

1. THE BACKGROUND

The word sophist has given us our word "sophistry" which can be defined as using false arguments with the intention to deceive, i.e. using emotional language and false logic to make a poor or erroneous case plausible.

Originally however a sophist simply meant a wise man and/or a teacher of wisdom; to be wise/a sophist meant being an expert at some art/craft;

So a sophist in early Greece might be a skilled artisan/artist/physician/prophet/ poet/thinker:

Thus: Solon; Pythagoras; Homer were all in their different ways "sophists".

And in early days too the family was the centre of life within the city - the "polis" the community into which the families had gathered for security and economic survival. The "core subjects" in the educational system in Athens at that time (where families were strictly divided into oligarchic-landed aristocracy- and the demos = everyone else in a semi-feudal system) were the poetry of Homer - or the epic poets; music - the lyre and lyric; and athletics - educating body mind and spirit, and largely touching the aristocratic families only.

For the community life, it was claimed, "The polis educates man".

But by the mid-5th century things had changed; the family bonds within the polis community had been weakened for various reasons:

eg. 1. The polis was larger; there were more people living in it, with many foreign settlers and visitors.

2. Economic changes had turned Athens from a self-sufficient country of small farmers, renting land from the large land-owners into a commercially biased state, dependant on trade for the livelihood of many people; wealth was no longer measured in land but in investments and profits. Aristocrats were no longer the only wealthy men.

3. This had brought social change too: the classes of the demos no longer felt subservient to the aristocrats (i.e. the oligarchs); the Hippeis and Zeugitae classes were often involved on their own account in business; even the poorest class, the thetes, had more opportunities for regular work with the growth of the Athenians' fleet.

4. Political change had been even more marked; democracy was now in full sway; Pericles had introduced pay for the jurors, the Assembly was the place where any one could try to get his ideas accepted by others; the use of the lottery system meant that the chance of serving on the Council of the state (the Boule) was open to all citizens. Pericles and most of the leading figures of his generation had been of oligarchic family, with the old educational traditions behind them; but with Pericles' death, and the general disenchantment brought by the great plague of Athens and lack of success in the Peloponnesian War, a new kind of politician began to emerge - the demagogue - the skilful orator, crowd-pleaser, or rabble-rouser.

The city was no longer the civilising influence it had been; family bonds were loosened; the old style education no longer fitted the new-style community.

2. THE COMING OF THE SOPHISTS

Who filled the gap?

The Sophists tried to; their deliberate policy was to educate the young men to fill their proper place in society. They were the first teachers to travel from their own cities to other cities - notably Athens as being the largest, most prosperous Greek city on the mainland; they travelled as individuals not representatives of a particular school, or even school of thought. They did not all share the same views or standards.

They were the first teachers to charge high fees for their instruction - hence they appealed to the wealthy, the landed aristocrats and the commercial successes.

So we have men without any personal ties of citizenship teaching citizens how to live in accordance with the ties of citizenship. This is one, but only one, of the reasons for the hostility shown them by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle (and Socrates?). But we must not make the mistake of lumping all Sophists together, as Plato tends to do; they represented a wide range of skills, opinions, standards, and no doubt ability to teach.

3. THEIR TEACHING

What do we actually know about them?

In general:

1. The central thrust of their teaching was based on Man; and the way he lives - man as a "political animal" - which has nothing to do with politics as we think of it, but refers to man's need/preference for community living.
2. They were influenced by earlier thinkers, the poets (especially ones like Solon who used social and political themes), and the pre-Socratic philosophers.
3. They preferred in general to adopt the direct approach to the live audience, i.e. the debate or lecture, rather than the book or pamphlet (though they did write, as we learn from the "Apology"). But their reluctance to leave written records, for whatever reason, is a major cause of our lack of knowledge about their teaching.
4. Their teaching emphasised the importance of speech and thought i.e. they taught communication studies. Most if not all of them claimed the ability to train people to:
 - (a) speak persuasively
 - (b) argue both sides of a case

From the philosophic angle:

1. Most important was their claim that "virtue" (Greek -arete) - the quality of living life as it should be lived in accordance with principles of wisdom, justice, courage, piety and self-control - was based on knowledge and therefore could be taught: i.e. their teaching was practical about the practice of living.
2. Many had a sceptical attitude, denying the possibility of any universal basic truths
i.e. they argued: every man is entitled to his own opinion until/unless he can be persuaded to change
For example: the laws of a city are man-made; the existence of those laws depends on men agreeing to keep and observe them; if the agreement no longer exists, the laws are no longer valid.

From the social/political angle:

These professional teachers offering "political skills" for a price naturally attracted the politically ambitious; most of their pupils were the sons of the wealthy and the aristocrats - i.e. the top two classes of Athenian society. The emphasis on rhetoric and the arts of oral communication meant that the way was opened up for a successful career in politics; convincing the masses was no longer in the gift of the inspired amateur, but in the training of the wealthy sophist-trained élite.

4. SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR TEACHING

Practical result of sophistic teaching:

Plus points:

1. Many provided wide and varied teaching; they were true "polymaths"
2. They offered a civilised personal culture to support the individual lifestyle.
3. They emphasised persuasion rather than violence as a way of winning an argument.
4. They opened up new possibilities for a generation which knew nothing but war.

Minus points:

1. They often made their pupils think that they could achieve anything, simply by using their skill in argument.
2. Their determination to see both/all sides of a question led to changes in interpretation of moral questions; morality became a question of the rights of the stronger.
3. Traditionally, society had depended on accepted codes of behaviour and practice; that society was breaking down, and the sophists' relativist approach to moral questions hastened its decline.
4. The teaching of the Sophists widened the generation gap which the Peloponnesian War had done much to cause; older people had been left high and dry by the losses of the plague and the fighting; the oligarchs had been ousted by upstarts of poor family and little education (compare the wealthy aristocrat of dignified persuasive speech Pericles with the ranting tanner Cleon - both incidentally were imperialists through and through); the old ways, the old community, was ruined by the war; it was every man for himself now; individualism was the coming "ism" - in thought, art and life.