

# History of Philosophy

## 03 The Greek Sophists

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#### Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines the **Greek Sophists** as a reactionary movement against the **pre-Socratics**. While earlier thinkers sought a **metaphysical grounding for morality**, the Sophists embraced **skepticism and relativism**, arguing that truth is subjective and reality is unknowable. They shifted the focus from the pursuit of knowledge to the **practice of rhetoric**, using persuasion to achieve personal success and political power. Figures like **Protagoras and Gorgias** epitomized this shift by claiming that man is the measure of all things and that morality is merely a **social convention**. In contrast, **Socrates** emerged as a critic of this approach, developing a **dialectical method** to seek objective truth and the moral cultivation of the soul. Ultimately, the source highlights how this ancient conflict between **reason and manipulative speech** established the foundational agenda for Western epistemology and ethics.

#### Briefing Document:

##### The Greek Sophists: Philosophical Skepticism, Rhetoric, and the Socratic Reaction

##### Executive Summary

The emergence of the Sophists marks a pivotal shift in Greek thought, characterized by a transition from pre-Socratic cosmological speculation to a focused interest in practical affairs, rhetoric, and ethical relativism. While pre-Socratic philosophers sought a "metaphysical grounding of morals"—attempting to align the ordered unity of nature with human morality—the Sophists largely rejected the possibility of knowing objective reality.

This briefing outlines the core tenets of Sophism, including the prioritization of rhetoric over theoretical science, the move toward ethical relativism, and the specific doctrines of key figures such as Protagoras and Gorgias. It further examines the subsequent Socratic reaction, which sought to reclaim the pursuit of truth through the "Socratic method" and a dedication to the nurture of the human soul. The document concludes by noting the enduring legacy of this conflict in the development of epistemology and modern ethical theory.

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## The Sophistic Reaction to Pre-Socratic Thought

The Sophists rose in reaction against the pre-Socratic tradition. Where earlier thinkers sought to understand *Physis* (nature or "what is") as an ordered unity, the Sophists introduced a thoroughgoing skepticism regarding the possibility of attaining such knowledge.

### Skeptical Foundations

The Sophistic rejection of pre-Socratic cosmology was rooted in several philosophical observations:

- **Incompatibility and Incommensurability:** The Sophists argued that the various pre-Socratic positions (such as those of monists versus pluralists) were fundamentally incompatible and could not be reconciled or even translated into one another's conceptual languages.
- **Equipollence of Arguments:** This principle asserts that for any given position, the arguments in favor carry no more weight than the arguments against it. This leads to a cancellation of conflicting views, resulting in the conclusion that truth is unattainable.
- **Rejection of Natural Moral Law:** Contrary to the pre-Socratic attempt to ground ethics in the nature of reality, Sophists viewed morality as "conventional"—a product of social agreement, social practice, or social contract rather than a reflection of natural order.

### The Practice of Rhetoric and Practical Success

Disillusioned with the pursuit of theoretical "science" (defined as theoretical knowledge), the Sophists turned to the practice of **rhetoric**.

- **Rhetoric vs. Philosophy:** Sophists prioritized the ability to persuade by non-logical means over the pursuit of truth or justice. Their goal was success in public life, winning debates, and achieving influence.
- **Manipulative Intent:** Rhetoric was viewed as a tool to appeal to emotions rather than reason. Gorgias described the power of speech as equivalent to "abduction by force" or the effect of "drugs on the bodily state," capable of making any impression on the soul.

- **Instruction for Profit:** As itinerant teachers, Sophists sold their services to the aristocratic youth, claiming to teach "wisdom" and "the good," which critics like Plato argued was merely the teaching of rhetorical skills for political advancement.

### Profiles of Key Sophistic Thinkers

The following table summarizes the primary contributions and positions of the most influential Sophists and their contemporaries:

Figure	Central Doctrine / Quote	Key Philosophy
<b>Protagoras</b>	"Man is the measure of all things."	Radical relativism; truth is a matter of "making" rather than "discovery."
<b>Gorgias</b>	Nothing exists; if it did, it would be unknowable; if knowable, it would be incommunicable.	Extreme skepticism; highlighted the gap between speech and the things perceived by sense organs.
<b>Thrasymachus</b>	"Justice is the interest of the stronger."	Ethical relativism based on power; might makes right.
<b>Antiphon</b>	Contrast between "edicts of laws" and "edicts of nature."	Argued that nature's laws are compulsory and violation brings harm regardless of detection, unlike human laws.

#### Protagoras and Agnosticism

Protagoras extended his skepticism to the divine, stating that he was unable to know if the gods exist or what they are like, citing the "obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life." His dictum regarding man as the "measure" suggests that individual perception is the final judge of reality and non-reality.

#### Gorgias and the Power of Speech

Gorgias argued that speech is distinct from the things that exist. Because we communicate with speech and not with the objects themselves, information about "perceptibles" cannot be truly transmitted. He viewed speech as a "great power" that could put a stop to fear and remove grief, yet he also saw it as a tool for manipulation that could "make the weaker cause the stronger."

#### The Socratic Counter-Movement

Socrates (and later Plato) emerged as the primary opponents to Sophistry, viewing their relativism as a betrayal of truth and justice.

### **The Socratic Method (Dialectic)**

Socrates described himself as an "intellectual midwife," following a family trade of bringing ideas to birth so they could be examined.

- **Dialectic:** Derived from *dia* (through) and *lego* (to think), dialectic is the process of "thinking something through" via probing questions.
- **Purpose:** The method aims to expose self-contradictions and refine hypotheses until a plausible, consistent truth emerges.
- **Focus:** Unlike the Sophists, Socrates used this method to seek objective definitions of virtues such as justice, love, and courage.

### **The Care of the Soul**

Socrates' primary concern was the "moral nurture of the human soul." He famously urged, "Know thyself," asserting that life is not worth living if the soul—improved by justice and depraved by injustice—is destroyed. He argued that the difficulty in life is not avoiding death, but avoiding "unrighteousness."

### **Political Critique**

The Socratic/Platonic tradition criticized contemporary leaders and poets for failing to uphold objective justice:

- **Pericles:** Criticized for a foreign policy based on power rather than justice, and for using rhetoric to reward citizens in ways that generated "idleness and avarice."
- **Homer:** Dismissed as a "copycat" who wrote about statesmanship and military matters without actual experience or independent judgment.

### **Conclusion: The Legacy of Sophistry**

The conflict between the Sophists and the Socratic tradition established the "philosophical agenda" for subsequent history. The need to respond to Sophistic skepticism led directly to the development of **epistemology**—the study of the nature and methodology of knowledge. While the term "Sophist" originally meant a "wise one," its association with rhetorical manipulation has left a lasting legacy in the English language, where "sophistry" denotes fancy-sounding talk that lacks rational substance.

## Study Guide:

### A Comprehensive Study Guide: The Greek Sophists and the Socratic Reaction

This study guide explores the transition in Greek thought from the cosmological speculations of the pre-Socratics to the skepticism and rhetoric of the Sophists, concluding with the philosophical methodology established by Socrates and Plato. The document synthesizes the historical shift from seeking a metaphysical grounding for morals to the relativism of the Sophist era and the eventual birth of formal epistemology.

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#### Part I: Philosophical Context and the Sophist Shift

Historically, the pre-Socratic philosophers sought to understand the "ordered unity" of nature, the city-state, and the individual's moral life. This endeavor provided a **metaphysical grounding for morals**, suggesting that ethics were rooted in the very nature of reality.

The Sophists emerged in reaction to this tradition. They were characterized by a deep skepticism toward the possibility of knowing objective truth about reality (*nature* or *physis*). This skepticism was fueled by several observations:

- **Incompatibility/Incommensurability:** The various pre-Socratic theories (monism, pluralism, etc.) were often mutually exclusive and could not be translated or reconciled with one another.
- **Equipollence of Arguments:** The Sophists noted that arguments for a position often carried no more weight than arguments against it, effectively canceling each other out.
- **Practicality over Theory:** Abandoning the pursuit of theoretical knowledge (then called "science"), the Sophists turned toward the practice of **rhetoric**—the art of persuasion by non-logical means.

While pre-Socratics sought truth and justice, the Sophists prioritized success, winning debates, and achieving power. They viewed morality not as a natural law, but as **conventional**—a relativistic matter of social agreement or "social contract."

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#### Part II: Key Sophist Thinkers and Concepts

##### Protagoras

Protagoras is best known for the dictum, "**Man is the measure of all things.**" This suggests that the individual is the judge of reality; truth is something humans "make" rather than "discover." He also expressed profound skepticism regarding the divine, citing the "obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life" as barriers to knowing if gods exist.

### **Gorgias**

Gorgias represented an extreme form of skepticism and nihilism. His thought is summarized in three points:

1. Nothing exists.
2. If anything exists, it is incomprehensible (unknowable).
3. If it is comprehensible, it is incommunicable (cannot be shared via speech).

Gorgias argued that speech is distinct from the things it describes; therefore, we communicate only speech, not reality. He viewed rhetoric as a "great power" akin to a drug, capable of manipulating the soul through emotional appeal rather than rational persuasion.

### **Thrasymachus**

A character often appearing in Platonic dialogues, Thrasymachus is associated with the claim that "**justice is the interest of the stronger.**" This perspective views morality as a tool used by those in power to maintain their status, a precursor to modern "might makes right" philosophies.

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## **Part III: The Socratic and Platonic Reaction**

Socrates distinguished himself from the Sophists by focusing on the **care of the soul** rather than the pursuit of wealth or political success. He believed that the improvement of the soul required knowledge of moral ideals and virtues.

- **The Socratic Method (Intellectual Midwifery):** Socrates likened himself to a midwife, helping others "bring to birth" ideas already formed in their minds. Through probing questions, he forced individuals to examine their hypotheses, exposing contradictions and refining their thoughts.
- **Dialectic:** Rooted in the term *dialegesthai* (thinking something through), this method involves rigorous logical inquiry to move beyond "intellectual guesswork" toward plausible, consistent truths.

- **Epistemology:** The conflict between Sophist relativism and the pursuit of truth led Plato and Aristotle to develop formal methodologies of knowing. They aimed to move philosophy from mere speculation to a systematic discipline.
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#### Part IV: Review Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the source context.

1. What is meant by the "metaphysical grounding of morals" in the pre-Socratic tradition?
  2. How did the Sophists use the concept of "equipollence" to justify skepticism?
  3. Why did the Sophists prefer the study of rhetoric over the pursuit of science?
  4. Explain Protagoras's belief that "Man is the measure of all things."
  5. What are the three main pillars of Gorgias's skeptical argument?
  6. According to Gorgias, why is it impossible to communicate knowledge of reality?
  7. How does Thrasymachus define "justice"?
  8. How does Antiphon's view of "natural law" differ from the Sophist view of "conventional law"?
  9. Describe the primary goal of the "Socratic method."
  10. Why did Plato criticize the statesman Pericles?
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#### Part V: Answer Key

1. **Metaphysical grounding of morals** refers to the pre-Socratic attempt to base ethical life on the inherent order and nature of reality. It suggests a parallel between the ordered unity of the universe, the state, and an individual's moral conduct.
2. **Equipollence** is the idea that arguments for and against a specific position have equal weight or force. Because these arguments cancel each other out, the Sophists concluded that certain knowledge of the truth is impossible to achieve.
3. The Sophists viewed theoretical knowledge as unattainable and impractical for the demands of public life. They preferred **rhetoric** because it provided the tools for

persuasion, political success, and winning arguments, which they valued over abstract truth.

4. **Protagoras** meant that truth is relative to the individual perceiver rather than an objective reality to be discovered. This dictum suggests that humans "make" their own truth and values based on their own perspectives and experiences.
5. **Gorgias's skepticism** is built on the claims that nothing exists; if something did exist, it would be unknowable; and if it were knowable, it could never be communicated to another person. This represents a complete rejection of metaphysical and epistemological certainty.
6. Gorgias argued that **speech is not the same as the things that exist** in the world. Since we communicate through speech and not the objects themselves, and because sense organs cannot share information with one another, speech can never accurately represent or transmit our perceptions of reality.
7. **Thrasymachus** argued that justice is merely the "interest of the stronger," effectively meaning that those with power define what is right and wrong to benefit themselves. This view reduces morality to a function of political and physical might.
8. Antiphon argued that **state laws** are artificially imposed by consent and can be evaded without penalty if no one is watching. In contrast, the **edicts of nature** are compulsory and carry internal consequences; violating them causes harm regardless of whether the violation is detected by others.
9. The **Socratic method**, or intellectual midwifery, aims to bring a person's latent ideas into the open for critical examination. Its purpose is to nurture and discipline the soul by exposing contradictions and pursuing clear, consistent knowledge of virtues like justice and courage.
10. Plato criticized **Pericles** for using his rhetorical skills to pursue power in foreign policy rather than justice. He believed Pericles failed to implant temperance and virtue in the souls of the citizens, focusing instead on policies that encouraged idleness and avarice.

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## Part VI: Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Use the following prompts to develop deeper analytical responses. (Answers not provided).

1. Compare and contrast the Sophist view of morality as "conventional" with the pre-Socratic and Socratic view of morality as "natural" or "rooted in reality."
2. Analyze the role of rhetoric in Sophist society. Is the "manipulation of emotion" inherently at odds with the "pursuit of truth," or can the two coexist?
3. Gorgias presents a radical skepticism regarding existence and communication. Evaluate his argument that speech can never represent "perceptibles."
4. Discuss the significance of the Socratic method as a transition from "intellectual guesswork" to a formal "methodology of knowing" (epistemology).
5. Explain why Socrates and Plato considered the "care of the soul" to be the highest priority of philosophy, and how this belief informed their critique of contemporary Greek politics and art.

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#### Part VII: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
<b>Conventionalism</b>	The Sophist view that morality and law are products of social agreement and custom rather than inherent natural truths.
<b>Dialectic</b>	From the Greek <i>dia</i> (through) and <i>lego</i> (to think); the process of thinking a matter through to a logical conclusion via rigorous questioning.
<b>Epistemology</b>	The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge and the methodologies of knowing.
<b>Equipollence</b>	A state where opposing arguments for a single issue are of equal weight, leading to a suspension of judgment or skepticism.
<b>Incommensurability</b>	The quality of two or more philosophical positions being so different that they cannot be compared, translated, or reconciled.
<b>Intellectual Midwifery</b>	The Socratic approach to teaching, where the teacher helps the student bring forth and examine their own internal ideas.
<b>Metaphysical Grounding</b>	The philosophical attempt to base human values, ethics, and social structures on the fundamental nature of reality.

<b>Nihilism</b>	A radical skepticism, exemplified by Gorgias, that suggests nothing has real existence or intrinsic value.
<b>Physis</b>	The Greek term for "nature" or "what is," representing the objective reality that philosophers sought to understand.
<b>Rhetoric</b>	The art of persuasion through speech, often appealing to emotions and "non-logical" means rather than rational argument.
<b>Sophistry</b>	Historically, the teachings of the Sophists; in modern usage, fancy-sounding talk or arguments that are clever but lack rational validity.