

## Major differences between the characters of the natural philosophers and the Sophists

### I. INTRODUCTION

In this short essay I would like to present the main differences between Greek natural philosophers and the Sophists not only from theoretical point of view but also regarding the differences between them because either were very different from each other. The consequence could be surprising because in the first period of the Western European philosophy thinkers were possible similar characters. At the beginning of philosophy we find major controversies but I believe that this aspect is very specific to ancient philosophical styles because that is the time when philosophical discussion was born. In connection with this period we cannot even talk about systematic philosophy. In my publication I first describe the main periods of the ancient Greek philosophy, secondly, I present the major differences between natural philosophers and Sophists, finally, I also focus on why it all started to change.

### II. THE CHRONOLOGICAL PRESENTATION OF THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The ancient Greek philosophy is divided into three main periods (i) presocratic, (ii) classic and finally, (iii) the Hellenistic period.

(i) The first era started in 7th century B.C. and ended with Socrates' trial and death; with regards to this this period we can list two classes of ancient philosophers (a) natural philosophers like Aristotle who was not contemporary of Socrates and (b) Sophists who were strongly criticized by Socrates. The natural philosophers were interested in the physical phenomena; they researched the genesis and the function of the cosmos, they rejected the mythological explanations of the natural phenomena, they were interested in more rational interpretations. The object of their research was exclusively the nature; they did not deal with moral or political questions. The most known names are Thales, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Zenon of Elea, Empedocles and the atomist, Democritus of Abdera. The second class of the philosophers from this period were the sophists. They were not occupied by natural philosophy; the principle problem that

agitated them was the human itself, the acting man, simply, the citizen. The philosophical aim of the sophist movement was to prove that the social rules of living together in a polis depended on human conventions not on God's annunciation. The primary issue what concerned them was how the well functioning legal rules operate in a polis, that is why the sophists were mainly preoccupied by pedagogy, rhetoric and politics. They were the first professional teachers in the ancient Greece in the 5th and 6th century B.C. This era is when the Athenian democracy was born. The most popular sophist of this time, for example Damon, Gorgias, Protagoras, lived in Athens. They turned away from the natural philosophy and natural science; they were more interested in human life. In the second part of the essay I will present the details of the natural philosophy and the Sophist theory.

(ii) The second period of ancient philosophy is marked by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They were the main figures, this is why we call this era the classical ancient philosophy. The three of them are the most well-known philosophers not because of their arguing style but also because of their philosophical thesis in connection with metaphysics, ethics, politics and psychology. They were the first systematical philosophers in the true meaning of the name, they established the primary concepts of philosophy for example the idea of the forms, the substance, the episteme and logic. Socrates did not leave behind written materials; we only have a few information about his life and thinkings from his contemporaries, first of all, from Plato and Xenophon. Although Socrates did not leave lengthy works behind, we still have several useful information in connection with his life and philosophical thinking. Its obvious explanation is his unbelievable popularity. His contemporaries and his late followers all wanted to make sure that the master's memory would never fade away. Socrates' way of life, especially his death made his whole oeuvre authentic; he forever became the example of standing up for one's own principles. Socrates' personality was not exclusively considered as positive among his own contemporaries either; its obvious reason is his philosophical style, more precisely, his irony.

Along with Socrates and Aristotle, Plato also had a very important philosophical foundation. Plato established the first university named the Academy. The function of this philosophical school was to create memory for his beloved teacher, Socrates. After Socrates' trial and death his followers started to spread all the philosophical teachings of the master. Plato wrote 36 dialogues and except a few Socrates is the main character in all of them so we cannot really separate each other. Plato's philosophical issues are the same of Socrates: how to live a happy life in a community, how to govern ourselves against passions, what is the best method to gain knowledge, how to become wise. Plato's modern interpreter, Whitehead said that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes from Plato. In this short analysis we could not introduce the platonic theories, we are only pleased to mention some substantial themes from his rich oeuvre; in consequence, we should thank him the theory of the form and the theory of the ideal state, moreover, he was the first thinker who used the name

‘state’ referring to the human community. Along with Plato and Socrates, in the second period of the Greek philosophy we also have to talk about Aristotle, who was Plato’s most well-known pupil. Just like Plato, Aristotle also created his own philosophical school in Athens, named the Lykeion. This institute was different from Plato’s Academy. As we know it from Diogenes Laertius, lectures were held out doors in a little bosket.<sup>[1]</sup> However, not only this one thing was the difference; they very different from each in many ways. Even though Aristotle was Plato’s pupil, he was also his main controversialist. In his work, entitled the *Metaphysics* he gives a short analysis of the theory of forms with a critical tone. Aristotle talks about the problem that the platonic thinkers created a double world: one for ideas and a physical world. According to Plato, people have to turn their mind to the universal ideas as they can recollect real knowledge from them and in accordance with this they have to neglect the physical things. For Aristotle this way of acquiring knowledge was impossible because according to him, everything exists physically, just like real things. According to Aristotle forms are names of physical things, they are universal concepts: “empty words and poetic metaphors.”<sup>[2]</sup> Alongside the criticizing Plato, Aristotle also created a long line of philosophical theories. His notions affect many fields of scientific thinking from theoretic and practical philosophy to history or poetry. Aristotle was the first philosopher who divided and classified the parts of science. He defined three parts of science: the theoretical, the practical and the poetical part. The first part includes theology, logic, metaphysic and physic, the second contains political science and ethics and finally the third one contains rhetoric and poetry.<sup>[3]</sup> This classification influenced the European culture very much. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were interested in giving a universal foundation for the man on how to become better citizens in a community. Socrates’ was looking for answers with regards to all parts of life. Plato completed this with directional teaching of philosophers on how to decline pleasure which triggers the evil and upsets rationality results in bad actions, finally, Aristotle corrected the platonic theory; in his opinion we could practice good life with rational thinking but he put a very important distinction to this: without health and material goods it is impossible. In my opinion the Aristotelian solution is highly close to today’s concept about the way of life.

(iii) The third period of the ancient philosophy was longer, it lasted from 323 B.C. until the battle of Actium which was in 31. B.C. During this time the Athenian philosophy became different from classic schools like the Academy or the Lyceion not only in its style but in its organization as well. The institutions of the two great philosophers operated but students were selected very much. We can imagine these schools like high quality training centers where students had to pay

[1] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, V. 2. [https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/diogenes\\_laertius/lives\\_of\\_the\\_important\\_philosophers/complete.html](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/diogenes_laertius/lives_of_the_important_philosophers/complete.html)

[2] *Metaphysics*, 991a-20.

[3] *Ibid.*

tuition fee but according to this practice they had to read the written works of Plato and Aristotle which were collected and protected by contemporaries. Therefore, not everyone could visit these philosophical classes; the doors were closed in front of outsider Athenian citizens. Parallel to this period in Athens new philosophical theories rose, the most popular of them were stoicism and epicureanism which weren't schools in the real meaning of the name, these were in fact philosophical groups and were open for outsider citizens as well. The followers did not have to pay fee for listening to the philosophers, anybody could talk to them and ask questions. That is why these philosophical movements were very popular and existed until the era of Rome. The cause of this open style was in connection with the difficult living conditions in Hellenism. By this time the Athenian rich life was gone, everyday life was hard and full of poverty. Most people died because of epidemic rages or due to natural catastrophes that is why these philosophical movements became therapy for suffering survivors. Stoic and the epicurean thinkers brought philosophy to the Athenian squares. Their main theme was ethics; more precisely, how the people could become happy on their own. The two movements gave two different answers to this question. The stoics focused on accepting the subsequences as in their understanding we cannot influence the happenings of the cosmos that is, they were fatalists. In contrast to them the epicureans had a hedonist theory; they believed every thing was good which was pleasure to the human soul but of course this hedonism was an intellectual hedonism. The good life depended on how we could catch the opportunities which we encounter in life. Finally, we could remark that the elitist philosophical character started to change by stoic and epicurean philosophy the philosophical issues were not exclusively discussed by highly qualified philosophers. The stoic philosophy was established by Zeno of Citium in 300. B. C. Zeno taught in the center of Athens near the Stoa Poikilie, which was a church and the stoic philosophy has the name from this building. The epicurean philosophy started with Epicurus, who was a contemporary of Zeno. He bought a little house in Athens where he lived together with friends. The epicureanism has the name from its establisher, Epicurus. After them the schools did not disappear either, they became very popular for centuries.

After this short interpretation of the chronology of the Greek philosophy in the second part of my publication I would like to describe how the philosophical character changed in the first period. We can observe some interesting differences not only in the method of philosophy but on the external appearances as well.

### III. COMPARISON OF THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS TO SOPHISTS - THE MAIN CONTROVERSIES

The physicists lived a solitary, lonely life, they were only occupied with just one pupil, they lived in the same place but did not like public life. They were mostly scientists because they started to analyze the natural phenomena of the external

word. Their reaction was more rational, they gave naive but very logical answers regarding the existence of the universe. These first thinkers were interested in questions connected to what the principle of the cosmos is coming from, how it operates, exists. They were basically interested in any divine power which governs the universe. These questions were common but the answers show diversity the ancient commentators divided the thinkers to four schools. The delineating of the philosophy of the presocratic philosophers is not an easy work, as there are some problems which can block the successful exploration. The main problem is that their works disappeared and we only know some fragments from them. We can reconstruct the theories from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Athenagoras and Aetius, just to mention the main interpreters. Regrettably, all the works disappeared, only a few fragments survived as little pieces of an enormous corpus, however, these are enough to understand their important thoughts.

The Ionians, such as Thales, Anaximandros and Anaximenes were influenced by the Egyptian and Babylonian culture and we do not doubt that the pioneer of rational investigations was Thales and his followers but it is hardly safe to say more because we only have some secondary writings. Thales is said to have viewed water as the principle of matter, however, Anaximandros gave a different answer. According to him the Arche is the fundamental substance that all other things are made out of, finally, Anaximandros suggested that the primary material is the air. The second class of presocratic schools is the Pythagorean circle. Pythagoras is most known from his mathematical doctrines. According to Pythagoreans the natural reality is a mathematical thing. For Pythagoras the key to understand the cosmos is connected to mathematics. He is the founder of geometrical science but unfortunately we encounter obstacles in connection with him as well, just like in the case of Thales, namely that he did not write anything. The presocratic sources are very fragmented because we do not have books or complete writings, which we can explain with two reasons; one of them is that some of the writing actually never existed, the ones which did unfortunately disappeared so we only know fragments and a few quotations and sentences, as well as commentaries from other people of that time. Aristotle, Plato and Diogenes Laertius are the main sources of the presocratic theories. The third philosophical movement is the Elea school and the major representative was Parmenides. The philosophical discussion rose due to their classes because the Eleans started to criticize the Ionian material philosophy. From these thinkers we have some direct quotations of ancient commentators. The Eleans tried to demonstrate that the universe has a metaphysical foundation. According to the Ionians the primary substance can have different forms, such as earth, water and fire. This point of view emerged due to the observed phenomena, which means that the primary substance is of physical nature. The Eleans did not accept the material attribution of the arche, they considered that the only thing that we could know exactly about the principle is that it existed. „If it had, it must have arisen from nothing or from something. It cannot have arisen from nothing; for there is nothing. It cannot have arisen from something; for there is nothing

else than what is.”<sup>[4]</sup> With this theory the metaphysical thought of the Western philosophy started. The universe is one, immovable, immortal thing.

Lastly, we can separate the fourth class of presocratic philosophers, the thinkers who worked out their judgements in 5th century B.C. Heraclit, Empedokles, Demokritos and Anaxagoras were contemporaries of Socrates but were not influenced by him. Generally, they were closer to the Ionian answer than to the Eleatic because they searched to determine physical entities primary substances. It was very hard to understand Heraclit's doctrines because it was a metaphor of wisdom and not a knowledge of many things; it is clear knowledge of one thing only and Heraclit describes it in true prophetic style.<sup>[5]</sup> Heraclit told his essential thinkings in riddles, we can give two reasons: it may come from his temperament or secondly, it can be his own powerful aim to make men the thinker men. He could no longer accept the Ionian cosmogonies nor find it easy and natural to confine life and thought in the strait-jacket of material substance.<sup>[6]</sup> The major character of these physicists are the next: they only have one pupil and they work for gratis; they used to live and work in their country of birth and in general they were interested in cosmogony and cosmology, they weren't philosophers in the real meaning of the word because they focused on the material components of the universe and the philosophy which we cannot simply identify with science. The next class of presocratic thinkers that is, the sophists researched the acting man. The problem of reality involves the problem of man who lives in the universe as an acting person who can convert or change his own agreements. There are many differences between physicists and sophists regarding their philosophical interests and their appearance as well. Sophists were a kind of travelling philosophers, they lived in different cities and had different pupils at every place. The main contrast between the natural philosophers and the sophists was practically that sophists had many teachings. We have to say that this is not strange from Athenian professional practice. The rhetor, the rhapsodist and the teacher were very acknowledged occupations, an appreciated rhapsodist (singer) should accumulate considerable property. They worked out a success plan for having students. When a sophist arrived in any polis he put on a kind of performing dress which was the same of the rhapsodist's and started to speak about a rhetorical essay and it was sufficient to create rumors in a city. After that the well-healed citizens were hired to teach their sons. What did the sophists teach? Since Drako's elementary education was obligatory for Athenian children; they learned geometry, reading and writing, physical education, music and history. Why was it important to teach them again by private teachers like sophists for money? The answer is in the Athenian political life style: citizens were obliged to participate in daily public administration of the polis, which was generally oral. If a citizen had any juridical problem he had to work out on his own plan, had to present himself in the case

[4] Burnet, 67.

[5] Burnet, 58.

[6] Guthrie, 46.

but if he wasn't so talented he could easily lose the case. That is why the sophistical science, first of all, rhetoric and oratory was very demanded in Athens in the 5th century B.C. If a citizen wanted to be successful in political life the key things he had to learn were convincing style and effective reasoning. What did the sophists teach? The main source to answer this question is Plato's dialogue: he exactly described that the Sophists first learned the elementary lessons followed by the principle Sophist theories which consisted of good judgement in affairs, how to run one's own home and how to influence public affairs with both their speeches and actions.<sup>[7]</sup> We can summarise that the Sophists created the civic science to make men good citizens. And unfortunately, the Sophists became hated people and the reason is easy. The sophistical speeches were very effective; a well educated citizen who was able to win in any public affair with his sophistical practice whether he was right or not and a second reason is the gross wealth and finally the very wrong opinion of Socrates and Plato about Sophists. This two major philosophers influenced not just the contemporary but the next commentators and philosophers as well. That is the reason why we have just a few direct sources from sophists. People had negative opinion of classical philosophers, we have to wait until the 3rd century A.C. for it to change, when Flavius Philostartus recollected the Sophist fragments and testimonia approximately one thousand year later after the sophists lived. We have to mention that the Sophist science was ironically and negatively characterized by Plato but we have to be pleased because thanks to him we can recognise the main Sophist theories, the difference between nomos and physis, the moral relativism, the origin of justice and law, the problem of language and logic. The most well-known Sophists are Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon and Damon.

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[7] Plato, Protagoras, 318 d7.



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