affliction, that his mind soar not too high, that the grain of guilt planted

by pride grows to a harvest of tears.” Divine justice, revealed in punishment of overreaching actions. Man’s guilt a result of *natural* overreaching, I’d say, but overreaching nonetheless. Man must oppose himself to nature and the world, but also must respect it, not complain, not go too far in his pride or grasp after too much. Cf. Homer. But the *Eumenides* requires a closer analysis, Athena-Reason vs. the Eumenides, who must be satisfied, but, justice must be tempered with mercy and kindness . . . Prometheus, the wise one, man artificer, and his conflict with Zeus, gets resolved. So a conflict with Gods presented, and a resolution in which the Gods are honored, but man allowed some space in which to act.

Sophocles — rather less of the horror in it, the world a little more rational. So the *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which one sees the sufferings as instructional(?). Look at the *Oedipus* trilogy in a little detail.

Euripides — reputation as pupil of philosophers and sophists. Naturalistic explanation and so on at the beck of his characters. [A lot of references to specific passages in the plays of all three in Zeller illustrating the central points. Good starting point.] I guess I should refer a lot of these to where ever the relevant doctrine is introduced, so that the summing up here gets a basis.

Pindar suggests in a famous verse that aretê is simply transmitted through noble blood and that it therefore cannot be taught: “A man with inborn glory has great weight, but he who has only learned (mathontes) is a man in darkness, breathing changeful purposes, never taking an unwavering step, but trying his hand at countless forms of aretê with his ineffectual thought.”

In the *Hecuba*, Euripides, “At the very least, a fair education offers a teaching in the good; and if someone should have learnt this well, then he would at least know what is shameful by having learnt a standard of nobility (kalou).” (592-602) This is not to say, of course, that he would behave nobly, now that he has the standard in hand.