Great Events from History: The Ancient World, Prehistory-476 C.E.

Sophists Train the Greeks in Rhetoric and Politics

**Category** Cultural and intellectual history  
**Date** c. 440 B.C.E.  
**Locale** Greek-speaking communities throughout the Mediterranean world

*The teachings of the Sophists marked the emergence of an educational movement that supplemented traditional learning in ancient Greece.*

**SUMMARY OF EVENT**

The Sophists, literally “wise ones,” arose in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. in response to a recognized need in the more advanced Greek states for training in the skills needed for active participation in political life. Traditional education consisted of appropriation of aristocratic ideals embodied in the poetic tradition and in military education, but this training was felt to be inadequate to impart the skills of political leadership in states in which success depended on the ability to sway votes in the courts and the popular assembly and on awareness of the principles of community organization.

To meet this need, the Sophists emerged as itinerant educators making the rounds of Greek cities and offering courses of instruction to anyone willing to pay. Although their name suggests they were organized into a school, the Sophists had no direct affiliation with one another. They did, however, all claim to teach *politite arete*, the civic virtues considered necessary for a life of public service. One of the better-known Sophists, Protagoras, claimed that any man who went through his course of instruction would learn “to order his own house in the best manner and be able to speak and act for the best in the affairs of the state.”

Although the Sophists offered courses of instruction in a variety of subjects, including history, mathematics, and literature, the ability to sway votes in courtroom or assembly was a fundamental political skill, so the Sophists placed special emphasis on the teaching of rhetoric and were the first to organize it into an art. Credited with being the first to suggest that there were two sides to every controversial question, Protagoras defined the nature and function of the orator as the ability to speak with equal persuasiveness to them both and to fortify a weaker argument so as to make it more convincing. The Sophist Gorgias simply defined rhetoric as “the art of persuasion.”

The methods of rhetorical training employed by the Sophists were the debate and the set speech. The debate was an imitation of the courtroom situation, wherein speakers had to present, as convincingly as possible, the arguments for both the prosecution and the defense. The set speech might exemplify the presentation of a policy before the popular assembly or present a persuasive reinterpretation of some conventional myth, offering a convincing reversal of value judgments on characters in the myth. Thus, the *Encomium of Helen*, a set speech by Gorgias, argued the view that Helen, far from being guilty of criminal adultery, was the innocent victim of forces beyond her control. Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen* neatly exemplifies some of the assumptions of Sophistic rhetorical theory: that human psychology may be understood in terms of physiochemical causation, that speech bears no necessary relationship to objective reality but plays on people’s hopes and fears to dislodge firmly held convictions and moral principles and to implant new perspectives with the same inevitable efficacy that drugs have when administered to the body.

Unlike their most immediate intellectual predecessors, the Greek natural philosophers, the Sophists were more interested in exploring the relation of human beings to each other than to the cosmos. Sophistic anthropology and political science were consciously founded on humanistic assumptions rather than on traditionally recognized divinely sanctioned principles. Protagoras made the first widely publicized open declaration of agnosticism concerning the nature and activities of the gods, and he also propounded the doctrine of the relativity of human
knowledge: “Of all things the measure is [each single] man, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.” With the logical priority of the individual over the group thus assumed, it is only reasonable to argue that the Sophists saw the values of any particular human community as artificial conventions, distinct from the conventions of other communities and imposing arbitrary limitations on an individual human being, whose natural inclination could be empirically recognized as essentially self-interested and aggressive. That nomos, the conventional values and laws of a particular community, were artificial limitations imposed on the universally self-assertive nature, or physics, of the individual thus became a widely accepted view in the later years of the fifth century B.C.E., a view finding varied expression in literature as well as in formulations of public policy.

As a consequence of this view of the nature of individuals and of human communities, the principle of justice came to be defined by some Sophists, most notably by Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, as the “advantage of the stronger party” in any community. Traditionally, justice had been held to be a divinely sanctioned principle of distribution of rights and privileges in the human community, but it was now held by the Sophists to be a reflection of the power structure of any state. For example, in an oligarchy, a minority, by virtue of its control of the army and the police, enforces a distribution of wealth and privileges that benefits itself; in a democracy, the majority has seized and maintains power to assure an equality of distribution of rights and privileges. In Plato's Politeia (388-368 B.C.E.; Republic, 1701), Socrates sharply criticizes Thrasymachus's view of justice and argues that not only justice but also all moral virtues are objectively real and good in themselves. In other dialogues, Socrates opposes additional Sophistic teachings, including the idea that virtue is teachable. Socrates is arguably the most famous Athenian opposed to the views and practices of the Sophists; however, their oligarchical associations, their skepticism about traditional beliefs concerning the gods, and their educational emphasis on the credibility of an argument rather than its truth made them the objects of criticism of many Athenian citizens.

SIGNIFICANCE

The impact of Sophistic rhetorical training on Athenian life is clearly evident in the literature of the later years of the fifth century B.C.E., especially in the history of Thucydides and the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes. A critical disposition of mind toward traditional values was fostered; eloquence of speech came to be admired and often to be practiced with a cynical awareness that an argument need not be valid to be persuasive; and there were growing doubts of the efficacy of traditional values to govern human conduct, which was increasingly viewed as governed by nonpredictable compulsions.

The impact of this analysis of human society in terms divorced from traditional moral sanctions was to undermine public confidence in, and voluntary submission to, constituted authority. Encouraged by the new perspective on humankind and society, groups of young noblemen, who were naturally most directly influenced because they were best able to afford Sophistic instruction, carefully studied the means of gaining power without scruples, and the later years of the Peloponnesian War were marked by violent social upheavals in many Greek states, upheavals made the more violent by the undermining of traditional moral scruples.

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