

# **A History of Philosophy**

## **03 The Greek Sophists**

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We've spent two days talking about the pre-Socratics, and I'd hope by now you have a pretty good grasp of what they're up to. Usually treated as pre-scientific cosmological speculation, but at the same time running through all that, and in some regards underlying it all, is their attempt to understand this so noteworthy, remarkable parallel between the ordered unity of nature, the ordered unity of a city-state, and the ordered unity of one's moral life, as it should be, at least. And accordingly, what you might call the metaphysical grounding of morals.

Thinking in terms of an ethic that is grounded in the very nature of reality. Metaphysical grounding of morals. Now, when we come, as we do now, to the sophists, we find that, not all of them, but by and large, the sophists are in reaction against what's been going on before.

They don't like it. And in fact, if you add to the two things about the pre-Socratics that we've been stressing, if you add the third thing that we noted in passing, namely their attempts to understand, or the beginning development of some God concept, they're skeptical about that as well. So, in effect, what you find in the sophists is, first of all, skepticism about the possibility of knowing the truth about reality.

About nature. And the term nature, as far as the Greeks are concerned, is simply what is. Skepticism about knowing the truth about reality.

It's as if, rather than getting into the disputes between the various groups of pre-Socratics, monists and pluralists and all the rest of it, they're saying, in effect, a plague on all your camps and on your whole enterprise. They just don't want it. They give up on it.

And the sorts of complaints that they have are that, for instance, we're faced constantly with the incompatibility of different positions. Or what is sometimes called, especially in more recent years, the incommensurability of certain positions. You simply cannot translate one into the language of another.

They simply don't match. They don't jive. Pulls apart.

But in addition, the equipollence of arguments. Equipollence simply means that the arguments for have no more weight than the arguments against. So the arguments for one position are cancelled out by the arguments for another position or against the first position.

As you go. And these features, which surface in some of the suffixes, are characteristic of scepticism in subsequent history. There are certain kinds of arguments for the position that you cannot know the truth.

The argument from equipollence of arguments is a characteristic one. The emphasis on the incommensurability of alternatives again. And, of course, the incompatibility contradictoriness that's involved in all the range of different views.

So if the sophists dislike and reject what the pre-Socratics are doing in their pre-scientific cosmology, what do they do instead of trying to gather the truth? What they do is to turn from the pursuit of knowledge to the practice of rhetoric. The attempt to persuade by non-logical means. You see.

And so, if you like, the sophists seem to be devoted to rhetoric rather than philosophy. Rhetoric rather than any science. Keep in mind that the word science way until about 1800 meant simply knowledge of a theoretical sort.

So, sceptical then about the cosmology. Moreover, their interest is in practical affairs rather than theoretical matters. In practical affairs where you would expect, at least following the line of pre-Socratic thought, where you would expect ethical concern to surface.

Concern about the good life, well-ordered, with a morality grounded in the nature of things. But, not so the sophists. They would rather view morality as conventional.

Simply a matter of social agreement, social practice, perhaps what we would call social contract, and therefore quite relativistic. They are more oriented to achieving success, winning a debate, and winning an argument, rather than the pursuit of truth and justice. You see.

At least that's the picture that we get from some of their fragments and from Plato, Socrates. In other words, we see in the sophists the attitude of Democritus with his materialism. Except that the sophists don't have a materialistic metaphysics, they don't have a metaphysics.

Democritus, you remember, rejected the notion that morality is grounded in the nature of reality, ordered in some way by some rational principle. No, for Democritus, it's a matter of chance the way things come out. So, use what you know to enjoy yourself, but avoid the painful excesses.

Well, some of the sophists are hedonistic like that, yes, but in any case, they are rejecting any notion of natural moral law that is beginning to appear in the pre-Socratics. Rejecting any notion of natural moral law. A morality grounded in the nature of things.

And instead of opposing it, the alternative is ethical relativism. Pretty thorough going ethical relativism. If you're interested in pursuing that sort of issue in greater detail, the recent writings of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre are well worth your attention.

Alasdair MacIntyre, now at Notre Dame, has written a series of three volumes that I'll refer to later on concerning the history of ethics in this sort of regard. Trying to turn our attention from an ethic of roles, where there is so much incommensurability between different approaches, he thinks you can never get anywhere. Turning our attention not to relativism, because he rejects that alternative as well, but turning attention rather to an ethic that lays emphasis on the virtues.

The kind of tradition that's rooted in Plato and Aristotle. His latest book in this regard is called *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. *Three Rival Versions, Moral Inquiry*.

One of these versions is the sort of 18th-century Enlightenment ethic which regarded ethics as a science growing cumulatively till we all reach perfect agreement about the good, the right, and everything else. The other is an ethic represented by people like Nietzsche, completely relativistic, therefore reverting to the pursuit of power rather than justice. Interesting echoes of some of the sophists.

And the third is an ethic of virtue that goes back to the Plato-Aristotle tradition. And he finds worked out much more fully in Thomas Aquinas. So it's a very interesting sort of thing.

This is where the cutting edge in present-day debate about ethical theory is. Interesting how it reaches right back into antiquity in many ways. In other words, according to MacIntyre, to understand the scene in the 1990s, well, 1980s, because he wrote it in the 80s, even though it's now the 90s, to understand the ethical scene in the 90s, you have to go way, way back to ancient Greece.

You see. The story of how we got to where we are. Well, in addition, as I indicated, the sophists are skeptical about knowing anything about God.

If there be a God or gods. Now, take a look at some of the selections that we have from the sophists, and you'll get this point. Look on page 53 in Kaufman.

Page 53. Where you have some brief selections from Protagoras. And the first one is much quoted to this day.

I'm sure you've heard it. Essentially, man is the measure of all things. Okay.

You notice it in the first paragraph, there at the bottom of 53. Of all things, the measure is man. Of things that are, that they are.

Of things that are not, that they are not. Okay. Who says what is? You see.

The individual, seemingly, is the judge. It is we who make our truth. Truth seems to be a matter of making rather than discovery.

An interesting anticipation of the sort of thing that's sometimes said about the situation today. Have any of you tried to read Alan Bloom's best-selling book of a couple of years ago, *The Closing of the American Mind*? You may recall that he complains that the contemporary university student talks as if there is no such thing as truth or falsity. As if there is no such thing as truth or falsity.

Right or wrong. No. We make up our own values.

You see. What's true for me may not be true for someone else. A man is the measure of all things.

In that sense. So protagorist dictum there is often taken as the epitome of relativism. And when you look on the next page, 54, paragraph number 4, about the gods.

I'm not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they're like. The factors preventing knowledge are many. The obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life.

Well, maybe we agree about the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life. But notice that he has an overarching pessimism about the possibility of knowledge. And interesting again, 6B, that little dictum, to make the weaker cause the stronger.

I don't know what he had in mind there. But to make the weaker cause the stronger sounds like something rather unnatural. You see.

As if there's an inversion of any kind of order. Well, Protagoras. The next selections are from Gorgias.

And here the skepticism is very blatant. This selection is taken, by the way, from Sextus Empiricus. His outlines of Pyrrhonism, I believe it is.

Sextus Empiricus was a Roman writer who tried to do sort of a digest, outline, digest of skepticism historically. So Gorgias appears. And notice the three main points of the outline at the beginning.

1. Nothing exists. 2. If anything exists, it is incomprehensible. Can't be known.

3. If it is comprehensible, if you can know it, it is incommunicable. You can't talk about it. Now, it would be hard to find a more complete skepticism than that.

Nothing exists. Well, you say you don't know for sure. Alright, well, if anything exists, I can't know what it is.

Well, maybe I don't know that for sure. But even if I could know, I couldn't tell you or anybody else. I couldn't talk about it.

You see, notice the qualifier, well, I don't know for sure, but even if I did. Because a complete skeptic is one who cannot make an affirmation, nothing exists. Because if he knows that, he's not a complete skeptic.

A complete skeptic cannot say, I can know nothing. If he can know that, he's not a complete skeptic. A complete skeptic can only say, well, as far as I know, I can know nothing.

As far as I know, nothing exists. Well, if anything does, then... And so, here you have it in Dear Old Gorgias. Notice how he develops this under Roman 2, at the bottom of the first column on 55.

If the concepts of the mind are not realities, that is to say, if what we're thinking about is not real, reality cannot be thought. Reality cannot be thought. If we can't think about it, reality cannot be thought.

So the question is whether there is any correspondence between thought and reality. Presumably, he's thinking that truth would be some sort of correspondence between thought and reality. But if there's no correspondence, then apparently we're not able to think about reality.

Or look under Roman 3, where he's talking about the problem of communicating. Six lines into that paragraph. That with which we communicate is speech.

Speech is not the same thing as things that exist. So that we communicate not the things that exist, but only speech. And at the bottom of that column, speech can never exactly represent perceptibles.

Perceptibles are obviously what we perceive. Speech can never exactly represent what we perceive, since it's different from them. And perceptibles are apprehended by each kind of sense organ.

Speech uses another. Hence, since the objects of sight cannot be presented to any other organ but sight, different sense organs cannot give their information to one another. Similarly, speech cannot give any information about the perceptibles.

So if anything exists and is comprehended, it cannot be communicated. Conclusion. But in the further material there, notice what further is ascribed to Gorgias.

Look at that inconium on Helen. Paragraph 1. What kinds of virtues are these he's talking about? The glory of a city is the courage of a body, the beauty of a soul, the wisdom of action, the virtue of speech, and the truth. It's right in all circumstances to praise what's praiseworthy and blame what's blameworthy.

Now notice that mix of virtues. You see, to talk of courage and beauty, why, that's those old heroic virtues. You see? Heroic virtues.

What he means by wisdom isn't made clear. The term can be translated as prudence. And prudence could simply be looking out for yourself because of the consequences.

So it seems that what Gorgias is talking about here is those virtues of the heroic sort. These surfaced in some of the early Greeks and were critiqued by people like Hesiod and others. Who are much more concerned about justice than about courage, good looks, and so forth.

Well, as you read on, look at paragraph 8 there on the same page. Speech is a great power that achieves the most divine works by means of the smallest and least visible form. It can put a stop to fear, remove grief, create joy, and increase pity.

The power of rhetoric. Oh sure, you know what it is to be turned on by some address, some speaker, you see. You probably don't remember the original I Have a Dream speech of Martin Luther King.

I remember sitting by the television, listening to that and watching that, and feeling like standing up and cheering. Rhetoric can do wonderful things. Well, look at paragraph 12 on the opposite page.

Persuasion by speech is equivalent to abduction by force. Oh, I didn't have any choice. And in 13, persuasion when added to speech can also make any impression it wishes on the soul.

Manipulative. And 14, the power of speech over the constitution of the soul can be compared with the effect of drugs on the bodily state. Put you to sleep.

Okay. So what Gorgias sees is the tremendous potential for good or evil. However, you define that in rhetoric.

And then on, let's see. No, I guess that's enough of Gorgias. One of the other sophists that we don't have a selection from, but who certainly appears as one of the characters in some of Plato's dialogues, particularly in Plato's Republic, was Thrasymachus.

And there's some reference to him in Stumpf, in his account of the sophists. But to Thrasymachus is ascribed the saying that justice is the interest of the stronger. Justice is the interest of the stronger.

Or if you like, might makes right. That it's those who exercise power who tell you what's right. Which is precisely the thesis that Friedrich Nietzsche elaborated around 1900 in his work on the genealogy of morals.

Yes, indeed. So Thrasymachus then comes out as, if you like, the ethical relativist. But the ethical relativist sees that the power behind moral persuasion is the power of rhetoric.

Now what is it about rhetoric that's so significant? That it appeals to the emotions rather than the reason. And incidentally, to make the point, did you notice how I leaned forward and, with good rhetorical style, said, It appeals to the emotions, and I capture your emotions, your feelings, in saying that. It's not that rhetoric per se is bad.

That it's wrong to appeal to the emotions. But it's wrong to manipulate the emotion when reason is turned off, bypassed, put to sleep, drugged. That's the difference.

Now this poses a fascinating kind of contrast that we're going to be working with as we move into Socrates and Plato. The contrast between the use of careful thinking, reflective argument, and philosophical inquiry, as against the use of rhetoric. Now, how are you going to try to affect people's viewpoints? Which way? Rhetorical manipulation of the emotions? Only? Or basically, good thinking, which becomes convincing.

Well, this is the picture of the sophists. It's sometimes said that that's not the entire picture. And indeed, you have a selection from Antiphon from the same period.

Who, as our editor's notes indicate, may or may not have been a sophist. There's some dispute there. And Antiphon seems to be, in this sort of conflict, one of the good guys rather than one of the bad guys.

Look on page 59, where Antiphon says, Justice is not to transgress the law of the state in which one is a citizen. A man can best conduct himself in harmony with

justice if, when in the company of witnesses, he upholds the laws, and when without witnesses, he upholds the edicts of nature. Now notice that the edicts of nature.

The edicts of laws are artificially imposed. Those of nature are compulsory. Where's the higher authority? The edicts of the laws are arrived at by consent, not by natural growth.

Whereas those of nature are not a matter of consent. If you disagree with a natural moral law, too bad for you. Doesn't do anything to the moral law; it does something to you.

It's no criticism of the Ten Commandments that people don't observe them; that's the criticism of the people who don't observe them. You see, that's the kind of point that he's making. So, if the man who transgresses the legal code evades those who have agreed to those edicts, then he avoids disgrace and penalty.

If he doesn't evade those who issued the edicts, then he doesn't avoid it. He gets caught, punished. But, if a man violates laws implanted in nature, even if he evades all human detection, the ill is no less.

And even if all see, the ill is no greater. He is not hurt on account of an opinion in that case. Because of the truth of the matter.

So, Anderthon, very plainly, is on the side of people like Hesiod and Sophocles. So, the transition seems to become clear. Look at the top of page 60, and you see another paragraph there.

We revere and honor those born of noble fathers. But those who are not born of noble houses, we neither revere nor honor. In this, we are like barbarians.

Oh, heroic virtues don't count. You see? Noble birth. The aristocratic bearing.

Those don't count. We're like barbarians in that regard. We're all, by nature, born the same in every way, both barbarians and Greeks.

And it's open to all men to observe the law of nature, which is compulsory. So, the contrast then becomes pretty clear by the time we get that far. Any comment? Question? You see the kinds of questions that this raises.

Does philosophical disagreement, such as we see it among the pre-Socratics, does philosophical disagreement mean that the only outcome is going to be skepticism and relativism? About truth and goodness? No. Not necessarily. Is the only alternative to replace the pursuit of knowledge with rhetoric and the pursuit of power? No.

Not necessarily. But you notice, if there is to be another alternative, then we've got to have a theory of knowledge that can maintain that knowledge is possible. You see? Maybe the problem with the pre-Socratics was not that they were seeking knowledge, but that they weren't methodical enough about it.

They were speculating, taking shots in the dark. Sort of intellectual guesswork. Coming up with likely stories.

Rather than working through the problem, the issue, the difficulties, to some reason, a sort of conclusion. In other words, we need something of a methodology of knowing. Which the pre-Socratics apparently didn't have.

And it's precisely that which Plato and Aristotle address. Not only that, but they address that obvious need. And the attempt to understand the proper nature of knowledge in relationship to methodologies of knowing is, of course, the branch of philosophy that is known as epistemology.

And so, that part of the agenda for philosophy that was tacit in the pre-Socratics becomes an explicit part of the philosophical agenda. A major part of it. From Plato onwards.

Now, so far, I've talked about the pre-Socratics. And about the Sophists. Socrates is next.

Any questions or comments about the Sophists? Yeah. No. No, as you read the material in Stumpf, if you haven't done so yet, you'll find some observations about their style.

They weren't a school of thought in any organized sense. They weren't all in one location. The term Sophist means a wise one literally.

Because they claimed wisdom. They were popularly regarded as wise people. Who usually, in an itinerant fashion, spent time in one city, state, or another, teaching the youth.

Itinerant teachers. You see. And they purported to teach them about the good.

But what were they really doing? Well, you see, the complaint is that they're not teaching them knowledge of what is good and true. They're teaching them rhetorical skills. How to be successful in the public arena as an aristocratic young person.

How to get ahead in life. How to win friends and influence people. And so Plato treats them as if they are traitors to the heritage of truth and justice, which they should be spreading.

You see. Yeah. So no cooperation between them.

Rather, a spattering of people who developed these kinds of ideas. Okay, now, let me say some things about Socrates. I've been using the names of Socrates and Plato hitherto almost interchangeably.

Well, once again, read what Stumpf has to say. Socrates seems to have been regarded by the Athenians as another of these wise people, rather like the Sophists, who perhaps may have been associated in their minds as one of the same sort. That is to say, he was accepted in an indiscriminating way by his peers.

You see, as were also the Sophists. But Socrates was different. He was different.

He developed what has become known as the Socratic method. As he himself put it, he was following in the family trade. His mother was a midwife.

He said he's following in the same business. He's an intellectual midwife bringing to birth the brain children that people are pregnant with. The ideas that are formed in their minds need to get out into the open and be examined.

So he sees what he's doing as an exercise, and he's an intellectual midwifery. Why? So that in the pursuit of truth, the soul might be properly developed, nurtured, and disciplined. His main concern is not success, but the moral nurture of the human soul.

The care of the soul. And when we get to Plato, we'll see he follows. The improvement of the soul is what concerns Plato.

Oh, Plato apparently knew Socrates and picked up his method. He happened to have taught and written more systematically, and so Plato's writings have come down to us, and in many of the dialogues, Socrates is the principal character. So when we're talking about Socrates, we're talking really of the Socrates we know through Plato's dialogues.

A little bit is known about him independently through other Greek writers. Not much. So Socrates, in that sense, is the germinal thinker from whose work Plato's much larger and more systematic vision of things developed.

Well-known saying of Socrates, know thyself, because it is only when you know yourself, know the condition of your soul, that you can cultivate the further nurture

of your soul. And it's that cultivation, that care of the soul, that is his overwhelming concern. Now, in that undertaking, what does he do? One, he tries to get people thinking about the truth, about goodness, about virtues.

And if you look over the list of Platonic dialogues that I've given you, you'll notice that there are all sorts of dialogues on different questions and different virtues. The whole of Plato's Republic is about the question, what is justice? Oh, and it begins with a discussion going on between Socrates and some other Greeks, some of them Sophists, like Calicles and Thrasymachus. And it's in that context that Thrasymachus says, justice, oh, that's the interest of the stronger.

What do you mean by the interest? I mean, justice is what benefits the stronger, of course. The stronger. Yeah, those who have more power, more strength.

Oh, you mean then that if the slaves, being physically in better condition and physically stronger, could overthrow the rulers, then that would be perfectly just, because it's the interest of the stronger. No, I didn't say that. Well, what do you mean? And Thrasymachus is forced to qualify his initial statements, to modify his initial thoughtless hypothesis.

Now, that process of searching questions to force a person's line of thought to open up, to take it further and further, until self-contradictions are exposed or ridiculous conclusions come into the open, or else the truth begins to emerge, reasonable, plausible, consistent. That's the Socratic method. That's the intellectual midwifery.

That's the beginning of the kind of method that Plato calls dialectic. Now, don't associate that with any notion of a Marxist dialectic, thesis, antithesis, synthesis. That's a later use of the term.

This notion of dialectic is literally rooted in the etymology of the term. They've got the verb lego to think. Logos, of course, is the noun correlative with it.

Dia is the preposition through. So dialectic is simply thinking something through. Nothing very fancy about that.

Thinking something through. But thinking it through by probing, what do you mean when you say that? What does that imply? Is that logically consistent with this? What further implication follows? Once in a while, we try the Socratic method in class. I usually try it on the first day of my intro course.

Before I hand out a syllabus, some of you remember this, I write on the board the word philosophy and say, " Well, you signed up for this course, you're intelligent people, you know why you signed up, tell me what philosophy is? I get some rough definition, obviously going to be sort of half-baked, as some of you remember. And

using the Socratic method, we question and challenge this, that, and the other, and gradually refine until we have something to live with for a while. Socratic method.

I had a teacher in graduate school who would use it periodically. I remember once in an advanced seminar on some recent work in philosophy, I made some comment about the stuff we were reading, and the professor said, " All right, go on. So I stumbled upon another thought.

All right, now what comes next? Push, push, push. Think, man, think. Dialectic, thinking it through.

Okay, so that's the method. What is he after? Knowing the truth, in Socrates' case, about moral ideals, about the virtues. What is justice? What is love? What about friendship? Courage? So on and so forth.

So, Socrates' contribution is significant. Now, you know the story of Socrates. How he was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens.

Sure, it's dangerous business to teach people to think. Yeah, parents and constituencies don't always like it when their young people start thinking things that they don't want them to think. Well, it's an age-old problem.

Don't go into education if you want untroubled waters to sail in the rest of your life. But on the other hand, in the case of Socrates, he was willing to take it. And he refused even, at the end, to back away in order to escape execution.

And even when given an opportunity to escape the night before, he refused. Says he, in his apology, and that section is not assigned, but it is in the text, page 90, the difficulty is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness. To renege on what he had been doing because he believed it was right, to renege on that, treachery, to the truth.

And, says he, in another place, will life be worth living if that higher part of man is destroyed, the soul, which is improved by justice, but depraved by injustice? It sounds almost as if it's the same thing that Jesus said, what will a man profit if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? You see? Plato's concern, Socrates' concern, is there. What medicine and exercise are to the body, good laws and the administration of justice are to the soul.

And, as is implied in this, he sees the role of the city-state in this regard, the function of government, and his political thinking. Indeed, in Plato's writings, you find that the famous Athenian statesman and orator, Pericles, is called to task. Oh, Plato thinks that Pericles was great because he gave attention to reason and to virtue, and he cited Anaxagoras and the concept of reason and nous ruling all things.

And, in his domestic policy, Pericles did a pretty tolerable job. But, on the other hand, in his relationships with other states, the key to what he did was not justice, equal justice for all, as it was in his domestic policy, but power! You see? And, even at home, some of his policies of what and how they rewarded citizens for generating idleness and avarice. But, particularly in his foreign policy, he seems to have operated on the policy that justice means doing good to your friends and evil to your enemies.

Justice means doing good to your friends and evil to your enemies. Plato wouldn't have that. You see? No, because Pericles misused his powerful rhetoric.

He should have used it to implant temperance and justice in people's souls and to take away all thought of injustice. And, he didn't. And, he hovered in his career between the tradition of the relativist rhetorician, okay? And, the rational appeal of those who believe that there is such a thing as objective justice rooted in the nature of things.

Pericles. Oh, Plato criticizes the poets. Homer.

Oh, listen. He had no experience as a statesman or military advisor, yet he writes about all that stuff, just copying other people. He doesn't have any judgments of his own to make.

Homer. You see, that's one of the reasons why he says that art is just a copy of something. Homer just copied.

Copycat Homer. But he's particularly critical of the sophists. You see? With their rhetoric, they sought wealth and power.

They could make no meaningful distinction between good and evil. And, running through Plato's writings, there is this critique of sophistical rhetoric. Yeah.

The rhetoric of the sophists. Way on into Aristotle. Aristotle talks of the errors of the sophists.

And, even in the English language, nowadays, we have the word sophistry. Fancy-sounding talk that really isn't very rational is Sophistry.