

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE CLASSICAL TRAINING: THE SOPHIST DEBATE*

TEORIA E PRÁTICA NA FORMAÇÃO CLÁSSICA: O DEBATE SOFISTA

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This work aims to discuss some philosophical and educational conceptions of Sophistic, especially of Protagoras and Gorgias, showing how these philosophers understood the relationship between theory and practice in order to provide a reflection on how one sees these two poles that make up the human development currently. The method used for the achievement of such intent is the literature review, in which the results are obtained through the interpretation of content and comparison between explicit or latent meanings. Results show that the Sophists have proposed a new way of thinking about the world through praxis thus realizing the junction between Theory and Practice. This transposition of dualism between theory and practice leads us to conclude that we should use the theory as a resource for exercising reflective thought and elements to create new actions based on the experience that it is living to deal with a changing world.

Descriptors: Learning; Education; Philosophy.

Este trabalho tem por objetivo discutir algumas concepções filosóficas e educacionais da Sofística, especialmente de Protágoras e Górgias, evidenciando como esses filósofos entendiam a relação entre teoria e prática a fim de propiciar uma reflexão sobre a forma como se encara estes dois pólos que compõem a formação humana atualmente. O método empregado para a realização de tal intento consiste na revisão bibliográfica, no qual os resultados são obtidos da interpretação de conteúdos e da comparação entre significados explícitos ou latentes. Os resultados evidenciam que os Sofistas propuseram uma nova maneira de pensar o mundo por intermédio da *práxis* realizando assim a junção entre teoria e prática. Tal transposição do dualismo entre teoria e prática faz concluir que se deve utilizar a teoria como recurso para exercer o pensamento reflexivo e elementos para criar novas ações baseadas na experiência que se vivencia para lidar com um mundo em mudança.

Descritores: Aprendizagem; Educação; Filosofia.

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo discutir algunas concepciones filosóficas y educativas de los sofistas, especialmente Protágoras y Gorgias, mostrando cómo estos filósofos comprendieron la relación entre la teoría y la práctica con el fin de ofrecer una reflexión sobre cómo se ve estos dos polos que componen el formación humana actualmente. El método empleado es la revisión de la literatura, que permite que se obtengan a las conclusiones del contenido y la interpretación de la comparación entre los significados explícitos o latentes. Las investigaciones indican que los sofistas han propuesto una nueva forma de pensar el mundo por la praxis, de esta manera lograr la unión entre teoría y práctica. La transposición del dualismo nos lleva a concluir que se debe utilizar la teoría como un recurso para que ejerzamos nuestro pensamiento reflexivo y para crear nuevas acciones basadas en la experiencia que se estea viviendo para hacer frente a un cambiante mundo.

Descritores: Aprendizaje; Educación; Filosofía.

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INTRODUCTION

Sophists were active in Greece as rhetoric teachers, thinkers, speakers and intellectuals, especially in the second half of the fifth century BC and the beginning of the fourth century BC. The name Sophist is related to the Greek words *sophos* and *sophia*, commonly translated by wise and wisdom, used to designate one who has knowledge of each of the problems relating to the human being and their position in society. This positive meaning of the term, however, turned negative, especially for heavily controversial position of Plato and Aristotle¹.

The extent of the problems formulated and discussed by the Sophists in their teaching activity was really amazing, of which we can highlight, among others, the philosophical problems in the theory of knowledge and perception; the nature of truth; the relationship between language, thought and reality; the sociology of knowledge; the theoretical and practical problems of life in society, especially in democracies; the nature and purpose of education and the role of teachers in society; and the ruinous implications of the doctrine according to which virtue can be taught. Two dominant themes permeated the Sophist movement: the need to accept relativism in values and other things without reducing everything to subjectivism, and the belief that there is no area of human life, or the world as a whole, that is immune to the understanding achieved through rational debate¹.

It is discussed in this work a theme that runs through all the Sophist philosophy, the discussion of the dichotomy between theory and practice. At first we will address the context in which these thinkers were inserted and changes by which the Athenian society was experiencing.

Secondly, we will discuss the ways in which philosophers since Homer's time understood the relationship between theory and practice and how this relationship was dichotomized by pre-Socratic thinkers to be reconciled then, sometime later, by the Sophists. Still, it is highlighted that when

Sophists understood theory and practice as elements that are not opposed, they outlined a spiritual formation for citizens of the polis, understanding man not only as an abstract being, but also as concrete being in a changing and uncertain world.

The objective of this paper is to discuss some philosophical and educational conceptions of Sophistic, especially those of Protagoras and Gorgias, showing how these philosophers understood the relationship between theory and practice in order to provide a reflection on the way these two poles that make up human development today are seen.

METHOD

This work is put in the scope of qualitative research. To discuss the proposed theme it was performed a literature survey in major books and articles dealing with philosophical and educational conceptions of the Sophists. After the literature survey it was carried out the literature review, which enabled the development and explanation both for data collection and in its analysis, allowing establishing and evaluating the data and also making a connection between them at different times. While in progressing the rooted theorizing, the literature review provides the theoretical constructions, categories and properties that are used to organize the data and discover new relationships between theory and real world².

The results from the analysis of the data were obtained through the interpretation of content as well as the comparison between explicit or latent meanings.

RESULTS

The theoretical constructions arising from the discussion of this work stem from the analysis of 8 books and 4 articles divided as follows: we used a work for the explanation of qualitative research and its epistemological and methodological approaches; to compose the discussion of the background of the Sophist movement were used 3 works about this movement,

which resumed discussions regarding these philosophers proposing a new interpretation of this philosophical current; for the discussion of the dualism between theory and practice in philosophical thought we used 2 works and 3 articles covering the Greek philosophies and their views about man and the world. To make the last item that deals with the ideal of human formation present in the conceptions of the Gorgias and Protagoras Sophists we used 2 works and 1 article whose theme is the Greek *Paideia*, i.e., the ideal training for the Greek citizen to work in the *polis*.

There has been a search in specialized magazines databases on the theme prioritizing articles published from 2010 to 2014, but the results were not satisfactory since it is a relatively unexplored topic and with little ongoing research dealing with this subject.

DISCUSSION

Sophists: men of their time

From 450 to 400 BC the city of Athens was the scene of profound social and political changes and intense intellectual and artistic activity. Traditional patterns of life and experience were dissolved to make room for new perspectives that allowed the exercise of criticizing beliefs and values accepted by previous generations.

The Sophists were able to capture accurately the changes of their time, giving them shape and voice, in response the needs of that moment, offering young people the new word for which they yearned, since they were not satisfied with the traditional values that the old generation proposed. These facts are listed as possible explanation for the fact that the Sophists have been so successful at the time, particularly among the new generations³.

For a long time philosophy historians have adopted not only information coming from Plato and Aristotle on the Sophists, but also the value judgments produced by them, causing the Sophist movement was devalued, considered as a time of severe decay of Greek thought³. Only in the twentieth century it became possible to

perform a systematic review of previously issued judgments, causing a historical reassessment that led to the conclusion that the Sophists represented an essential link in the history of ancient thought^{1,4,5}.

The movement of revision of the Sophist thought highlighted the true spiritual revolution undertaken by those thinkers, through which it was produced the displacement of the axis of philosophical reflection on the *physis* and the cosmos to man and what concerns the life of man as a member of a society³. By placing man at the center of philosophical reflection, the Sophists focused on the problems concerning ethics, politics, rhetoric, art, language, religion and education, initiating what can be called humanistic period of ancient philosophy, which was concerned with the formation of the citizen and the virtuous wise⁶.

In taking the universe and the physical world as objects of rational research, the Sophists innovated to transfer these methods to social organization and man as a politician being. This change in the reflection axis took the man as a starting point of reflections that radiated to society, politics, ethics, education, law and language. In the pre-sophistic period, the man was the object of analysis only through a vision of the cosmos; from the sophistic period, the cosmos is seen through the man. There is a change from the cosmos comprising man situation to the man in the world situation. The search for the original principle (*arché*) that marked the philosophy at that time provided place to the presence of the individual in existence, or rather, of the man in political and existential relations with their fellow citizens. The natural (*physei*) now accommodates at its side the convention (*nomos*), the choice of men; the truth, earlier supported by myths, religion and community ties, enters the realm of *dóxa* (opinion) and *Sofia* (knowledge experienced and conquered as wisdom), entering this way in the direction of movement and time; it is at that time the questions that led to the emergence of the human sciences arouse⁷.

Sophists were responsible not only for the conversion of the philosophical look from cosmos to men, but also by a formal education in the highest sense of the word, which had not yet posed a structure of understanding and language, but included all the spiritual forces. For a long time, the Sophists were understood by Plato's point of view, which inhibited and somehow still inhibits the genuine understanding of the significance of that moment in the history of education, since it presents problems intrinsic to later moments of philosophical reflection. Historically, Sophistic is as relevant as Socrates or Plato were because it demarcates an era in which the ideal of man's *arete* gathers in itself all values that the Aristotelian ethics meets later as spiritual prerogatives⁵.

Overcoming the dualism between Theory and Practice in the Sophist thought

The Homeric period (1200 BC to 800 BC) refers to the time started with the presumed Dorian invasion that might have destroyed the Mycenaean civilization in the eleventh century BC, and finished with the rise of the first Greek city-states in the ninth century BC. It also refers to the time dominated by the epic literature of Homer and by the first written records to use the Greek alphabet, in the eighth century BC.

During this period, having knowledge of any kind meant having practical knowledge of how things come to be and are. *Episteme* (science) and *techné* (art, technique) were mixed with the act of creating (*poiesis*); having knowledge, then, represented knowing how to bring a preferred reality over time through active engagement with things and people in a shared environment⁸.

At the time the Sophists began to act in Greece - the beginning of the fifth century BC - *episteme* and *techné* had started to separate. Although the formalization of this separation was made years later by Plato and Aristotle, its distinction appeared in the predecessors of the Sophists, known as pre-Socratic philosophers, the first to separate rational knowledge of the universal being

from practical knowledge that dealt with the ephemeral world⁸.

For the pre-Socratic philosophers the function of the knowledge was not to stay on a changing world to control it, but to pierce the veil of appearances and transcend the usual limitations using the *logos* (the language of logical argument) to reach the *Logos* (the natural and rational order of the world). These natural philosophers (*physikoi*) emerged at the beginning of the sixth century BC aiming at establishing a world of ideas instead of a mythological world, built through the power of independent human thought, the *logos*, which could be claimed to explain the reality of a natural way⁸.

Starting with Thales (640-546 BC), the pre-Socratic were linked to what Guthrie calls belief that under the apparent multiplicity and confusion of the universe around us there is a fundamental simplicity and stability that reason can discover⁸. This belief led to the great tradition of philosophical dualism, which concerns the division between knowledge and questions of fact and contemplative appreciation, separation between practical intelligence and non-practical intelligence^{9,10}.

The changes occurred in Athens in the early fifth century BC led to the submission of the nobility aristocracy to democracy of citizens; the change of the authority of the aristocracy with their myths to the democracy of public arguments; the decline of the aristocracy of the oracles, which led to the democracy of human laws; the aristocracy of poetry gave glory away to the democracy of the prosaic speeches⁸.

These cultural changes were crucial to breaking the traditional division between practical intelligence and non-practical intelligence that has long characterized the Greek life. With the ability of individuals to use their knowledge and skills to climb the social hierarchy and also to change its own structure, attention naturally turned to the development of an ideal of practical intelligence - to use the resources of *logos* to bring new and better states of existence in the world. The introduction of creative

thinking in arts and civil emancipation brought about a real transformation in society, as citizens and workers were freed from the constraints of caste and sought naturally any and all available resources to move forward in a changing and uncertain world⁸.

The pre-Socratic emancipated the *episteme* of these strictly practical purposes in an effort to give the speculative imagination freedom to roam. By denying the separation between theoretical and practical knowledge, the Sophists put together the two spheres of knowledge without collapsing them, preserving the intellectual autonomy as they recognized that the long-term value of the speculation was measured by the ability to enrich the cultural and political life⁸.

The Sophists were linked to the growing business class that was thriving by offering the ambitious citizens the necessary skills to make the most of their opportunities in politics and economy. This experimental attitude was a reflection of an optimistic era that believed that mankind could control their own destiny through the power of art, once merged with resources of intelligence and methods of invention⁸.

In some Protagoras fragments such as, *the man is the measure of all things; on each subject there are two opposite logoi* [speeches or arguments]; *with respect to the gods, I am not in a position to know whether they exist or they do not exist*, we can extract various metaphysical and epistemological implications, but if we consider them as practical and pedagogical arguments, their effect is to drive the attention from divine to human affairs, from the transcendent to human experience, from the dogmatic belief to the deliberative judgment⁸. Protagoras suggests that the form of knowledge was not divinely inspired poetry, but contrasted human arguments in prose; the preference of Protagoras for the *logos* can be understood as a defense (through praxis) for a new way of thinking about the world¹¹.

It is through the *logos* that the Sophists combine the two poles - *episteme* and *techné* hitherto considered antinomical - of

philosophical thought. The logical analysis of the Sophists is based on historical narratives, offering a provisional explanation of the human condition through time, resulting in a new form of discourse that suggests new solutions to the problems of social organization represented by democracy. Rhetoric was not a special talent for flattery, as later Plato called it, but a new production of a type of discourse capable of merging logic with poetry to form the collective experience of citizenship in *kairótíc* situations⁸.

For Gorgias rhetoric is the culminating expression of the thinking feeling that penetrates deep into the auditorium and transforms their attitudes toward things and ideas in the world. This view is marked by the relation of the diversity and the reality of human experience reflected in the multiplicity of *logoi*, an instrumental view of the theory rooted in valuing *techné*, a methodological interest for constitution of virtue and self-sufficiency in public and private affairs, an experimental stance toward the *logos* which aims style and substance as a means to transform a shared environment through the interaction on a time horizon⁸.

The accumulated social and historical knowledge in the *logoi* of tradition becomes the link between theory and practice. Using rhetoric, the Sophists developed an active process of creation and invention through historical texts⁸. They established this knowledge in the world in which they lived, considering the general ideas about things, such as opposite qualities, justice, good, useful, the laws, the gods, the sciences such as geometry or astronomy, and also the conventions born of a consensus among men for the usefulness of the common life and of each one. There is no universal and necessary knowledge about things; there is no truth, only true opinions on the move and techniques born of experience and observation for the use and action of men⁶.

With the Sophists, the ascetic way of life is abandoned and therefore there is a detachment from the social ambition, from intemperance and from the world at large

until then postulated by philosophy, bringing knowledge, formerly metaphysical and abstract, to the sensible world through the *logos*¹². The Sophists addressed the arts and sciences as resources for the rhetoric creation in order to control the contingencies and reduce uncertainty amidst the conflict and turmoil⁸.

Gorgias believed that any serious rhetorical should master all the intellectual theories of their era to reach new prospects for action. The *logos* is seen by Sophists as a means of turning bad experiences in better ones, as it suggests new possibilities for action based on their own analysis and comparison. It is seen in this attitude the use of resources of theoretical knowledge to inform collective practice and thus to help controlling the fate of humanity in a changing world⁸.

The Sophists used all the resources of reflective thinking to produce productive transformations in a complex and changing environment. Sophistic attitude encompasses what Eric Havelock features as the Promethean spirit of an era in which the man user of tool (as in architecture, navigation and metallurgy) is conjugated with the man as abstract scientist (in numbers, alphabet and medicine) to produce a unique insight into the character and functions of homo sapiens⁸.

When we realizes the sophistic willingness to consider knowledge as something important for assisting the man and his actions on society and the world in which it operates, it is understood that the Sophists were not theorists who turned to the practice, but above all, they were practitioners who developed theories to enrich and enlarge subsequently the practice. Their historical example provides a model of how theory and practice can operate together on developing radical democratic pedagogies guided in an attitude of experimentalism that expresses itself in new creation methods⁸.

The Sophist paideia: formation of the whole man

The Sophist concept of knowledge as something that is useful only when it

modifies and transforms the practice of men in society also includes a conception of education, which includes the set of all ideal, physical and spiritual demands, in the sense of spiritual conscious training of citizen⁵.

It is noteworthy that there are few details about the Sophists so that we can offer an image of the teaching processes and objectives of each of their main representatives, since those philosophers have left no writings that have survived for long. The Protagoras texts were still read at the end of Antiquity, but were forgotten from that time. The difficulty in finding Sophists texts also concerns the fact, mentioned by Thucydides, that the rhetoric *epideixis* of those philosophers was not stable and permanent, but bright fragments to circumstantial auditoriums; their efforts aimed at exerting action on men, not at composing a literary activity. That does not prevent us from recognizing the uniqueness of their educational concepts transmitted by the few works that remained and also the information of doxographers⁵.

The fifth century Athens had undergone significant changes, becoming an urban, commercial, artisan and democratic society; the old *areté*, based on disdain for handwork and on the ideal of training for noble warriors, no longer made sense, gradually losing ground⁶. It was based on the deepest needs of the state's life that the idea of Sophist education was born, which recognized in the knowledge the new and powerful spiritual force for the formation of men at that time, and put it at service of this task. With the Sophists the concept of *paideia*, with the connotation of a conscious theory of education, received a rational foundation⁵. It was an education ruled in spiritual formation, in the acquisition of a culture that had the goal of training the man, the man as such, the whole man as a member of society¹².

Sophists had two different modalities of education of the spirit: the transmission of an encyclopedic knowledge and the training of the spirit in its various fields; the spiritual antagonism of these two methods of

education can only achieve unity in the superior concept of spiritual education⁵.

Spiritual education of the Sophists was represented by Protagoras, who saw in poetry and music major shapers of the soul, along with grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. Such education of the spirit had its roots in politics and ethics, distinguishing from formal and encyclopedic education, because it no longer considered the man in an abstract way, but as a member of society. Thus, education was put in solid connection with the world of values, entering the spiritual formation in the whole human *areté*. It was a form of spiritual education, because the spirit was not considered according to a purely intellectual, formal, or content perspective, but it was related to the conditions of social life⁵.

Protagoras believes that the education of citizens does not end with finishing school, for it is precisely at this point that it starts. For Protagoras, the state laws are the greatest educator force of political *areté*. Civic education properly begins when young ones, after finishing school, step into the life of the state and is forced to know the laws and to live according to its model and example. The idea supported by the old aristocratic *paideia*, whose emphasis was the incarnation of the ideal figure of the man, which should lead other citizens to imitation, becomes a secondary element in the Sophist education. The personal example aimed at putting live under the eyes of students the standard to be followed; the law makes this personal element of imitation disappear, because in this new design the normative element is already maintained and strengthened as the highest element that educates citizens. The law is the most general and concluding term of current regulations⁵.

It is clear, therefore, that it is established an essential link between the higher education and the idea of the state and society. A humanistic education, in the broadest sense of the word, is brought by the Sophists, infusing an ideal of human formation in the depths of the evolution of the Greek spirit and its most essential sense.

In modern times, the concept of humanism refers specifically to education and culture of Antiquity, and this design is based on the fact that it was at that time that our idea of universal human education originated⁵.

It is through the Greek philosopher Plutarch that it is known not only the pedagogical trinity of the Sophists - nature, study and practice - but also a series of ideas linked to their educational doctrine. It is through the example of agriculture, seen as the fundamental case of cultivation of the nature by human art, that Plutarch explains the relationship between the three elements of education. A good agriculture requires, first, a fertile land, a competent farmer and a good quality seed; analogous to agriculture, we have education, for which the land is the nature of man; the farmer is the teacher; the seeds are the doctrines and precepts transmitted by word of mouth. By performing the three conditions with perfection, the result is extraordinarily good. When a poorly endowed nature receives, through knowledge and habit, proper care, its shortcomings can be partly offset⁵.

Thus, there is a possibility of abundant nature to decay and be lost if subject to abandonment. We see, therefore, how the art of education is indispensable, for what we get from nature with effort, if not cultivated, becomes sterile, and may even become as worse as best depicted earlier, by its nature. However, a land can be worse, but if it is cultivated with perseverance, can lead intelligence to yield the best fruits⁵.

The analogy between human education and agriculture penetrated into Western thought, creating the new metaphor of *animi* culture, according to which the human education is spiritual culture. Its metaphorical origin clearly resonates in this concept, derived from land culture. Educational doctrines of later humanism kept this idea, which subsequently conquered central place in human education of people of culture⁵.

The fact that the Sophists were the creators of the concept of culture adapts perfectly to the characterization that is made of them as humanists, even though it was

impossible for them to suspect that this metaphor, applied to man's concept of education, was so rich in nuances, becoming the highest symbol of civilization. The Greek idea of education seen as the application of general laws to the dignification and improvement of nature by the human spirit has in that fruitful analogy its universal foundation⁵.

This proves that the union of pedagogy with the philosophy of culture, by the tradition attributed to the Sophists and especially to Protagoras, corresponds to an inner need. The ideal of human education is the culmination of culture, in its broadest sense; everything is encompassed in that ideal, since the first efforts of man to master the physical nature until the highest degree of self-formation of the human spirit. In this deep and broad foundation of the educational phenomenon, there is the nature of the Greek spirit, directed to what is of universal and total in the being⁵.

CONCLUSION

The Sophist analogy of human education with agriculture allows us to discuss the problem of the relationship between theory and practice, which is decisive to give grounds for the formation of the individual in any field of knowledge.

As seen in this article, the farmer providing himself with a good soil and a good seed is not enough, if he has no knowledge of the techniques necessary for a good cultivation. Likewise, having all the knowledge about agriculture is not enough, if one does not know how to use the theory to grow and solve the problems that arise in daily life. Having theoretical knowledge about agriculture does not guarantee the farmer a positive result in the plantation. It is necessary knowledge about how to deal with the climate weather and pests, among other possible misfortunes. And the farmer will only manage to deal with such situations if he has contact or has, himself, previous experience with cases similar to his, and knows how to use theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge to create new techniques and tools, which being applied

properly, can make him able to overcome difficulties that arise in the course of cultivation.

After making the transposition of these agricultural lessons for the educational field, in the light of Sophist philosophy, we can begin to discuss the meaning of knowledge historically produced by mankind to guide the conduct in the present reality. Sophists taught us to look the theory as something valuable to enrich practice, without taking the theoretical concepts as finished and definitive solutions to the problems facing mankind, but as powerful resources that enable exercising reflective thinking and thus gathering elements that help in the development of new actions based on current experience. The Sophists taught us to combine theory and practice so that men can move this world marked by contingency, where the certainties, if any, are rare.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Tatiane da Silva was responsible for the conception and design of the study, analysis and interpretation of data and writing of the manuscript. **Marcus Vinicius da Cunha** was responsible for the conception and design of the study, analysis and interpretation of data and writing of the manuscript.