

Review Article

Socrates And The Greek "Enlightenment"

As the first two volumes of Guthrie's remarkable *History of Greek Philosophy* make completely plain, the development of Greek thought from the early sixth century forward is by no means marked by readily delineated periods in which a single opinion was held by all or almost all thinkers. Nevertheless, in the first part of the fifth century there began to emerge a radically new mode of reflection which brought to the fore some issues of immediate urgency for the continuation of rational discourse. By its concentration upon this new way of philosophizing, and upon the problems created by it, the third volume* of Professor Guthrie's *History* provides an interlude between the relatively primitive but complex thought of the pre-Socratics (discussed in Volumes I and II) and the sophisticated and often technically difficult doctrines of Plato and Aristotle (to be examined in the subsequent volumes of the *History*).

There is ample justification for describing this era of thought as an "enlightenment", for as in the Enlightenment period of eighteenth-century Europe, philosophic reflection lost its interest in ontological and cosmological problems and began to concentrate instead upon questions which are in essence human concerns. For the first time, active consideration was given to the problem of the nature of law and of society and to the place of man in society. The good for man and the warrant for the claim of one moral sanction or the other became topics of prime concern. And in time the very existence of the gods and their concern for mankind was subjected to question.

But it is not only because the questions were raised for the first time that the period is an "enlightenment". The appellation is appropriate because answers which were proposed in the fifth century and in Europe are very similar. Epistemological skepticism and positivism dominate; and accordingly wide acceptance is given to the view that society and its laws are conventions devised by men. In this intellectual climate values, and in particular the social value of justice, are understood no longer as absolute commands but as relative conventions which can be,

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and often are, altered. Supernatural beings, if they are believed to exist at all, are considered to be quite indifferent to the affairs of men.

Although there is nothing approaching a "system" embodying all of these doctrines promulgated by a single thinker in fifth-century Greece, each of these was maintained by at least one of the number of men who have since antiquity borne the title "sophist". The name itself conveyed a degree of opprobrium even at the time of the sophists' greatest influence, and certainly in contemporary usage a "sophistic argument" is one which is regarded as misleading and probably intentionally so. Yet the sophistic doctrines are highly important and in many respects they are no less important for contemporary society than for the fifth century.

Although it is dealing with issues which are basically humanistic, and not with technical problems in cosmology, cosmogony, or ontology, this volume of Guthrie's work is characterized by the same careful scholarship, expansive exposition and controlled organization that make the first two volumes indispensable to anyone even remotely concerned with classical civilization. In this discussion, Guthrie is faced with a dual task: first it is necessary to develop as fully as possible the positions which the various sophists held; and in the second place it is important to fit into the context thus created the figure of the sophists' chief critic, Socrates.

Neither of these purposes is easily achieved. Few fragments of sophistic texts are extant and Socrates himself wrote nothing of philosophic importance. In both cases the chief—although by no means the only—sources of information are Plato and Aristotle, both of whom were severe critics of the sophists and professed admirers of Socrates. This situation has, of course, provoked essays purporting to demonstrate that in the main one or more of the usual sources is unreliable and that our conception of either the sophists or of Socrates requires to be drastically revised. Although he does not burden the text with excessive quotations from or discussions of such critics, Guthrie strongly supports the accuracy and fairness of Plato and Aristotle in dealing with the sophists and Socrates. As a consequence the understanding of these thinkers which emerges is not radically at variance with what the reader of Plato's dialogues or Aristotle's treatises would expect. The great merits of Guthrie's work, though, are its patient exposition of the problems which interested the sophists, the full treatment given individual figures, and the clear demonstration of Socrates' place in the "enlightenment".

To Protagoras, who—evidence seems clearly to indicate—was the leading figure in the sophistic movement, goes credit for having enunciated what, if anything, functions as the first principle of sophistry. His treatise entitled *Truth* apparently opened with the proposition: "Man is the measure of all things; of the things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not." This is a complete relativism. If the room is hot to me, it is hot insofar as I am concerned. But it may well, simultaneously, be cold to another. There is no absolute hot and no absolute cold. There are only states of warmth or chill in various observers.

Generalized, the doctrine may be applied to any sensible attributes but, moreover, to the moral qualities as well. Not only does thinking upon it totally constitute the rectitude or vice of a given action or thing, but the same event or entity may well be simultaneously both approved and condemned by different observers. There is, in short, no naturally occurring good or evil, but only what men decide either to approve or to condemn.

Although the growth of Athenian democracy did not wait upon the evolution of Protagoreanism, obviously the two are mutually complementary. If there be no absolute standards or criteria of right and wrong, there is no sense in which any one individual or group of individuals may set themselves up as experts in virtue. Experts are no more required to determine the rightness or evil of an act than they are to decide whether the room is hot or cold to me. Once this is granted, the practice of the Athenian Assembly which allowed all citizens an equal voice in determination of policy is readily defended.

The Protagorean analysis of morality is greatly liberating. No longer must justice and the other moral attributes be conceived to be the dicta of half-understood and greatly feared deities. Rather the sensible man will now recognize that for any given society justice is merely what the population determines it to be. Further, if human conventions can explain the existence of laws in society, they also explain the origin of society itself. Societies are no longer regarded as natural phenomena which have existed from the beginning of time, but rather as developed in response to human needs and in accord with varying human conventions.

While it is impossible to ignore the element of liberation implicit in such views, it is also true that they allow, even encourage, the excesses to which sophistry became subject. If there be no virtue as such, and no justice, the place of the expert in these matters will be taken by the clever speaker, the man able to persuade the Assembly to favour his proposals. And of course it is well-known that instruction in the art of rhetoric was a crucial part of the sophists' curriculum. The sophist could not profess to teach moral goodness, for on his own doctrine there is no good as such to be master of. But he can teach the art of persuading one's fellow men to follow any given course, to view this course as "just".

Socrates came to intellectual maturity during the growth of Athenian power and civilization. One of the influences to which he was exposed was, of course, the considerable excitement generated by the sophistic movement. Like the sophists, Socrates regarded theoretical speculation as unprofitable, and in company with them he turned to investigation of human problems. But the crucial difference between Socrates and the sophists was that ". . . he sought to make ethics and politics the subject of a scientific inquiry which should reveal universal laws or truths, in opposition to the scepticism and relativism that had turned all things into matters of

opinion and left men's minds at the mercy of the persuader with the smoothest tongue" (p. 425).

Thus, as Guthrie shows, Socrates' teaching was marked by the relentless search for definitions of the moral attributes of justice, and courage, and virtue; for from these definitions knowledge would follow. That he failed to discover the definitions thus sought is well-known. But in his quest he demonstrated his own ignorance as well as the ignorance and pretensions of those who had claimed to be intellectual and political leaders of his city. Instead of flattering them by the easy teaching that a few lessons in rhetoric would make them appear wise, he ruthlessly unmasked their intellectual unfitnes, and those who would listen he continually urged to care for their own minds and souls before all else and thereby to emulate his own life of inquiry.

In the hands of Plato, Socrates' teaching gradually became a philosophic doctrine—indeed almost a system. The dialectic method of statement and criticism which was characteristic of Socrates' procedure is probably insufficient to attain the sorts of definition that were required: and there is no end of controversy surrounding the point at which Plato leaves off memorializing his teacher and friend and begins to assert his own theories. But what is of first importance in the context of Guthrie's discussion of the fifth-century enlightenment is that, although he accepted their root concern for the human and practical issues rather than the speculative ones, Socrates opposed the sophists' positive conclusions at virtually every juncture.

If the sophists were epistemological and ethical relativists, Socrates believed that although neither he nor any of his fellow Athenians had yet discovered absolute truth, it was within the power of the earnest inquirer to do so. Thus it manifestly is not true that every man's notion of truth and right is as much to be valued as the next. Only those who have undergone the discipline of Philosophy—and in particular the probing of dialectic discourse—may claim to speak with authority on matters of individual morality or of statecraft.

It would neatly complete the portrait of Socrates, were it possible to argue with full conviction that, while the sophists were either agnostic or atheistic, Socrates held definite theistic views. But this cannot so confidently be affirmed. Guthrie inclines to the view that in fact Socrates did hold quite orthodox religious opinions including belief in the traditional gods and a faith in the immortality of the individual soul. The evidence, however, either for the claim that Socrates was in some sense theistic or polytheistic—the distinction is not clear-cut at this stage in history—or for his belief in the immortality of individual souls is ambiguous. It becomes extremely difficult at this point to separate Socrates from Plato, for Plato confidently held both positions and supported them with elaborate philosophic arguments. But the fact that the appropriate doctrines are affirmed through the

agency of "Socrates" does not firmly establish that the historical Socrates actually held them. To assert with dogmatic finality either that he did or did not is folly. As Guthrie remarks concerning the issue of immortality, "on no other subject is it truer to say that everyone has his own Socrates" (p. 478).

If suspension of belief is requisite at this point, a similar tentativeness is by no means indicated in reading much early Greek Philosophy. And considerable difficulties are created for all but the most expert investigators by the plethora of fragmentary and highly specialized accounts. In this, as well as in the two previous volumes, Guthrie threads his way through the great store of both antique and modern literature to produce a coherent and intelligible analysis of an era in the history of Philosophy too often regarded only as an area for arcane philological research. The result is a reconstruction of the thought of the sixth and fifth centuries in which no technical rigour is sacrificed to the lucidity and wit of the exposition. The Cambridge University Press is to be highly commended for its support of this work, which is certain to be the standard source in English for early Greek thought for many years to come.

Mount Allison University

GORDON TREASH

SOLAR PLEXUS

Richard Kohler

I am the sun thinking about the planets:
 First I supposed them nine annoying gnats,
 Mechanical midges mocking me in matter—
 Who am all energy, a lion plagued with fleas;
 But my first thought burnt on, on—I realized:
 They are fearful slaves of space, chained to my heat;
 Cowering from my eyes, fearing my mind,
 Feeling my dreams pursue them where they turn—
 I am their fate, their father, their desire.

Seeing then their bondage to the edge of fire,
 Why does the third one out move me to burn
 With troubled fancy? stir my depths to find
 An incandescent vision of deceit?
 O particle, your name is advertised
 As Falsity, Pride. You stretch as if to seize
 The very heart of light. Your dark flights batter
 And wrestle the sundering void as if to mate
 My eons to your monstrousness of minutes.