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Nature, Man and Logos: an Outline of the Anthropology of the Sophists[2]

Abstract

The paper aims at reconstructing the fundamentals of the sophistic anthropology. Contrary to the recognized view of the humanistic shift which took place in the sophistic thought, there is evidence that the sophists were continuously concerned with the problems of philosophy of nature. The difference between the sophists and their Presocratic predecessors was that their criticism of the philosophical tradition and the transformative answers given to the old questions were the basis and the starting point of the "ethical" and "rhetorical" part of their intellectual activity. This naturalistic perspective is reflected in their research in the field of medicine and biology, in the discussion about "the human nature", and in their interest in the individual physiological and mental conditions, which determine the state of the human body and the behaviour of a man. The sophists pioneered in linguistic, rhetorical, and philological studies. To enhance the power of persuasion, they investigated how various mental conditions influenced cognitive processes and physiological reactions. Thus they started a thorough examination of the human psyche, initiating the field of psychology.

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Although the originality of the sophists in each of the aforementioned aspects is undeniable, a complete picture of the sophists can only be achieved by examining the sources of their thought: the Presocratic philosophical tradition, Hippocratic medicine, and earlier literary tradition.

Keywords:
Ancient Greek philosophy, Presocratics, the sophists, anthropology, theory of cognition, rhetoric

It is generally accepted nowadays that a group of professional teachers – the representatives of the so-called "Sophistic Movement" (Kerferd, 1981b) – along with Socrates (Kerferd, 1981a) have contributed to the humanistic turn in philosophy, shifting the focus from natural to moral philosophy and (as Cicero remarked about Socrates) "calling philosophy down from the heavens" (Cicero, 1927). The view of this radical humanistic shift, which took place in the fifth century B.C., had become prevailing already in late antiquity and was re-established in modern scholarship in the fundamental works of the German historians of philosophy such as E. Zeller (1856), F. Ueberweg (1876), H. Diels (1884), and W. Nestle (1940). In opposition to this recognized view, which (as it was remarked by E. Capizzi (1955) originated under a strong influence of Hegel's philosophy of history, the more recent contributions of E. Dupréel (1948), M. Untersteiner (2009), and G.B. Kerferd (1981b) provided many reasons to argue that at least in the sophistic thought, there was never any radical transition from philosophy of nature to the research focused on man and "humanistic" problems (Emsbach, 1980). There is evidence that the sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Polos, Prodicus, Alcidamas, Antiphon, and Critias were continuously concerned with the problems introduced by the Presocratic philosophy of nature (Segal, 1962). The difference between the sophists and their Presocratic predecessors is not that these sophists have completely changed the subject of their interests, but rather that their criticism of the philosophical tradition and the transformative answers given to the old questions were the basis and the starting point of the "ethical" and "rhetorical" part of their intellectual activity (Guthrie, 1971).. Following this perspective, it is necessary to reconstruct the fundamentals of their thoughts and, subsequently, make an attempt to establish how the answers that the sophists gave to these questions ultimately influenced their teaching.

1. THE VIEW OF REALITY

The reconstruction of the view of reality, which can be associated with the sophists is a real problem because the content of few extant fragments and testimonies is limited to criticism of the Eleatic notions of one and being (Kerferd, 1981b). But, there is one underestimated source, namely Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, which gives an opportunity to reconstruct some features of Protagoras' view of reality. Though it is a very controversial issue to what extent we can trust Plato as a doxographer, there is no doubt that according to Plato's report in *Theaetetus*, Protagoras was an upholder of Heraclitean doctrine of universal flux. And, as it is argued, there are many arguments supporting the view that Plato's account is trustworthy (Nerczuk, 2009).

Protagoras claims there that the beginning of all things is motion, which is the source (*arche*) of "that, which passes for existence, that is, of becoming" (Plato, 1921, p. 53). The opposite of it, namely "inactivity" or "rest" causes "non-existence and destruction" (Plato, 1921, p. 45). The reality is composed of "things" (*chremata*), which are in constant motion. Change is the source of everything what is falsely called "being". In fact, as it is said, there is no being, but everything is in the state of "becoming". Because of the variability of *chremata*, one cannot rightly say that something is "one" (*hen*) (Palmer, 1999), "is anything" (*ti*) or is qualified in some way (*opoionoun*). The reality is itself contradictory and this is why it is possible to predicate contradictory statements in relation to everything.

2. THE SOPHISTS AND MEDICINE

In the view of the sophists, who might have been under the influence of Hippocratic medicine (Kerferd, 1981b), a man is a biological creature and a part of the world of nature (Nestle, 1940).

Preserved source materials confirm that some of the sophists conducted their own research in the field of medicine and biology. Prodicus' work *On nature* testifies that he was concerned with problems of anatomy and physiology (Guthrie, 1971). Critias, who claimed that a man's soul is contained in blood, might have been inspired by Empedocles, who was a philosopher and a physician (Guthrie, 1971).

The idea of "the human nature" was derived by the sophists from the Hippocratic medicine (Jaeger, 1944). In the remaining testimonies, we may find some remarks concerning "human nature" and natural laws, to which it is subject. The

laws of nature are prevalent to the differences between people, the source of which is culture and civilization. Birth and death determine the natural limits of human life (Diels & Sprague, 1972). Men, like other living creatures, are subject to natural instincts of survival and procreation. To survive, a man must meet his needs, such as breathing and nutrition (Kerferd, 1981b). The biological development of a man requires that he would take care and exercise his body and soul. These two parts of a man are interdependent and determine human behaviour contingent on his mental and physiological stimuli. Moreover, there is a close relationship between mental affections (*pathe*) and physiological reactions (Flashar, 1956).

The medical writers and the sophists have a common interest, especially in the individual physiological and mental conditions, which determine the state of the human body and the behaviour of a man. In Hippocratic medicine, this problem was related to the discussion on the possibility of applying the general principle to individuals (Hippocrates, 2005). Thus, medical writings contain many observations on specific diseases and symptoms related to each individual case. Their sophistic parallels stress the particularity of conditions, which individuals are subject to and point out the impact of private affections on the results of cognition (Brett, 1912). Following this line of thinking, both Protagoras and Gorgias took interest in the differences of one man's perception, which reflect the differences of conditions such as good health and illness, dreaming and being awake as well as youth and old age.

3. COGNITION

The interest in idiosyncrasy of physical and mental disposition of a man is the basis of the view that the standard of knowledge (analogously to the standard of the individual therapy) (Hippocrates, 2005) should be grounded in perception (*aisthesis*).

This empirical perspective can be observed in the sophistic view on the process of cognition. The sophists accepted Parmenides' claim related to the relationship between thought and being (Kenny, 2004). But, they were also inspired by two other traditions. Under the influence of the Hippocratic medicine, they took into account the state of the perceiving subject. They were also inspired by Empedocles' theory of mechanism of perception (Diels, 1884) and by Xenophanes' remarks on unreliability of human experience (Diels & Kranz, 1968).

The combination of these traditions resulted in the new, anti-Eleatic theory of knowledge based on perception (*aisthesis*) and experience (*empeiria*) (Schiappa, 2003). According to Plato's report in *Theaetetus*, Protagoras has provided a defi-

nition of knowledge. He defined it as perception, which not only embraced the sensual apprehensions, but also the emotions (i.e., pleasures and pains, desires, fears) and dream-images (Cornford, 1935). In his speech entitled *Palamedes*, Gorgias differentiated knowledge, the source of which was direct, personal experience, and uncertain opinion (*doxa*), referring to that, which was beyond the range of autopsy (Diels & Sprague, 1972). The acceptance of perception as the source of knowledge resulted in a belief that human cognition, at least with reference to everything what is beyond direct sense-perception, has a fragmentary and confined character.

In *Theaetetus*, Plato presents a wider context of Protagoras' *man-measure* principle (*homo-mensura*), which is associated with the view of changing reality and the theory of perception (Deschardin, 1990). This doctrine, which Plato attributes to Protagoras and unnamed Heracliteans, takes its name from the conviction that colour, which is an example illustrating the way in which the process of perception takes place, is neither anything that exists in the object nor anything that is in someone's eyes. Colour is brought into existence somewhere between the perceiving organ and the perceived object (Plato, 1973). The "things" (*chremata*) constituting the changing reality are therefore the results of interaction between the sensory-organ and the motion that comes from the external object.

Such a definition negates any kind of the objective knowledge of reality. The world as it is perceived is composed of things (*chremata*), which are constituted in the individual and particular acts of perception. Things are just appearances (*phainomena*). There is no other way a thing persists "except so far as it is something falling within the range of somebody's perception" (Fuller, 1931). *Chrema* is always momentary, particular, and private. It "is" not, it appears "something" or "of certain quality". Each particular man is the measure of all things "because the changing experience of each individual bounds and constitutes his particular universe" (Fuller, 1931). According to Protagoras, there are as many "truths" as individuals who live in their particular worlds, which are constituted by their unique and "private" affections (*pathe*).

The belief in the reliability of all perceptions results in the removal of categories related to truth and falsehood (Dupréel, 1948). As we may read in *Theaetetus*, those categories were replaced by Protagoras by the notions of "better" and "worse". Each man is the measure and everyone has his own world based on his own perceptions, but an inevitable interaction with the "worlds" of other individuals differentiates perceptions and beliefs into "better" and "worse", i.e. more and less "effective".

4. LOGOS AND BEING

The ontological and epistemological views of the sophists are the basis of their interest in the language, which led them to examine the ontological status of a discourse (*logos*), the conditions determining the process of communication, and "correctness of words and names" (i.e. adequate and inadequate ways of predicating of reality [*orthoepeia*]).

One of the main problems, which were reconsidered by the sophists, was the Eleatic issue of the relationship between discourse (*logos*) and being (Kerferd, 1981b). The whole problem was introduced by Parmenides, who in his poem (as it may be inferred from the preserved fragments), postulated the correspondence between being and thought (*logos*). This thesis of Parmenides was critically reconsidered by Gorgias and Protagoras.

Gorgias of Leontinoi, who in his treatise *On non-being or the Non-Existent*, aimed at refuting the fundamental dogmas of the Eleatic tradition pondered in the third thesis of his writing if it was possible to communicate any knowledge of being to another person (Diels & Sprague, 1972). Gorgias' conclusion was negative. According to him, *logos* is something different from being and what is conveyed through words to another person is not external reality, but just words (Verdenius, 1981).

The conception of *logos* as a mere means of communication, which can be used to convey either true or false messages, finds its expression in two surviving works of Gorgias, namely *Encomium of Helen* and *Palamedes* (Segal, 1962). In his *Encomium of Helen*, the rhetorician extols the enormous power of *logos* mentioning speech, which "written with art, but not spoken with truth, bends a great crowd and persuades" (Diels & Sprague, 1972). And in his other rhetorical declamation *Palamedes*, Gorgias presents a desperate situation of an unjustly accused hero, who is aware that his salvation is fully dependent on persuasive power of his apology.

The question of the status of *logos* can also be found in Protagoras. The view of reality as a flux and the definition of knowledge as a perception are reflected in Protagoras' conception of *logos*. According to him, all perceptions are true by virtue of their reference to being (Plato, 1921). But in Protagoras' world of flux, unlike in Parmenides' view of "changeless being", there is no strict relationship between *logos* and 'being' in its static, Eleatic sense. There is no "one by itself", but there are just endless chains of things in motion (*chremata*). Correspondingly, there is no universal truth, but there are just particular, individual "discourses", which express private, particular, and contradictory affections of individuals (Emsbach, 1980).

Convinced of the significance of this discourse, Gorgias took up research focusing on language. Here, he pointed out the complexity of the act of persuasion, which is not necessarily dependent on whether the message is true or false, but is determined by persuasive "power" of the discourse itself. Reflecting Gorgias' view, the narrow limits of individual cognition are the reason why human reality is to a large extent constituted by words and, therefore, constantly reinterpreted (Consigny, 1992). The discourses form the human reality in such a manner, that the words in a sense become "beings" themselves (Hoffman, 1925). The realisation of this creative role of *logos* led many sophists to research the conditions of the act of persuasion and to analyze a number of factors, which could enhance the persuasive power of speech (Kennedy, 1963). The main category became the notion of "the power of *logos*" (*dunamis tou logou*). This category is implied in Protagoras' statement: "to make the weaker argument stronger" (Diels & Sprague, 1972). It can also be found in Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, where in the speech delivered by Socrates, Protagoras is credited with saying that his task is to replace the "worse opinions" with the "better ones" by the means of words (Plato, 1921). Gorgias, in his *Encomium of Helen*, praises *logos* as "a powerful lord which by means of the finest and most invisible body" (Diels & Sprague, 1972) can form human opinions. According to Gorgias, the power of *logos* is so immense that it equals physical violence (*bia*) (Diels & Sprague, 1972). The rhetoric is thus the most powerful of the arts because it helps rhetoricians achieve the greatest good, that is: "the power of persuading by words, I should call it, the judges in a court of law, or the councillors in a council-room, or the assembly men in an assembly, or any other kind of meeting which is convened for a public purpose" (Plato, 1864). Considering this enormous power of *logos*, the sophists often compared their rhetorical skills with martial arts. The refutations presented by Euthydemos and Dionysodoros, the sophists depicted in Plato's dialogue *Euthydemos*, are the grotesque examples of this new art. The verbal contests, which both sophists practice and teach, are a new form of their old profession; they used to be *pancratiasts* and now they give instruction in the art of contending with words.

5. REASON AND EMOTIONS

To intensify the influence of *logos* upon the soul, the sophists began to research both elements of that relation namely, discourse and soul. They pioneered in linguistic, rhetorical and philological studies (Kerferd, 1981b). They also started a thorough examination of the human psyche, initiating the field of psychology

(Brett, 1912). Contrary to the earlier Pythagoreans, who were interested in the eschatological aspect of the soul, the sophists focused on its "psychological dimension", that is the soul conceived as a complex, composed of emotional and rational part, both of them influencing human acts and beliefs. For this reason, problem of sensations which embraced both cognitive (beliefs, perceptions) and emotional (pleasure, sadness, desire, and fear) elements (Plato, 1921), appeared in the centre of their interest.

This awareness of the two different aspects of human soul led the sophists to develop techniques, which aimed at increasing the persuasive power of speech; this was done by addressing both rational and emotional part of the soul (Halliwell, 1994). The sophist Gorgias mentioned with pride that by the means of the art of persuasion he succeeded to persuade his patients who refused "to take their medicines, or to submit to be operated upon either by the knife or the cautery, when the physician failed to persuade him" (Plato, 1864). While Gorgias believed that this was a good example of the immense power of *logos*, in Plato's opinion, this was just an illustration of rhetorical deception (*apate*), an example of a case when one ignorant person persuades another ignorant person (Plato, 1864).

To enhance the power of persuasion, the sophists investigated how various mental conditions influenced cognitive processes and physiological reactions. They reflected upon peculiar emotions, such as love, fear, desire and the illusions: "such fancies as result from wrong hearing, or wrong seeing, or any other false perception" (Plato, 1875). Protagoras discussed the specific affections (*pathe*) experienced by a man in the state of sleeping and being awake as well as in sickness and good health (Plato, 1921). Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* praised *logos*, which was able to "stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity" (Diels & Sprague, 1972). He further pointed out that people experienced "fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing" (Diels & Sprague, 1972). Another sophist, Antiphon, established his private quasi medical practice removing sorrows by the means of words (Diels & Sprague, 1972).

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The starting point of the sophistic anthropology, a fundament upon which they construct their ethical and political doctrines, is their real interest in the world of nature. Their studies in medicine and biology, which lead to the belief in universal relativity, Protagoras' and Gorgias' theories of perception and the sophistic examination of psychological and physiological constitution of a man, testify that the complete picture of the sophists can only be achieved by examining those two

aspects of their intellectual activity, namely both their criticism of the Presocratic tradition and its creative adaptation and continuation.

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