HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Sophists (2d half of Fifth Cent. B.C.)

The Sophists were a group of itinerant teachers of knowledge, communication, and the basic principles of thinking effectively. Among the most effective of the group were Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus, although the definition of the group is not that easy, and depends, in fact, on how the group is defined. By a wide enough extension, the term found itself applied at times even to Socrates (#47). (That was the charge made against him by the comic poet Aristophanes, a charge which was one of the grounds for the execution of Socrates.) The reason for this difficulty in defining the group is that these teachers of knowledge and effective thought were only a loosely defined phenomenon, teachers who traveled throughout the Greek world teaching the skills of effective thinking. We might want, today, to compare this loose but vigorous movement to the vogue of thoughtful self-help writers whose books crowd the shelves of Barnes and Noble, and who advise (often very well) on how to speak, think, act effectively in our time. It might be added that today, as was true in fifth century Athens, this kind of educational service can be highly lucrative, and is often looked down on as hucksterism or pandering.

The most significant of the Sophists, and a qualified philosopher to boot, was Protagoras, although virtually all the Sophists make their ways into such philosophical fora as the dialogues of Plato. (Consult the Platonic dialogues *Hippias*, *Protagoras*, or *Gorgias*, to see how these teachers of wisdom are characterized.) Protagoras, for example, was clearly a systematic philosopher, with a world view that turned around specific views, and proved culturally influential. He wrote extensively on grammar, in great detail assorting the effective usages of the Greek language. He staged debate sessions, in which Athenians were invited to consider 'making the worst appear the better reason,' and from there he launches into the issue of relativism and value. He engaged in public discussions of propositions such as that it is impossible to say anything false, for every statement is a statement of something. In short Protagoras engaged closely with the thinking of his time, as did Socrates, who had the misfortune to be tarred with the charge of disrespecting the gods.