Philosophy and Democracy in Fifth Century B.C.

Athens

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Athens of the fifth century B.C. was the site of both the development of democracy and a flowering of philosophical inquiry. Democracy has its start in Athens, but philosophy does not. Regardless, the path of history brought the two together during very interesting times: the Persian Wars, the creation of the Delian League and the Athenian Empire, and the Peloponnesian War shape the backdrop of this century. This paper will first examine who the new intellectuals known to Athens were and what brought several of them to the city-state; it will then consider what influence, if any, they had on the government and how the Athenian democracy responded to them. Several factors contributed to making the democracy and empire of Athens particularly suitable for encouraging this initial intermixing of ideas, even if the famous trial of Socrates suggests that not all Athenians were always tolerant of philosophers.

When Thales of Miletus departed from reliance on mythology in an attempt to understand the world, his action was something new. Aristotle regarded him as the first philosopher, and many still agree with him today.\(^1\) Thales worked during the early sixth century B.C. in Asia Minor; countless individuals followed him in the pursuit of natural philosophy. The Presocratics, as they are sometimes called, inquired into the nature of the cosmos, investigating the world without relying on the supernatural for an explanation. Although they were not scientists in the modern sense, Thales and the other natural philosophers investigated similar issues, ranging from physics to psychology. In addition to natural philosophy, these intellectuals delved into matters such as metaphysics and ethics.\(^2\)

Thales, however, never came to Athens. Scholars today recognize Anaxagoras as the first philosopher to visit the Athenians, bringing natural philosophy along with him. This fifth century B.C. philosopher was born in Clazomenae, an ancient
Greek city which, like Miletus, was located in Asia Minor. Anaxagoras worked primarily to understand the nature of the cosmos and declared the sun to be flaming metal and the moon to be made of earth. In Athens he was well-known for his friendship with the great Athenian statesman Pericles; the third century A.D. biographer Diogenes Laertius recounts Pericles’ assertion that he was a student of Anaxagoras.\(^3\) The philosopher’s dates are uncertain. Some scholars argue that he arrived in Athens as early as 480 B.C. with the Persian invasion, while others prefer dates as late as 456 B.C. Ancient sources say that Anaxagoras lived in Athens for at least twenty years. He apparently did not enjoy a quiet life in the city-state and eventually he was brought to trial: Diogenes Laertius preserves several varying traditions that claim the philosopher either was accused by Cleon of impiety or by Thucydides – the son of Melesias, not the historian – of both impiety and Persian sympathies.\(^4\)

Heraclitus of Ephesus, like Anaxagoras, came from Asia Minor. Diogenes Laertius records that he was most active between 504 and 500 B.C.\(^5\) Referred to as the Obscure by ancient authors, Heraclitus was known for his intentionally cryptic quotes. He may have been from a noble family: an ancient story claims he gave up kingship of Ephesus to his brother. (As the city was under control of the Persian Empire at this point, the king probably had little power.) He apparently had no interest in the political sphere at Ephesus, refusing a request to help write the city’s laws. Diogenes Laertius records that Heraclitus hated the Ephesians and the Athenians, though they thought highly of him, and that he supposedly kept aloof even from the court of King Darius.\(^6\) Although Heraclitus and his ideas were certainly known by the Athenians, it is uncertain if he ever actually visited the city-state; ancient authors do not write of him in Athens.

The fifth century B.C. Parmenides from Elea in southern Italy was the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy and author of a work called On Nature. He did come to Athens: Plato’s Parmenides presents a meeting and a discussion on the nature of Forms between the young Socrates, Parmenides, and Parmenides’ student, Zeno of Elea. Other elements of Parmenides’ work focused on questions about knowledge and what can be understood. The fourth century B.C. philosopher, Speusippus, also records that Parmenides served Elea as a lawmaker.\(^7\)
Philosophy, clearly, did not have its roots in Athens but rather came there from abroad. Yet something caused early natural philosophers to start visiting Athens in the fifth century B.C. In the specific case of Anaxagoras, some scholars suggest that he first came to Athens in 480 B.C. as a conscript with the Persians, who controlled Clazomenae at the time. Whether or not this is true, the overarching Persian Wars during the start of the fifth century were likely a factor in philosophers’ sudden interest in Athens: after the critical victories at Salamis and Plataea, Athens catapulted to prominence. The Delian League, where Athens took the leading role, was founded in 478 B.C. Admittedly, it is difficult to determine whether Athens attracted considerably more visiting philosophers than other city-states because today’s surviving sources are mainly Athenian and do not show the whole picture of intellectuals throughout the Greek world. But as a naval power that was engaged all across the Aegean, Athens must have encountered countless new peoples and new ideas. At the same time, she attracted considerable attention, especially as more city-states were constantly interacting with Athens as members of the Delian League – Miletus, Clazomenae, and Ephesus, for example, numbered among the member cities.

In 431 B.C., Pericles delivered his Funeral Oration and within it discussed Athens’ rise to greatness. He praised the democracy for how it allows men freedom in their private lives, and commented on how the prominence of Athens attracts all and allows her to enjoy the fruits of other lands as if they were her own. (Pericles was most likely speaking about literal commercial goods, but it is not much of a stretch to see how this could apply to philosophical knowledge as well.) Stressing how different Athens is from Sparta, Pericles declared that Athens is open to the entire world; she does not refuse foreigners coming to see and to learn. This speech was, of course, given later than when the early natural philosophers first came to Athens, but Pericles was not discussing a new phenomenon in his city. The year 480 B.C. set in motion Athens’ growth, and over the years she developed into the center of trade, culture, and learning which Pericles and his audience knew so well.

Considering Athens’ rapid rise in power and influence, it makes sense that philosophers were drawn to her. These intellectuals did not thrive in a vacuum. Scholars know that
Anaxagoras wrote at least one book; he would not do so if he thought the book would lack an audience. Parmenides also wrote philosophical works and founded the Eleatic school of philosophy, which had students such as Zeno of Elea and Melissus of Samos. Heraclitus of Ephesus was specifically known as the Obscure and the Weeping Philosopher, and his hatred of his fellow Ephesians and Athenians was well-known enough for Diogenes Laertius to write about it hundreds of years later. The fact that these were defining characteristics of his suggests that he was the exception rather than the rule: most philosophers did not distance themselves so far from their fellows.

Once in Athens, how did philosophers interact with the radical democracy that led the city-state? These men were not all withdrawn from political life like Heraclitus was: Parmenides, for instance, was a lawmaker in Elea. Perhaps it was not uncommon for these early intellectuals to provide practical benefit to their cities through actions such as lawmaking; their wisdom would certainly recommend them for the task. However, they could not take this role in Athens where they did not have access to the assembly—such rights were open only to Athenian citizens.

As a resident foreigner, Anaxagoras could not participate in the political life of Athens, but the ancient authors stress that he still left a mark on it through his student Pericles. Plutarch discusses their relationship in his Life of Pericles: Anaxagoras, he says, was responsible for cultivating Pericles’ dignified bearing and speaking ability. Nor was Anaxagoras the only early philosopher with whom the great statesman supposedly spent time: Plutarch goes on to name Damon as his music teacher and then claims that this profession was a screen and Damon was actually a sophist. Additionally, Plutarch asserts that Pericles studied under Zeno, the student of Parmenides.12

The example of Anaxagoras also shows that while Athens was often intrigued and impressed by these early philosophers, the democracy would also come to lash out against some of them. Anaxagoras, the first to come to Athens, was also the first to be tried there. The charges were impiety and perhaps also Medism. Scholars today often understand Anaxagoras’ trial to have been an indirect attack against his student Pericles by political opponents.13 Even so, the charges would have to at least be plausible, which means that the Athenian populace was to some degree distrust...
of natural philosophy. Plutarch offers the suggestion that “public opinion was instinctively hostile towards natural philosophers and visionaries, as they were called, since it was generally believed that they belittled the power of the gods by explaining it away as nothing more than the operation of irrational causes and blind forces acting by necessity.”

Anaxagoras was not the only associate of Pericles to fall foul of the democracy’s suspicions: Damon was ostracized supposedly as a “great intriguer and a supporter of tyranny.”

Plutarch calls Damon a sophist, a particular category of intellectual considered distinct from the earlier philosophers by the ancient authors. These were traveling learned men who lectured and taught for pay, often on rhetoric. This understanding of sophist derives from Plato, who had much to say about them, the majority of it criticism. Use of the term by ancient authors after Plato was usually negative: sophists were especially decried as ‘making the weaker argument appear the stronger.’ Recent scholarship has stressed that the label is problematic because it is an invented one, a way for Plato to group together and scorn the intellectuals of his day with whom he disagreed. Below are several notable fifth century individuals who have been termed sophists: while they share some similarities such as lecturing for pay, they are much more varied in the subjects they investigated and debated.

According to Plato, Protagoras was the first self-avowed sophist. Scholars today believe that he lived from about 490-420 B.C. He was born in Abdera and seems to have settled for a while in Athens around 464 B.C. before spending time in Italy, where he drafted laws for the recently established pan-Hellenic colony Thurii. He was apparently a prolific writer, since Diogenes Laertius records the titles of eleven works. What evidence remains of his writing suggests that Protagoras might have been agnostic; he is said to have written that he had no way of determining whether or not the gods existed, and in fact he did not think it was possible to know. Diogenes Laertius writes that the Athenians expelled him for this and even burnt his works, although it is strange that no surviving contemporary sources such as Plato mention this incident. Protagoras is another philosopher whom scholars have noted as interacting with important political figures: Plutarch records that he and Pericles shared at least one
philosophical conversation. From Plato’s Protagoras it is apparent that Protagoras held rather democratic views; furthermore, a fragment of the sophist’s suggests that he held Pericles in very high esteem. Like many of the traveling intellectuals of the time, Protagoras usually charged for his lectures.

Other important sophists active in the fifth century include Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. All are known to have lectured for pay and were notable speakers; Plato records Hippias in particular boasting about his ability to go to Olympia and lecture on any topic asked of him. At least Gorgias and Hippias also served their cities as diplomats. Gorgias, for instance, came to Athens in 427 B.C. on a political mission from Leontini to ask for aid with war in Sicily. His rhetorical skills were apparently effective: the Athenians assented and sent out the First Sicilian Expedition under General Laches.

Athens most likely attracted these traveling teachers for the same reasons she was visited by the natural philosophers: the city-state had become a center of the Greek world. Athens was even quite literally located at a convenient geographic center: from the west she was visited by intellectuals from colonies in Sicily and Italy, from the east by those from the Ionian city-states in Asia Minor. Ancient sources record that the sophists delivered lectures at Pan-Hellenic sites such as Olympia and Delphi: places visited by many Greeks where they could be sure to command an audience. Though not a Pan-Hellenic site, during much of the fifth century Athens was the head of a widespread Greek alliance and, in later years, empire. The sophists certainly could find a large audience there.

Many of these individuals did teach rhetoric, among other subjects. Due to the structure of the Athenian democracy, teachers of rhetoric were very desirable and, consequently, well-paid. An important feature of the democracy in the fifth century was the assembly, which was open to all adult male citizens. Anyone could speak before the assembly, but this did not mean that everyone was capable of speaking well and persuasively. If a young man had hopes of a political career, however, he could pay to study the art of rhetoric. The same held true in the judicial sphere, another very democratic feature of the Athenian government. A man who wished to make his case convincingly to the jury could benefit from paying one of these travelling teachers for lessons. After all, no less
a statesman than Pericles was connected with several philosophers credited with polishing his speaking ability. In later years, when intellectuals arrived in Athens offering to teach these skills for a fee, they found numerous willing clients.

Athens’ reaction to the sophists, however, was mixed. Some of the criticisms that were directed against them are the same as the accusations later turned also against Socrates: that they made the weaker argument appear the stronger, and that their teaching corrupted the young. Some criticism stemmed from the idea that these individuals taught anyone who could pay, rather than only students of a certain moral caliber. A similar idea appears in Plato’s Gorgias, where he stresses the idea that rhetoric, when used by the philosopher, is guided by morality; the sophist’s rhetoric lacks this dimension and is wielded only for personal gain. Yet while heavily criticized by some and mocked by comedy, sophists did not get in much trouble for teaching the art of rhetoric. Of the examples considered above, only Protagoras was allegedly brought to trial. Furthermore this was for impiety, not due to his being a sophist.

The trial of Socrates was a dramatic departure from the relative peace most philosophers enjoyed. Born in 469 B.C. and executed in 399 B.C., Socrates was active in Athens at the same time as the intellectuals mentioned above. He gained many followers, including philosophers Plato and Xenophon and future politicians such as Alcibiades, the oligarch Critias, and the democrat Chaerephon. Exactly what Socrates taught is difficult to determine because he never wrote anything; he instead appeared as a character in the Socratic Dialogues of Plato and Xenophon. Socrates is known for the idea ‘I know only that I know nothing’ and many Socratic Dialogues reflect this: it is not uncommon for the piece to end in aporia, a philosophical puzzlement. Though Plato writes that Socrates was intrigued by natural philosophy in his youth, in later years he focused more on the pursuit of knowledge and virtue. It is notable that Socrates did not participate much in the Athenian government despite his being a citizen.

Socrates had already gained a reputation by 423 B.C. That year Aristophanes staged The Clouds, a comedy which thoroughly mocked the philosopher. In the play Aristophanes has Socrates make an entrance floating in a basket attached to the crane which usually introduced gods in tragedy. The comedy’s philosopher
contemplates natural philosophy and rejects the Olympian gods; furthermore, he promises to teach the protagonist Strepsiades how to make his false argument appear stronger and get out of paying his debts.\textsuperscript{36} Strikingly, these are some of the very charges Socrates faced twenty-four years later. Before 400 B.C., the Athenians tolerated the gadfly who insistently irritated them into thought and action. With the end of the fifth century, something changed to cease their tolerance.

In 404 B.C. the Peloponnesian War ended, and Athens lost. Sparta overthrew the Athenian democracy and installed an oligarchy, the short-lived and bloody Thirty Tyrants. By 403 B.C. the tyrants were overthrown and the democracy restored, but Athens never returned to her former confidence and glory. Within a few years, three men bring suddenly brought charges against Socrates, with accusations that sounded like they belonged in Aristophanes’ play from over twenty years earlier: “Socrates is a criminal and a busybody, investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens and making the weaker argument stronger and teaching others these same things.”\textsuperscript{37} The second set of accusations he faced were charges of corrupting the youth, impiety, and introducing new gods.

The impiety charges are reminiscent of what Anaxagoras and perhaps Protagoras faced, but it is likely that what turned the Athenians most against Socrates were the charges that he corrupted the youth. Alcibiades and Critias once numbered among Socrates’ associates; in the years following the end of the Peloponnesian War, neither was popular in Athens. Alcibiades defected to Sparta and Persia and was known for his uncontrolled ways, while Critias became a particularly violent member of the Thirty Tyrants. Some Athenians might have interpreted Socrates’ choice to stay in Athens under the oligarchy rather than go into exile with the democrats as support for the Thirty Tyrants’ reign. He certainly had never fully approved of the democracy, but rather had always been very critical of the people’s ability to justly rule.

Socrates’ defense was unsuccessful; the Athenians were determined to view him as a sophist with dangerous ideas and therefore as responsible for the actions of his students, despite Socrates’ attempts to disprove these claims. A later defense speech given by Aeschines in 346 B.C. reinforces this idea: he recalls Socrates’ trial, asking the jury, “Surely you put to death Socrates the
sophist, fellow citizens, because he was shown to have been the teacher of Critias, one of the Thirty who put down the democracy? 38  Despite the fact that he was not paid for his discussions, the Athenians viewed Socrates as one of the teachers who had flooded Athens in the fifth century and left their mark on the city by training young, aspiring politicians. He was to be held responsible for the havoc caused by Alcibiades and Critias.

Thus an unusual set of circumstances prompted the Athenians to take action against Socrates, not his philosophy: this they bore for at least thirty years. In fact, during the fifth century it was not the democracy that sought to curtail the philosophers, but rather the brief oligarchy: Critias and the other oligarchs attempted to outlaw teaching the ‘art of words.’ 39 The democracy of Athens was instead very welcoming of these wise individuals: sources record only a few who met with opposition, and this was in many cases due to politics rather than their philosophizing. This spreading rationality likely positively impacted Athenian democracy: no longer, for instance, was speaking ability limited to old noble families who passed the knowledge down through the generations. Teachers for hire were willing to teach anyone the art of rhetoric if he could pay. The philosophers also benefited from Athens, where they could meet with other intellectuals, circulate ideas, and earn money for their teaching. Difficult times after 404 B.C. struck down Socrates, but this was not the end of philosophy in Athens. The city-state recovered after the Peloponnesian War and new philosophers came to prominence, notably Plato and Aristotle. These philosophers owe a great deal to the development of philosophy in the late sixth and fifth centuries, and therefore also to fifth century Athens.
Bibliography


Notes

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