



The Influence of the Sophists on Rousseau's Thought

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Commentary

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The Sophists were the creators of an important Enlightenment movement in ancient Greece, which characterized an era of great spiritual activity centred on the city of Athens in the 5th century BC. Century¹, in which time was the focus of the democratic economic and spiritual life of the ancient Greek world. The first to use the term Enlightenment for the sophistry of the above century was Hegel in his work *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der philosophie*. In this work Hegel expresses the view that with the sophist's philosophical discourse took on an objective substance².

Rousseau was the first in modern times who brought back to the forefront of philosophy something that the sophists (especially Antiphon) had pointed out since antiquity, the separation of the concepts of law (positive) and nature (natural law). The sophists "brought down" philosophy from heaven to earth and they were the first to separate political law from nature. Their philosophical interest is centred on man, unlike Pre-Socratic philosophy, which focused on nature.

According to the sophist Protagoras, man is the measure of all things. In addition to their humanity, the sophists offered other important things to our culture, such as their positions on the equality of all people and justice. In the sophists we also find the theory of natural law, as well as the first critique of the institution of slavery. Most sophists were not Athenians³ and were therefore excluded from the city's political affairs

and treated with contempt because they were wanderers and provided their services in exchange for money. However, they played an important role in the education of young Athenians and contributed significantly to the creation of the ideology of the city⁴. In the following centuries, however, due to the war against them and the predominance of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, sophistic positions and views were relegated to the background and eventually neglected.

The main source of the views of the sophists is the works of Plato, such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Sophist and others. In his work, Plato sets out the beliefs of the sophists not to support and defend them, but to refute them. It presents the conflict of their views with the views of Socrates, who ultimately prevails. This one-sidedness of Plato also highlights a difficulty in approaching the real work and views of the sophists.

Plato's attitude certainly wrongs the sophists and above all does not allow scholars to form an objective opinion. But despite the little information available about them, recent research has shed much light on their true views and positions. Today, albeit with a long delay, the sophists are treated as authentic thinkers, whose thought had a significant influence on the formation of Western thought.

The sophists put the individual at the center of developments, both theoretically and practically. The individual, they put him at the center of their philosophical contemplation, secondary to their interest in the forces that created and ruled the universe. They threw their weight on human abilities, on their cognitive powers, bringing to light all the dimensions of human existence, always guided by worldly things, away from metaphysical or natural interpretations and prejudices with their presence, a new democratic reality

1 Sinclair TA (2012) A History of Greek political thought. Routledge, pp: 61. Κύρκος. Ancient Greek Enlightenment and sophistry. Athens, Papadimas 1986, p. 39 et seq.

2 Κύρκος AB ibid, pp: 45-46.

3 Here are some: Protagoras was from Avdera, Prodicus from Keio, Thrasy machos from Chalcedon, Gorgias from Leontini, Ippias from Ilia, Evinos from Paros, Diagoras from Milos, Theodoros from Byzantium etc.

4 Vegetti M (2001) History of ancient philosophy, pp: 123.

was created in Athens, which emerged from the changes of previous centuries. The need for persuasion in the Church of the Municipality made rhetorical ability necessary. The sophists met this need by teaching the art of rhetoric. The term sophist is directly related to teaching, because it comes from the verb "I am wise, which means to teach, I make sure to become wise, I train".

An important contribution of the sophists to the research and interpretation of social phenomenon and institutions was their understanding of the treaty, the social contract an issue that has preoccupied many younger philosophers such as Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau and others. The search for the interpretation and examination of this concept in Greek Antiquity must be done in the context of the law-nature scheme. According to Aristotle, the concept of the social contract is connected with the sophist Lycophron, who called the law "treaty" and guarantor of law within the state⁵.

As Plato writes in the Protagoras dialogue, the idea of a treaty, a common agreement between people is older than the sophists. Specifically, Plato mentions the myth of the common agreement of people where everyone participates in the gift of Zeus, political art⁶. This cohabitation requires the acceptance of certain common rules of conduct. This requirement is most evident to the sophist of Antiphon, where it is based on or derived from the laws, which are the result of a common agreement of the citizens⁷.

In Protagoras, Plato quotes the myth of Prometheus⁸, who stole fire and wisdom and gave them to people. This is why the man did not have any innate system of defence and instincts for self-preservation, but he was physically inferior and so his survival depended purely on his intelligence. The fire given to him by Prometheus, however, was not secured from the wild beasts and he had to organize in cities. In this fact Protagoras attributes the aggression of the people and the tendency of some to impose and exploit the many⁹. Here we can compare Rousseau's views on the opportunity given by the social impulses of humanity to the few capable and unconscious to exploit the many. In order to prevent this situation, the intervention of Zeus was needed, who gave people the shame and their own, that is, conscience and justice, to all. Only on this basis is political coexistence possible.

5 Aristotle. Politics, 1280b 8 For Lycophronas see Mulgan RE. «Lycophron and Greek theorie of social contract» History of Ideas, v. 40 (1979), pp: 121-128.

6 Plato. Protagoras. Athens, Patakis, 1985, 323a and 324e

7 Kupkoc AB ..., *ibid.*, pp: 223.

8 Starobinski J. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction. University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp: 22-36.

9 Taylor. AE Plato: man and his work. Athens, MIET, 2009, pp: 288.

In the Enlightenment sophists of antiquity we find the most varied views and evaluative positions on the question of whether or not the course of the human species is determined. For instance, if it is possible to place nature higher than the law or vice versa some sophists viewed the development of civilization and social progress with the assistance of the law (such as Protagoras) with optimism and faith. Others saw that the help of nature was necessary for this, the primordial and only happy state for man (like Hesiod before the sophists).

Between these two perspectives, the progressive and the romantic, escalated various other theories and evaluations, such as those of the younger philosophers, such as T. Hobbes (1588-1679), J. Locke (1632-1704), D. Hume (1711-1776), C. Montesquieu (1689-1755) and J. J. Rousseau, "who renovated the old theoretical forms in modern times"¹⁰.

Although the original conception of the social contract dates back to the ancient Greeks¹¹, in modern philosophical thought the theory of the social contract was renewed and promoted as the foundation of political thought by the English empiricists Locke and Hobbes, while it became a central concept of Rousseau's political philosophy in project of the Social Contract. The concept of social contract also depends on the concept of natural law, which also traces its origins to ancient Greece and the sophists. Rousseau was the first in modern times who brought back to the forefront of philosophy something that the sophists (especially Antiphon) had pointed out since antiquity, the separation of the concepts of law and nature. According to Rousseau, the physical state of man was a state of freedom and peace, but the laws of civilized societies alienate man and take him away from nature. The consequence of this removal is his misery¹².

In his critique of law and nature, the French philosopher draws his examples from the earlier stages of development of human societies¹³. Sources of his arguments against the laws are nature and the ancient Greek city. The sophists did not reject myth as a pedagogical tool for educational purposes, but Rousseau's thought is radically opposed to myth, but it is not free of political utopias. But the gap created by the myth in modern European thought came to be filled by the political myth, that is, the mythologization of political ideology and the party¹⁴. The relationship between the individual and the

10 Plato. Protagoras, *ibid.*, p. 394.

11 Kahn CH "The origins of social contract theory", The Sophists and their legacy. Wiesbaden, 1981, pp: 92

12 Rousseau JJ. The Social Contract. Harmondsworth, Renguin, 1968, I, 2.

13 Pantazakos PN. Freedom of will and moral values in Plethon, Rousseau and Wittgenstein. Athens, Greek Letters. 2006, pp: 46.

14 Kupkoc AB, *ibid.*, pp: 52-53, footnote. 30.

community within the democratic state is the subject of the interactive debate between Protagoras and Socrates, where they are concerned with the question of political virtue and whether it is instructive.

Rousseau's view of the man-state "partnership" was long supported by the sophist Lycophron, who argued that the law is a treaty or convention that guarantees citizens the right to their relations or transactions but the law does not have the power to make citizens good and virtuous. Aristotle writes that according to Lycophron, political society is an alliance of citizens with each other, which differs from other alliances between cities only in the distance of the places where the allies live¹⁵.

15 Aristotle mentions him in *Politika* (1080b 8): good and just citizens

Rousseau shares Twilight's thought. Although he believes that man, although guided by his senses, desires and needs for the purpose of self-preservation, is possessed by natural goodness. However, the conclusion of the Social Contract is not an act of good people, but a social need to address all the problems caused by the culturally corrupt selfish human nature. Thus we have the transformation of natural persons into citizens. This makes them part of a political whole, who not only not lose their freedom, but by obeying the laws, they essentially obey their self-legislation. Every citizen, although forming a single body with other citizens, will in fact obey only his own will and will remain as free as he was before¹⁶. In other words, this power of the political body does not come from some metaphysical principle or source, but from the community itself for the sake of peace and security.

16 Rousseau JJ *The Social Contract* 6(1): 4.

