MORAL RELATIVISM: IN DEFENSE OF THE SOPHIST'S NOTION OF TRUTH

BY

BLESSING UCHE OPUBOR (Miss)
ART2106458

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY

OCTOBER, 2025

MORAL RELATIVISM: IN DEFENSE OF THE SOPHIST'S NOTION OF TRUTH

BY

BLESSING UCHE OPUBOR (Miss)
ART2106458

AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY. IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A.) DEGREE IN PHILOSOPHY

OCTOBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work titled: **MORAL RELATIVISM: IN DEFENSE OF THE SOPHIST'S NOTION OF TRUTH** was carried out by **BLESSING UCHE OPUBOR(Miss)** with matriculation number **ART2106458** of the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin-City.

DR. E. ASIA **(Project Supervisor)**	**Date**
DR. W.T. OSEMWEGIE **(Head of Department)**	**Date**

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God almighty, who had been my strength throughout this program and my very source of wisdom, purpose and all the good things in life, I dedicate this work to my beloved parents, Hon. Augustine Opubor and Hon. Ifeanyi Chukwuedo who instilled in me the values of hard work and perseverance. And also to my friends, Deborah, Habeeb, Melody, Isioma, Divine and Success for being there for me throughout the entire B.A. Program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who supported me during this project. I extend my deepest gratitude to my wonderful supervisor Dr. Emmanuel Asia, whose guidance and expertise were invaluable throughout this process, your insights helped shaped the direction of my research and significantly improve its quality. Special thanks to my family for their unwavering support and encouragement during challenging times. Your belief in me kept me motivated and your prayers for me were what sustained me this far.

Also, I sincerely wish to acknowledge and thank all my lecturers Dr. W.T. Osemwegie (Head of Department), Prof. P.F Omonzejele, Prof. G. U. Ukagba, Prof. A.A. Asekhauno, Prof. S.I Odia, Prof. Felix Airoboman, Dr. J.N Odigie, Dr E.V Obiyan, Dr. Christopher Osawaru, Dr. Paul Michael, Dr. S. Apologun, Dr V. Jeko and Mr. Ibrahim Abdullahi for their contributions to my academic development and growth through their constant guidance and mentoring. I also want to express my gratitude to all the philosophers whose writings have influenced and enlightened me. Their observations have really helped in refining and expanding my concepts.

Finally, I would like to appreciate God Almighty who made all these possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Through the lens of the Sophists' conception of truth, this work explores moral relativism as a philosophical position. Plato and other ancient philosophers frequently attacked the Sophists for supporting the notion that truth is dependent on circumstances rather than being an absolute, universal category. human perspectives, cultural environments, and rhetorical structures. The Sophists pioneered a relativistic defense that denies the existence of objective moral norms by highlighting the subjectivity of perception and the social construction of meaning. Their method, according to this study, is still pertinent to current discussions on ethics, cultural pluralism, and epistemology. We will utilize the critical analytical method in this research project to get a complete understanding of the subject. Instead of denying the truth, the Sophistic viewpoint reframes it as being flexible, pragmatic, and context-dependent, which promotes tolerance, dialogue, and adaptability. in a world of conflicting ethical assertions. The article explores the benefits and cons of moral relativism in support of the Sophists' viewpoint, arguing that their insights offer a useful basis for rethinking the contemporary language of ethics and politics.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Greek word "sophistēs", formed from the noun sophia, which means ‘wisdom’, so generally it meant one who exercises wisdom. As sophia could designate specific types of expertise as well as general sagacity in the conduct of life and the higher kinds of insight associated with seers and poets, the word originally meant ‘sage’ or ‘expert’. During the fifth century BCE the term, while retaining its original unspecific sense, came to be applied specifically to a new type of intellectuals, "professional educators" who toured the Greek world offering instruction in a wide range of subjects, with particular emphasis on skill in public speaking and the successful conduct of life.

Sophists were itinerant professional teachers and intellectuals who frequented Athens and other Greek cities in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. In return for a fee, the sophists offered young wealthy Greek men an education in aretē (virtue or excellence), thereby attaining wealth and fame while also arousing significant antipathy. The emergence of this new profession, which was an extension to new areas of the tradition of the itinerant rhapsode (reciter of poems, especially of Homer), was a response to various social, economic, political and cultural developments of the period. The increasing wealth and intellectual sophistication of Greek cities, especially Athens,

created a demand for higher education beyond the traditional basic grounding in literacy, arithmetic, music and physical training. The increase in participatory democracy, especially in Athens, led to a demand for success in political and forensic oratory, and hence to the development of specialized techniques of persuasion and argument.

The sophists were primarily practical people especially competent in grammar, writing and public discourse. These skills made them uniquely qualified to address a special social need within Athenian society, they took a fresh look at Athenian thoughts and customs and asked searching questions about them. In particular they forced Athenians to consider whether their ideas and customs were founded upon truth or simply conventional ways of behaving. Not only had the sophists lived in different countries with their different customs but they had also gathered a wide fund of information based upon their observation of a multitude of cultural facts. Their encyclopedia knowledge or different cultures made them skeptical about the possibility of attaining any absolute truth. They set the stage for a more deliberate and careful consideration of human nature specifically how knowledge is acquired and how humans might order their behaviour.

Finally, the period saw the flourishing of a challenging, rationalistic climate of thought on questions including those of morality, religion and political conduct, to which the sophists both responded and contributed. The sophists became popular Lecturers and were the cheif source of new education what made them particularly sought after was that they professed above all to teach the art of "Rhetoric" that is persuasive speech, the

power of persuasion was a political necessity in the democratic Athens for anyone who hoped to rise to the level of leadership. The sophists possessed the exact skills to facilitate this need. The reputation of the sophists was at first very favourable. They provided an immense service by training people to present their ideas clearly and forcefully. In a public assembly, it would be disastrous to permit debate among unskilled speakers who could neither present their own ideas effectively nor discover the errors in their opponents arguments but rhetoric became somewhat like a tool that could be used for good or ill use as on one hand, those who possessed the power of persuasion could use thar posed to psychologically impel listeners to adopt a good idea on the other hand, though persuasive speakers could put over morally questionable ideas in which they had special interests.Their teachings sparked controversy not only because they charged fees, but also because they challenged traditional values—particularly regarding truth and morality.

Most Sophists argued that ethical rules are not natural or divine, but human-made. This view is known as ethical conventionalism as Laws and moral codes vary between societies and cultures. Since societies disagree on moral matters, there is no single, absolute morality. The best laws are not necessarily the most “true” but the most useful or persuasive.

The inherently skepticism of the sophists greatly facilitated a shift from the commendable use of rhetoric to it's regrettable use. In time, the sophists skepticism and relativism made

them suspect. No one could criticize them for training lawyers to argue either side of a case a technique called "Antilogic". Surely people deserve to have their defense presented with as much skill as the prosecutor uses against them. As long as the art of persuasion was linked to the pursuit of truth there could be no quarell with the sophists. But since they looked upon truth as a relative matter, they were eventually accused of teaching the young citizens how to make a bad case look good or to make the unjust cause appear to be just. Furthermore, they developed the reputation of taking young people from good families and leading them in a critical and destructive analysis of their traditional religious and ethical views. To tarnish their reputation further they departed from the earlier image of the philosopher as a disinterested thinker who engaged in philosophy with no concern for financial gain. The sophists by contrast charged fees for their teachings and they sought out the rich who were able to pay these fees socrates had studied under the sophists but because of his poverty could only afford their " shorter courses" . This practice of charging fees for their teaching prompted plato to term them as "shop keeper's with spiritual wares".

It is important to emphasize the individualistic character of the sophistic profession; its practitioners belonged to no organization, shared no common body of beliefs and founded no schools, either in the sense of academic institutions or in that of bodies of individuals committed to the promulgation of specific doctrines.

There is no canonical list of the sophists and there is some uncertainty about the exact nature of the activity, writings, and teachings of the sophists, owing to the almost total loss of their writings. The most important of the sophists include Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490–420 BC), Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 485–380 BC), Hippias (active in the last third of the 5th century BC), Prodicus (a near contemporary of Socrates'), and Thrasymachus (active in the last third of the 5th century BC), all of whom are featured in Plato's dialogues. The so-called Anonymous Iamblichi – text preserved in Iamblichus' Exhortations to Philosophy – is usually thought to be a product of the fifth century, possibly by Protagoras or Democritus. Antiphon of Athens was an orator and is sometimes classified as a sophist because of fragments that are attributed to him.

Finally, Socrates himself (469–399 BC) is a central figure of the sophistic period, and his thinking and activities have important parallels with the sophists, whether or not one agrees with Plato's efforts to categorize him as an authentic philosopher, not a sophist.

The writings of the sophists are mostly lost, but the fragments and testimony for them were collected by Diels in 1903 (Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, 6th ed. (1952)), which remains the basic reference point; more recently, Laks and Most have expanded the collection with more fragments and testimony included (vols 8 and 9 of the Loeb Early Greek Philosophy 2016).

It is by now a truism to note that the sophists have been underrated by philosophers going all the way back to Plato. Our understanding of the sophists is deeply colored by Plato's strenuous efforts to sharply distinguish philosophers from sophists, and in particular to make a case that the Athenians were wrong to regard Socrates as one of the sophists. Much of what we know about the sophists comes from their portrayal by Plato, in dialogues such as the Protagoras, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Gorgias, Euthydemus, Republic as well as the Sophist. Plato does not give us a one-dimensional portrait of the sophists; his very nuanced treatment of the sophists – especially Protagoras and Gorgias – shows how stimulating and influential they were for his own thought, as well as for the development of philosophy and intellectual thought in the 5th and 4th century BC. Other contemporary authors whose work reflects engagement with sophistic ideas include Democritus, Euripides, and Thucydides. The sophists made important contributions to many areas of early Greek philosophy, including ethics, political and social philosophy, anthropology, logic and dialectic, mathematics, the study of language and grammar, literary criticism, rhetoric, the study of the gods and the origins of religion.

Perhaps because of the interpretative difficulties mentioned above, the sophists have been many things to many people. For Hegel (1995/1840) the sophists were subjectivists whose sceptical reaction to the objective dogmatism of the presocratics was synthesised in the work of Plato and Aristotle. For the utilitarian English classicist George Grote (1904), the sophists were progressive thinkers who placed in question the prevailing

morality of their time. More recent work by French theorists such as Jacques Derrida (1981) and Jean Francois-Lyotard (1985) suggests affinities between the sophists and post modernism

The Sophists and Socrates shifted the concerns of philosophy to the study of human beings instead or asking large cosmic questions about the ultimate principles of things. they instead asked questions that more directly relate to moral behaviour. The transition from predominantly scientific concerns to basic ethical questions is explained in part by the failure of the pre socratic philosophers to arrive at any uniform conception of the cosmos.

Moral relativism is the view that moral judgments and values are not universally true but are relative to the cultural, individual, or historical context in which they arise. It denies the existence of objective moral standards that apply to all people at all times.

The Sophists, particularly figures like Protagoras and Gorgias, are often associated with a form of relativism, especially concerning truth and morality. Their views challenged the idea of objective truth and absolute moral standards, which later philosophers like Plato and Aristotle strongly criticized. However, moral relativism can be used as a philosophical defense of the Sophists' notion of truth.

The Sophists believed that truth is not absolute but rather contingent upon individual or cultural perspectives. Protagoras famously claimed, "Man is the measure of all things",

suggesting that what is true or right depends on each individual's perception. Gorgias even argued that nothing exists, and if it did, we couldn't know it, and if we knew it, we couldn't communicate it—a radical form of epistemological skepticism. Moral relativism holds that moral judgments are true or false only relative to a particular standpoint (e.g., cultural norms, individual beliefs) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over others. This challenges moral absolutism, which claims that some moral principles are universally valid. Using moral relativism, one can defend the Sophists in several ways:

1. **Contextual Truth**: The idea that truth varies across cultures and individuals aligns with Protagoras's relativism. If moral values are culturally or individually defined, then truth claims about right and wrong cannot be universally fixed.

2. **Pragmatic Function of Truth**: Sophists emphasized persuasion and rhetoric, valuing the usefulness of belief over its correspondence with an objective reality. In a relativist framework, truth can be seen as that which works within a given context, not what is eternally and universally correct.

3. **Tolerance and Pluralism**: Relativism can promote tolerance by acknowledging that different societies have different moral codes, none of which are inherently superior. This stance echoes the Sophists' willingness to question dominant moral and political norms.

4. **Critique of Dogmatism**: The Sophists' skepticism toward absolute truth challenges dogmatic thinking. Relativism supports this critique by showing how supposed "objective" truths often reflect particular interests or ideologies.

Postmodern and contemporary relativist theories in ethics and epistemology (e.g., Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty) have revived interest in Sophistic thought. These thinkers question grand narratives and support the idea that truth and morality are contingent and constructed.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research work is as follows:

1. The sophists emphasized practical skills, like rhetoric and public speaking, which are still central in modern education, especially in law, politics, and business. Their legacy prompts reflection on what education should prioritize—useful skills or philosophical ideals. Studying the Sophists' use of rhetoric and argumentation techniques can improve critical thinking and communication skills which is proven to be very valuable, examining Sophistic arguments and counterarguments also fosters critical analysis and evaluation of complex ideas.

2. Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias emphasized that truth and morality are subjective, shaped by individual perceptions and cultural contexts. Studying their views helps us

understand the historical roots of ethical relativism and its continued impact on modern debates over truth and ethics.

3. The sophists were some of the first to offer paid education, and their teaching methods and curriculum influenced the development of formal education systems. Studying their approach to teaching, especially in contrast to other philosophical schools, helps us reflect on the purpose and value of education.

4. As the sophists were deeply involved in the democratic politics of Athens, and their ideas often aligned with the growing importance of public debate and individual success in a democratic society. Understanding their influence on Athenian democracy is essential for grasping how philosophy intersects with politics.

5. In democratic societies, the ability to argue effectively, present ideas, and influence others is vital. The sophists were among the first to teach these skills systematically, laying a foundation for modern civic engagement.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The following are significance of the study:

1. It will show that the Sophists were among the first to systematically teach rhetoric, argumentation, and public speaking—skills that remain foundational in politics, law, and education. They introduced the idea that truth and morality can be relative to individuals

or cultures (e.g., Protagoras' claim: "Man is the measure of all things"), bringing about debates that continue in modern philosophy and ethics.

2. They promoted questioning authority, traditions, and absolute truths, encouraging a mindset of skepticism and independent thinking.

3. They also emphasized on human experience and practical knowledge over metaphysical speculation, influencing education by focusing on how to succeed in civic life. Living in democratic Athens, many Sophists taught citizens how to argue in public debates and courts, contributing to early theories of democracy and civic engagement.

4. It will show that by teaching citizens how to argue and persuade, the sophists supported democratic participation, a concept still vital in today's political systems.

5. Their belief that truth and morality can vary across individuals and cultures helps us understand and navigate the diversity and complexity in present-day societies.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this research work focuses on the 5th and early 4th centuries BCE, primarily in ancient Greece, with particular emphasis on Athens, where the Sophists were most active, the study will examine major Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus, analyzing their known doctrines and roles, and critiques of the sophists by

Socrates and Plato. Secondary figures and lesser-known Sophists may be mentioned where relevant.

Majorly focusing on moral relativism regarding the sophists notion of truth and also Philosophical contributions: Epistemology (knowledge), ethics, relativism, skepticism. Influence on Athenian democracy, law, and public discourse.

1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Sophists of the fifth-century BCE – most famously Protagoras and Gorgias – introduced a radical challenge to the traditional notion of absolute truth and fixed moral principles. Protagoras's dictum that "man is the measure of all things" has long been taken as a declaration that truth (and by extension morality) is relative to each individual or community.

Gorgias similarly espoused extreme skepticism in On Nature, arguing that nothing exists and that even if anything did exist it could not be known or communicated. These claims embody the essence of moral and epistemic relativism: the idea that what is true, just, or good can vary with perspective. The fundamental problem, then, is to clarify the implications of the Sophists' perspective on the truth – and on morality – and to articulate why this view presents a challenge to the assumption of universal, immutable values.

In other words, if truth and justice depend on human conventions or perceptions, what room remains for objective moral standards? This question defines the philosophical

issue at stake. In an age of burgeoning democracy and rational inquiry, thinkers debated whether nomos (law or custom) or phusis (nature) is the ultimate source of normativity. As one account notes, fifth-century Greeks asked whether social norms are "in some sense part of or grounded in the reality of things, or…mere products of human customs, conventions or beliefs".

The Sophists frequently sided with the view that laws and moral codes are human conventions, not eternal edicts. They argued, in effect, that if morality is "nothing more than a human invention" it lacks any intrinsic authority.

By contrast, defenders of traditional morality (including many philosophers and traditionalists) held that ethical norms somehow reflect a natural or divine order. Thus the Sophists' relativism struck directly at the roots of classical moral absolutism: if norms are created by people, then moral authority becomes contingent on social practice rather than on objective reality

The relevance of this problem extends far beyond antiquity. The Sophists' challenge to absolute truth presaged many debates in epistemology and ethics that are still unresolved. Their emphasis on cultural and individual perspective anticipated modern concerns about cultural relativism, multiculturalism, and the limits of reason.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research work adopts a qualitative, historical-philosophical and expository approach to examine the Sophists and their contributions to ancient Greek thought. Given the fragmentary nature of their original writings and the dependence on secondary sources, the methodology emphasizes on critical textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and comparative evaluation. Expository in the sense that moral relativism regarding the sophists notion of truth shall be identified and thereafter an evaluative analysis shall be carried out on those notions in comparisons to modern day society.

1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS

This work encapsulates some major terminologies like ; Moral, Relativism, Moral Relativism, Defence, Notion, Truth.

(a) Moral: This is relating to principles of right and wrong in behaviour, especially for teaching right behaviour.

(b) Relativism: The theory, especially in ethics, that conceptions of truth and moral values are not absolute but are relative to the persons or groups holding them.

(c) Moral Relativism: It is a philosophical positions concerned with the differences in moral judgments across different people and cultures.

(d) Defence : This is an argument in support or justification of something.

(e) Notion: It is a mental apprehension of whatever may be known, thought, or imagined; idea, concept.

(f) Truth: True facts, genuine depiction or statements of reality.

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Alasdair McIntyre in his work *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?,* he examines the historical development of moral and rational traditions, particularly in Western philosophy. He argues that different traditions—such as Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Enlightenment—offer competing accounts of justice and rationality that are incommensurable. There is no neutral standpoint from which one can definitively judge between them. This conclusion challenges Enlightenment universalism and supports a form of relativism grounded in the internal coherence of traditions. MacIntyre does not endorse Sophist relativism outright but opens space for its rehabilitation by showing that rationality and morality are not monolithic.[1]

According to Richard Rorty in his work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* ,he argues that truth, selfhood, and community are contingent constructs rather than reflections of any universal order. He rejects metaphysical realism and moral objectivism, favoring a pragmatist, anti-essentialist view. The "ironist" in Rorty's framework recognizes that

1 MacIntyre, A. (1988), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, (New York: University of Notre Dame Press), p. 49.

their values and beliefs are historically contingent, yet can still be passionately defended. Rorty aligns with Sophist thought by treating truth as rhetorical and socially constructed, not as correspondence with reality. He calls for solidarity built on shared hopes, not shared truths, pushing relativism into the ethical domain in a deeply personal and political way.[2]

According to David B. Wong in his book, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism,* he offers a sophisticated defense of moral relativism, which he terms pluralistic relativism. He argues that different societies can develop valid moral systems based on their histories, environments, and needs. These systems can vary, yet be internally coherent and conducive to human flourishing. Rather than saying "anything goes," Wong holds that some frameworks are more defensible than others, even within a relativistic context. He uses insights from cross-cultural ethics and moral psychology to show how diverse moralities can coexist without collapsing into nihilism. Wong's view echoes Protagorean relativism in valuing context over universality.[3]

According Adam Beresford in his translation of Plato's book on *Protagoras and Meno* this edition includes two Socratic dialogues, with Protagoras centering on the Sophist

---

2 Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 89.

3 Wong, D. (2006), *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 67.

Protagoras and his claim that "man is the measure of all things." The dialogue explores whether virtue can be taught and what it means to possess moral knowledge. Protagoras advocates a relativist view of truth and values, arguing that perception and cultural norms shape what people call "true" or "just." While Plato critiques this view through Socratic questioning, the dialogue preserves the complexity and appeal of Protagoras's relativism, making it a foundational text for understanding the historical roots of relativist philosophy.[4]

According to Maria Baghramian in her work, *Relativism* she provides a rigorous analysis of relativism across epistemology, ethics, and science. She surveys historical and contemporary arguments for and against relativism, including its roots in Sophist thought and later development in postmodernism. She clarifies various forms of relativism cultural, cognitive, linguistic and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. While not overtly endorsing relativism, Baghramian defends its coherence and situates it as a legitimate response to the failures of absolutism. She examines how relativism can both empower marginalized voices and risk epistemic paralysis, making her work an essential resource for understanding the nuances of relativist positions.[5]

---

4 Beresford, A. (2005), *Plato, Protagoras and Meno*, (London: Penguin Books), p. 35.

5 Baghramian, M. (2004), *Relativism*, (London: Routledge), p. 88.

According to Gilbert Harman in his work, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy,* Harman argues for moral relativism and challenge the idea of objective moral facts. He contends that moral judgments are context-sensitive and dependent on group-specific moral frameworks. In arguing against moral absolutism, Harman draws on linguistic and psychological evidence to show how people come to moral judgments differently across cultures. He also argues for internal coherence and justification within moral systems, rather than comparison through a single standard. His work is aligned with the Sophist emphasis on the persuasive and socially embedded nature of truth and morality.[6]

According to Emrys Westacott in his book , *The Virtues of Our Vices ,* Westacott defends behaviors commonly considered moral failings like gossip, rudeness, and snobbery by arguing that their moral evaluation depends heavily on context. He uses philosophical argument and everyday examples to show how such behaviors can serve social functions and even enhance human relationships. By questioning the universality of moral judgments, he advances a mild form of moral relativism. While not directly drawing from

6 Harman, G. (2000), *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 44.

the Sophists, his work resonates with their spirit by challenging conventional moral boundaries and exploring alternative justifications[7].

CHAPTER TWO

FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE SOPHISTS TRADITION

2.1 WHO ARE THE SOPHISTS?

7 Westacott, E. (2011), *The Virtues of Our Vices*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p. 25.

The Sophists were a group of traveling intellectuals and educators who flourished in ancient Greece, notably in Athens, during the fifth century BCE. They are typically linked to teaching rhetoric, the skill of persuasive communication, and questioning accepted truths about truth, morals, and knowledge. Despite their significant contribution to the cultural and intellectual growth of ancient Greece, the Sophists left behind a complicated and contentious legacy. While they were revered by some as pioneers of education and critical thinking, others, notably the philosopher Plato, saw them as deceitful and morally questionable.

The Sophists, their main tenets and personalities, the social and political environment in which they emerged, the critiques they received, and their lasting impact on Western philosophy. In ancient Greece, the Sophists were a crucial component of the intellectual environment. They were the first professional instructors, and they met the demands of a democratic society by imparting the skills necessary for engagement in public life. The Sophists made significant and lasting contributions to education, ethics, language, and politics, despite being frequently accused of relativism and rhetorical manipulation. Their legacy persists in many ways in contemporary discussions about truth, morality, and the power of language. Knowing who the Sophists were helps us value both the richness of

ancient Greek thinking and the continued applicability of their questions in the modern world.[8]

Despite their contributions, the Sophists were frequently seen with mistrust, particularly by classical philosophers. In Plato's depiction, Socrates vehemently disagreed with the Sophists' relativism and their emphasis on persuasion over truth. They were accused by Plato of prioritizing winning arguments over finding what is just or true. Plato compares the Sophists' rhetorical abilities to the philosophical pursuit of objective truth in works such as the Gorgias and the Protagoras. Aristotle built upon this criticism by differentiating between dialectic (a reasoned debate with the goal of finding the truth) and sophistry (arguments intended to deceive or persuade). The word "sophist" eventually came to refer to a person who uses astute but deceptive logic as a result of these criticisms.[9]

The Sophists were mostly seen through the negative lens of their detractors for hundreds of years. Nonetheless, their role in intellectual history has been reevaluated by contemporary scholarship. Modern scholars now acknowledge that the Sophists were the pioneers of many concepts in contemporary philosophy, linguistics, political science, and

---

8 Kirk G.S., Raven J.E., Schofield M. (1983), *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 85.

9 Guthrie W.K.C. (1962), *A History of Greek Philosophy; The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*", (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.79.

education. They foresaw moral relativism, in which their idea was that values differ across societies, and they held the constructive belief that knowledge is formed through language and experience. In addition, they theorized on critical pedagogy, in which they proposed an education that prioritizes questioning and opposing prevailing discourses. The Sophists also helped advance the humanist idea that people, not the gods, are the focal point of moral and political existence.

2.1.1 Historical and Social Context

The emergence of the Sophists coincided with a period of tremendous change in Greek history. Athens established itself as the major force in the Greek world following the Persian Wars (490–479 BCE). Its democratic political structure promoted involvement in public life, notably by speaking in the legislature and courts. Success in this scenario was frequently contingent upon one's capacity to sway others via speaking.

The Sophists excelled in the fields of public speaking, debate, and civic virtue education, and this need gave rise to a market for it. In contrast to earlier philosophers, who sought wisdom for its own sake, the Sophists were skilled instructors who charged tuition. They went from city to city, providing their services to wealthy young men who wanted to achieve success in politics and law. The Sophists thus established a model for organized

instruction in secular knowledge and became some of the first paid teachers in Western history.[10]

The Sophists were a group of itinerant teachers and intellectuals. They were known for teaching rhetoric, grammar, and virtue skills necessary for success in public life. Unlike traditional philosophers who sought objective truth, the Sophists emphasized persuasion, relativism, and the power of language. This marked a significant shift in Greek thought from natural philosophy to human-centered inquiry. Sophists charged fees for their instruction, which led to criticism from philosophers like Plato, who accused them of valuing winning arguments over pursuing truth. Socrates, as portrayed by Plato, stood in contrast to the Sophists by advocating for dialectical reasoning aimed at discovering objective moral truths. Nevertheless, the Sophists played a crucial role in democratizing education and expanding intellectual discourse beyond aristocratic elites.

Socially, the Sophists reflected and responded to the rapid cultural and political changes of classical Athens a city experiencing democratic reforms, imperial expansion, and increasing civic participation. Their teachings aligned with the needs of a new class of citizens who sought power through eloquence and public influence rather than noble birth. The Sophists questioned traditional norms, suggesting that laws and morality were not divinely ordained but constructed by societies. Protagoras, a prominent Sophist, famously

---

10 *Ibid*., p 97.

declared, “Man is the measure of all things,” encapsulating their relativistic stance. Gorgias, another key figure, argued that nothing truly exists, and if it did, it couldn’t be known or communicated highlighting radical skepticism. Though often maligned by later philosophers, the Sophists significantly influenced Western thought by introducing critical perspectives on language, power, and cultural norms ideas that continue to resonate in modern philosophy, law, and education.

2.1.2 Key Sophists and Their Philosophies

Despite the fact that the Sophists did not constitute a cohesive school with a single philosophy, they had some common methods and intellectual concerns. Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Thrasymachus were some of the most well-known Sophists.

(a) Protagoras (490–420 BCE)

Protagoras, possibly the most well-known Sophist, is best known for his assertion that "man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not. " This declaration demonstrates a kind of relativism, implying that truth and reality are contingent upon human perspective. Protagoras maintained that moral and legal standards vary from one society to the next because they are founded on social customs. In addition, he pioneered the teaching of how to argue both sides of a topic, which had an impact on subsequent rhetorical instruction.

(b) Gorgias (483–375 BCE)

Gorgias devised a sort of radical skepticism and was a very talented speaker. In his work In NonBeing, he said that:

1. There is nothing;

2. Something can exist, but it cannot be known;

3. It is impossible to express, even if it may be known.

Gorgias employed these assertions, which may appear contradictory or amusing, to emphasize the shortcomings of language and human understanding. Philosophers like Plato were horrified by his conviction that persuasive speech was more potent than reality itself.[11]

(c) Prodicus and Hippias

Hippias epitomized the Sophist ideal of the polymath—someone well versed in all areas of knowledge and was well known for his extensive expertise in a variety of fields, including literature, mathematics, and astronomy. In contrast, Prodicus gained notoriety for his meticulous word distinctions and his insistence on clear and accurate language.

---

11 Guthrie, W.K.C. (1971), *The Sophists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 85.

Furthermore, he investigated the origins of ethical theory, asserting that rational analysis, rather than divine orders, could be used to make moral judgments.

(d) Thrasymachus

"Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger,"[12] Thrasymachus contends in Plato's Republic. This is indicative of a realistic or cynical perspective on politics, in which those in positions of authority decide what is moral. Despite Plato's use of Socrates to counter him, Thrasymachus's ideas still have an impact on contemporary political philosophy, particularly in debates about power and ideology.

2.1.3 Methods and Educational Philosophy

The Sophists introduced many educational innovations like;

Emphasis on Rhetoric: They taught techniques for crafting persuasive arguments, using logic, emotional appeal, and stylistic devices.

Debate and Dialogue: Students were trained to argue both for and against a proposition, sharpening their critical thinking skills.

Civic Education: Sophists believed that education should prepare individuals for public life and civic responsibility, not just personal virtue.

---

12 Kerferd, G. B. (1981), *The Sophists Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 65.

Relativism and Skepticism: They often questioned the objectivity of knowledge and morality, suggesting that human experience is shaped by culture, language, and perception.

2.2 WHAT IS TRUTH

Truth is the quality or state of being in harmony with reality. The most fundamental definition of a statement is that it is deemed true if it accurately reflects reality. Truth is a complex and contentious issue that can be viewed from various perspectives, including the social, practical, objective, and subjective. The fundamental issue in philosophy, science, politics, and daily life is whether truth is found or created. But the subject of "What is truth? " is more complicated and has been discussed by philosophers for millennia. The Sophists, notably Protagoras and Gorgias, contended that reality is contingent upon human interpretation and circumstances.

"Man is the measure of all things," Protagoras famously stated, meaning that the reality for one individual might not be the reality for another. Gorgias even questioned if objective reality can ever be known or expressed. Their perspective challenges the notion of a single, unchanging reality and rather highlights the influence of language, culture, and persuasion in determining what we consider to be true.[13] Truth is the quality of being in accordance with fact or reality. It represents a statement or belief that accurately

13 *Ibid*., p. 69.

reflects the way things actually are. Philosophically, truth has been debated for centuries correspondence theory holds that truth aligns with objective reality, while coherence theory sees truth as consistency within a set of beliefs. Pragmatists argue that truth is what works in practice. Relativists claim that truth can vary between cultures or individuals.

Despite these differing views, truth remains essential for knowledge, trust, and communication. In a world shaped by perception and interpretation, truth may be both elusive and indispensable. It guides scientific discovery, shapes ethical judgments, and underpins justice. Yet, discerning truth requires critical thought, dialogue, and openness. Truth guides scientific discovery, shapes ethical judgments, and underpins justice. Yet, discerning truth requires critical thought, dialogue, and openness. In science, truth emerges through evidence, experimentation, and peer review, though it remains provisional, open to revision with new data. In ethics, truth influences our sense of right and wrong, though cultural and personal differences can complicate moral clarity. In law, truth-seeking is central to fairness and accountability, yet truth can be obscured by bias, misinformation, or manipulation. Philosophers continue to ask whether truth is absolute or context-dependent. Ultimately, truth is not just a concept it is a pursuit, a responsibility, and a foundation for meaningful human interaction.

Truth also plays a vital role in personal identity and social cohesion. People construct their sense of self around what they believe to be true, whether about their past, their

values, or their purpose. At the societal level, shared truths form the basis of collective understanding and cooperation. However, in an age of information overload, echo chambers, and digital deception, distinguishing truth from falsehood has become increasingly complex. This makes media literacy, education, and open discourse more important than ever. Truth demands both humility and courage the humility to admit we may be wrong, and the courage to stand by what we believe is right. Truth has traditionally been seen as a match between mind and reality. The notion that a statement is true if it accurately represents reality is known as the correspondence theory of truth. The idea of an objective truth, something that exists outside of individual opinions or cultural beliefs, was championed by philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and later Aristotle. For instance, mathematical truths like 2 + 2 = 4 and logical truths like the law of noncontradiction were regarded as universal and timeless. Plato went farther, proposing a universe of timeless, unchanging Forms or Ideas, of which physical reality is merely an imperfect replica. In Plato's view, reason and philosophical investigation (episteme) were the sources of truth, not appearances or beliefs (doxa).[14]

2.3 THEORIES OF TRUTH

Every theory of truth provides a unique perspective through which we might comprehend what it means for something to be true. Depending on the perspective, different things are

14 Poulakos J. (1985), *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greec,* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press), p. 77.

emphasized, such as objective reality, language, usefulness, or social context. Together, they demonstrate that truth is a complicated and multifaceted notion that incorporates morality, science, logic, culture, and power. The following is an explanation of these theories.

1. The Correspondence Theory of Truth states that the truth depends on how well a statement or belief reflects reality. A statement is accurate if it accurately represents the way things are in the world. The truth, according to the correspondence theory, is that a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts or reality. For instance, "The statement" The fact that water boils at 100°C at sea level is due to a physical reality in the universe. Thomas Aquinas, Bertrand Russell, and Aristotle are a few well-known supporters of this line of reasoning. Truth is objective; it is unaffected by our opinions or convictions. This is the oldest and most obvious theory of truth, dating back to Plato and Aristotle. According to Aristotle, "It is false to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, while it is true to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not. " The sentence, "The sky is blue," is another illustration. If the sky is truly blue, then this statement is accurate. “Water boils at 100°C at sea level” is true if water truly does boil at that temperature and condition.

Strengths

- consistent with both logic and science.

- Works well with empirical and factual assertions.

Weaknesses

- Difficult to use with abstract concepts, such as morals and feelings.

- The question is raised: how can we establish reality outside of our own senses?

2. The Coherence Theory of Truth states that truth is determined by the consistency and logical coherence of a belief inside a set of beliefs. A belief is true if it makes logical sense within a web of knowledge made up of other beliefs. According to the coherence theory of truth, a belief is only valid if it makes sense within a coherent system of other beliefs. In a mathematical system, for example, the conclusion is true if every component of a proof agrees with the definitions and axioms. Notable supporters include Baruch Spinoza, G. W. F. Hegel, and a few rationalist theorists. Truth is the internal coherence of a set of ideas or beliefs. It gained popularity among rationalists like Spinoza and Hegel, and subsequently in idealist schools of thought.[15]

The validity of a theorem in geometry, for instance, is contingent upon its consistency with established theorems and axioms. In religion, too, a teaching is deemed "true" if it is consistent with the religion's overall belief system.

---

15 *Ibid*., p. 129.

Strengths

Beneficial for systems that are self-sufficient (such as mathematics or ethics).

Prioritizes internal coherence over external validation.

Faults

Which is "really" true since several, opposing systems can be internally consistent?

Truth may be separated from reality (a fantasy world might also be consistent).

3. **Pragmatic Theory of Truth**: What works in practice is true. A belief is true if it is helpful, trustworthy, or advantageous when used to solve real-world issues. Pragmatic Theory of Truth: If a belief or statement works in practice or has positive outcomes, then it is true. For instance, a belief is deemed valid if it enables us to develop successful therapies for diseases caused by bacteria. If the belief that "vaccines prevent disease" results in effective disease prevention, then that belief is true. The belief is considered true if it results in social harmony because of the belief in human rights. What is realistic and helpful is the truth. Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey created it in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the context of American pragmatism.[16]

16 Kerferd, G. B. (1981), *The Sophists Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.76.

Positive Aspects

Focuses on outcomes and human requirements.

able to adjust and adapt to shifting environments.

Weaknesses

A comforting lie might be emotionally effective, but it's not always the case that it "works. "

Truth may be transient or subjective.

4. The Truth is Constructed by Individuals, Cultures, or Social Groups in the Constructivist/Relativist Theory of Truth. It is contextual, linguistic, and dependent on point of view rather than being universal. For example, moral truths vary from society to society, such as the morality of polygamy. The notions of "right" and "wrong" vary greatly among cultures and eras, indicating that moral truths are not absolute but rather created.

Some of the most important proponents of this idea include Michel Foucault, social constructivists, some postmodernists, and Protagoras (Sophist). Truth is not absolute; rather, it is influenced by our culture, language, and personal experiences. It is based on Sophist philosophy (especially Protagoras) and was further developed in modern times by scholars such as Michel Foucault and Thomas Kuhn.

Positives

Discusses the diversity of ideas and values across time and cultures.

Disputes the notion of a single truth and ethnocentrism

Weaknesses

Result in relativism: how can we determine harmful ideologies, such as racism, if all truths are created equal?

Has the potential to weaken the notion of common or objective truth.

5. The Truth's Deflationary (Minimalist) Theory: The truth is not a profound or significant notion. Truth is a linguistic instrument. For example, saying Snow is white doesn't gain anything from simply stating Snow is white. Additionally, saying "It is true that X" does not improve the argument in any way from just saying "X. " Alfred Tarski and others in analytic philosophy contributed to its development in the twentieth century.

Strengths

Reduces needless philosophical theorizing.

Aids in language theory and logical analysis.

Weaknesses

Only discusses the usage of the word "true" without defining what truth is.

“Not helpful for contentious, metaphysical, or ethical assertions.

6. The Redundancy Theory of Truth: The notion of truth is superfluous in language. The word "truth" is merely a way to agree or emphasize; it does not allude to anything tangible. Frank Ramsey improved upon it in the 1920s. As an illustration, you could say "2 + 2 = 4" rather than "It's true that 2 + 2 = 4. "

Advantages

It is quite straightforward and in line with how people speak.

Weak points

It ignores the fundamental question of truth, much like deflationary theory.

2.4 MORAL OBJECTIVES

Moral objectives are the guiding goals or standards that individuals and societies use to determine right from wrong, good from bad, and just from unjust behavior. These objectives serve as foundational principles in ethical decision-making and are essential for personal development, social harmony, and legal systems. Understanding moral objectives involves exploring their origin, nature, and impact across different

philosophical traditions and cultural settings. Moral objectives are vital tools for ethical living and collective well-being. They help guide behavior, resolve conflicts, and promote social order. While people may disagree on their origin or interpretation, the search for moral truth remains central to human experience. Whether seen as divine commands, products of culture, or conclusions of reason, moral objectives shape our understanding of what it means to live a good and meaningful life.[17]

What Are Moral Objectives? Moral objectives refer to the ethical goals or purposes that shape how people ought to behave. They answer questions such as: What is the right thing to do?, How should I treat others?, What kind of person should I be? Common moral objectives include: Promoting honesty, Practicing justice, Respecting human dignity, Encouraging compassion and kindness, Avoiding harm to others. These objectives function as normative standards, meaning they provide rules for how people ought to act rather than describing how they do act.

2.4.1 Sources of Moral Objectives

Moral objectives can arise from various sources, including:

17 Guthrie, W.K.C. (1971), *The Sophists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.115

1. Religion

Many religions provide moral teachings and commandments believed to be divinely inspired. For example, the Ten Commandments in Christianity or the concept of Dharma in Hinduism.

2. Philosophy

Moral philosophers have proposed different systems of ethics, such as; Utilitarianism (maximize happiness),Kantian ethics (act according to moral duty), Virtue ethics (develop good character traits).

3. Culture and Society

Moral objectives are also shaped by cultural norms and social expectations. Different societies may emphasize different values based on history, tradition, and social needs.

4. Human Reason and Empathy

Many argue that humans have an innate sense of fairness and empathy, which helps them form moral objectives through reflection and emotional understanding.

2.4.2 Objective vs. Subjective Morality

This is a crucial philosophical discussion about the objective or subjective nature of moral goals. The tenet of moral objectivism is that there are universal moral truths that

are applicable to everyone, irrespective of their beliefs or culture. Most objectivists would agree, for example, that activities like murder or slavery are always immoral. Contrarily, ethical relativism asserts that moral goals are culturally or individually defined and can differ from one community to the next. For example, the renowned Sophists advocated for a relativistic perspective, asserting that "man is the measure of all things. " In contrast, philosophers such as Plato and Kant argued in favor of objective morality, which is founded on reason or universal forms.

A few useful illustrations of moral goals include:

1. **Justice and fairness**; laws and legal systems strive to maintain justice as a moral goal, and equal treatment under the law is a common notion in many nations.

2. **Human Rights**: The moral goal of protecting human dignity underlies the notion that everyone has inherent rights.

3. **Environmental Ethics**: The moral drive to safeguard the environment and future generations informs goals such as sustainability and conservation.

4. **Medical Ethics**: Moral goals in healthcare include patient autonomy, beneficence (doing good), and nonmaleficence (avoiding harm).

Difficulties in Defining Moral Goals

Moral goals can be, in spite of their significance;

(a) **Debatable**: There may be different opinions among different groups as to what is acceptable.

(b) **Misused:** People could use moral language to defend immoral or harmful behavior.

(c**) Hard to apply**: It's not always clear which moral goal should take precedence in complicated circumstances. For instance, the aim of defending one's nation may clash with the goal of saving life during war.

CHAPTER THREE

CRITIQUE AND DEFENCE OF THE SOPHIST NOTION OF TRUTH

3.1 THE SOPHIST NOTION OF TRUTH

Truth is one of the most basic and yet complicated ideas in philosophy and in everyday conversation. It pervades every aspect of human investigation, including law, science, ethics, and metaphysics. Truth has been notoriously hard to define, despite its widespread prevalence. The fundamental concept of truth tries to express what it means for a belief, statement, or assertion to be true. This essay will examine the main philosophical theories of truth, their historical evolution, their advantages and disadvantages, and their relationship to more general epistemological and metaphysical issues. Truth can be described in a variety of ways, encompassing a wide range of philosophical concepts and

practical issues. Truth has remained a key idea, albeit a contested one, from the classical correspondence theory to postmodern criticisms. The continuous pursuit of truth, while not necessarily explained by any one theory, is crucial to knowledge, democracy, and human advancement. Even though it may be difficult to find, truth is still worth seeking for.[18]

The search for truth dates back to antiquity, with some of the earliest recorded ideas coming from ancient Greek philosophy. The Pre-Socratic thinkers, like Parmenides and Heraclitus, linked truth with existence and permanence, but the Sophists saw truth as subjective and susceptible to rhetorical manipulation. On the other hand, Plato believed that truth is the agreement between our thoughts and the eternal Forms or Ideas. According to Aristotle, truth is linguistic and propositional: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false; while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true. "[19] Within a theological context, medieval thinkers like Aquinas further developed these concepts, defining truth as the agreement between the mind and reality (adaequatio intellectus et rei). The growth of science and empiricism in the modern era led to new theories of truth that placed emphasis on observation, logic, and coherence.

---

18 Bradley F.H (1914), *Essays on Truth and Reality*, (London: Macmillan Co), p.45.

19 Crivelli, P. (2007), *Aristotle on Truth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 57.

3.1.1 The Modern Era's Truth: A Return to Sophistry?

The Sophists' concept of truth has been revisited by several scholars in contemporary philosophy and social theory. Truth, according to philosophers like Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, is shaped by history, politics, and conversation, rather than just a reflection of reality. Foucault argued, for instance, that what a society considers to be true is often dictated by institutionalized systems of power and knowledge. The Sophistic perspective holds that the truth, which is neither objective nor absolute, is influenced by language and power. Additionally, the Sophists' queries about truth are more relevant than ever in today's culture, which is marked by alternative facts, media manipulation, and political divide. Their emphasis on critical thinking, discussion, and the limits of objectivity is a helpful reminder of how complex and fragile our claims to truth are.

The Sophists challenged one of the fundamental principles of Western philosophy: the idea that truth is objective, timeless, and knowable. Truth is relative to human perception, influenced by rhetoric, and shaped by society, the Sophists argued, forcing philosophers to support and explain their ideas. In spite of their frequent condemnation for relativism and skepticism, the Sophists developed novel methods for comprehending language, knowledge, and society. In doing so, they helped lay the groundwork for ongoing discussions about the nature of truth, which continue to have an impact on the world.

3.1.2 A Sophistic Perspective on the Nature of Truth

The question of What is truth? is one of the oldest and most enduring problems in human history. Throughout history, thinkers, from ancient philosophers to modern scientists, have attempted to define what truth is, whether it can be known, and whether it is universal or subjective. The ancient Greek Sophists questioned the notion of truth with an intensity that few other organizations in the history of Western philosophy have equaled. The Sophists, who flourished in the fifth century BCE, pondered whether truth is a subjective reality that is shaped by language, culture, and power, or an objective reality that exists apart from human perception. The topic of truth is explored in this essay, and the ways in which the Sophists contributed to the philosophical discussion about it are discussed.

Truth In Modern Settings

Truth has become a more pressing issue in discussions during the contemporary era. The objectivity and neutrality of truth claims are challenged by postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, who contend that truth is frequently a result of social structures or discursive formations. According to this perspective, the definition of truth is strongly influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors. In the meanwhile, in the era of knowledge and misinformation, concerns about epistemic relativism, media bias, and post-truth politics have sounded the alarm regarding the deterioration of a

common sense of reality. The significance of truth as a societal foundation, not just as a philosophical challenge, is brought into focus by these advancements.[20]

The Regulatory Function of Truth

Whatever theory one accepts, the majority concurs that truth has a significant normative function. It serves as the foundation for communication, the criterion for knowledge, and the objective of inquiry. Truth is important because it helps us navigate the world, make choices, and settle disagreements. The ethical aspect of truth has been highlighted by philosophers like Bernard Williams, who claim that truthfulness a dedication to speaking and seeking the truth is a fundamental virtue without which trust and integrity break down. Truth, in this sense, is a moral need rather than just a theoretical idea. Truth remains a complex and continuously relevant concept in both theoretical and practical terms, as evidenced by the following persistent questions: Is there a single, unified concept of truth, or are there multiple truths across different domains (e.g., scientific truth vs. moral truth)? Can truth be both objective and socially constructed? What part does language play in influencing our view of truth? How can we balance the need for universal standards with the diversity of human perspectives? These questions highlight the enduring complexity of the idea of truth.

3.2 CRITIQUE OF THE SOPHISTS NOTION OF TRUTH

20 Rorty R. (1989), *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 65.

The Sophists, a band of wandering educators in ancient Greece during the fifth century BCE, were instrumental in the evolution of philosophical and rhetorical ideas. However, their legacy is still highly disputed, mostly because of their relativistic view of reality. The Sophists, especially Protagoras and Gorgias, promoted the notion that truth is subjective and dependent on perception, convention, or usefulness rather than based on objective reality. This viewpoint was revolutionary and significant in its historical environment, but in the end, it fails because of its ethical ramifications, rejection of objective criteria, and susceptibility to self-contradiction. Protagoras' well-known assertion that "man is the measure of all things" is at the center of the Sophistic concept of truth. According to this statement, truth is relative to the individual perceiver; what one person sees to be true is true for that person, regardless of what another person perceives. According to this viewpoint, there is no single, unchanging truth that is independent of human perspective. Gorgias took this relativism to its logical conclusion by asserting that nothing exists and that anything that did exist cannot be known or expressed. The validity of truth, knowledge, and communication is called into question by such extreme skepticism.[21]

The Sophists' theory of truth sparked important philosophical discussions, but it ultimately falls short of providing a logical or helpful theory. Its relativism undermines itself, poses a threat to ethical stability, and goes against the principles of reasoned

21 Boghossian, P. (2013), *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.75.

discussion and investigation. Any true notion of truth must go beyond mere opinion and strive for standards that go beyond individual subjectivity. Only through such dedication can ethics, philosophy, and science thrive. The inherent self-contradiction in the Sophists' notion is its most significant flaw. The assertion that all truths are relative must be relative in its own right if all truths are relative and there is no objective standard. This indicates that someone who believes in objective truth is just as right as the Sophist who, by arguing for relativism, defeats himself. Relativism cannot claim any superiority over realism or objectivism if all beliefs are equally valid. Protagorean relativism falls apart due to its own internal inconsistencies, as Plato famously illustrated in works like the Theaetetus.

Secondly, denying objective truth undermines the foundation for ethical and logical discussion. There is no foundation for condemning injustice, deceit, or manipulation if truth is just a product of individual or cultural viewpoint. Plato, in particular, frequently charged the Sophists themselves with employing rhetoric for persuasion and financial gain, regardless of its moral validity, rather than in the search for truth. As a result, their relativism is a useful instrument for sophistry in the negative sense: the use of astute reasoning to mask rather than clarify. In the absence of shared truth criteria, public discourse turns into a battle of might and persuasion, with no ethical means of settling conflicts.

In addition, the Sophists' denial of objective reality threatens the entire field of science and philosophy. The premise of investigation is that there is something to be found, something that is true regardless of our wants and opinions. The Sophists' pessimism offers no prospect of advancement, just an endless stream of views. In contrast to the efforts of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who maintained that rational inquiry could bring us closer to objective knowledge even if perfect certainty remained elusive, this stagnation is glaring. In all fairness, the Sophists did manage to bring attention to the boundaries of human understanding and the influence of language, culture, and power in influencing opinion. They predicted significant issues in anthropology, linguistics, and epistemology. Their insights, however, are more readily understood as challenges to dogmatism than as justifications for complete relativism. Recognizing the impact of viewpoint while maintaining that some truths are better supported by reason and evidence than others is a more sustainable strategy.[22]

Criticizing Truth as Relative

The idea of absolute truth, which is simply a truth that is unchanging, universal, and unaffected by human viewpoint, has long been a cornerstone of Western philosophy. Much of intellectual history has been driven by the search for unchanging truth, from Plato's realm of Forms to Descartes' rational certainties. But this quest is fundamentally

22 *Ibid*., p. 83.

flawed from a relativist standpoint. Truth is a result of human interpretation, language, culture, and context, rather than an objective quality of the world. Treating it any other way is to impose artificial hierarchies on human comprehension and to hide the complex, man-made character of knowledge. From a relativist perspective, the notion of absolute truth is a fallacy that tries to capture the ever-changing, contextual, and fluid nature of human knowledge in a static ideal. Instead of seeking for universal truths, we should celebrate the variety of viewpoints and acknowledge that our identity, location, and interpretation of the world all influence the truth. Contrary to undermining knowledge, this perspective fosters intellectual openness, cultural respect, and critical understanding of the forces that influence our perception of reality.

"Man is the measure of all things," Protagoras, a well-known Sophist, stated as a fundamental tenet of relativism. This suggests that every truth evaluation is dependent on the perspective of the individual or group from which it originates. Something that seems real to one individual may not seem so to another, and both may be equally legitimate in their own context. The validity of absolute truth is put into question by this. The notion of a view from nowhere is a fiction if truth is meant to be separate from perception and all we ever experience are viewpoints. The relativist critique is supported by language itself. The meaning of a word comes from its social usage and interpretation, not from any intrinsic meaning it may have. As postmodern scholars like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have highlighted, the "truth" that we accept is frequently the result of discursive

power language systems that mirror and support particular societal interests. A society's most prevalent "truths" typically reflect the interests of the ruling class. As a result, using the phrase "objective truth" sometimes conceals a political or ideological viewpoint by presenting it as a neutral fact. This criticism applies even to scientific facts, which are frequently regarded as the pinnacle of objectivity. According to Thomas Kuhn's notion of "paradigm shifts" in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, what scientists consider "true" is greatly influenced by the dominant theoretical framework of the day. Einstein's theories redefined Newtonian physics, which was formerly regarded as absolute. This does not mean that science is subjective, but rather that truth is conditional, ever changing, and dependent on context rather than being absolute.[23]

Additionally, assertions of absolute truth often ignore or marginalize non-Western epistemologies. From the perspective of Western scientific rationalism, indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, or spiritual insights are frequently disregarded as "subjective" or "irrational. " This demonstrates that appeals to objectivity can be used to promote cultural dominance and exclusion. Conversely, relativism recognizes the validity of many forms of knowledge, which fosters intercultural discussion, humility, and pluralism. Relativism critics frequently contend that it results in nihilism, or the inability to tell between good and bad ideas. But this is inaccurate. Although relativism does not reject the importance of critical thinking or evidence, it does debunk the misconception

23 Delanty G. (1998), *Social Science: Beyond Constructivism and Realism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 43.

that such decisions are based on a fixed basis. Relativists are still able to assess beliefs, but they do so within specific frameworks, acknowledging that those frameworks are themselves historically and culturally situated.

Critiques of Truth as a Social Construct

According to the traditional view of truth, it is the accurate reflection of an objective reality an autonomous world of facts that people can find and describe precisely. Truth, in this perspective, is unaffected by societal, cultural, or historical factors. However, this viewpoint has come under growing fire from the argument that truth is not found but rather created that it is influenced by social forces, language, institutions, and power dynamics. From a social constructivist perspective, what we call truth is not a neutral reflection of reality but rather a result of human conventions, customs, and systems of authority. The notion that reality is socially constructed shatters the illusion that we can objectively describe an independent, unchangeable reality. Instead, it accepts that truth is produced by human interaction, which is influenced by culture, language, and power. By reminding us to constantly consider not just what we know but also how we came to know it and whose truths are being heard, this viewpoint actually enhances inquiry rather than diminishing it.

Truth is a social creation, but that doesn't mean that the external world doesn't exist; rather, it challenges the notion that our interaction with the external world is ever pristine or unmediated. The lens of culture always filters human knowledge: language, values, assumptions, and categorization methods. Society's notion of "truth" is formed by collective agreement and supported by education, legislation, religion, science, and the media. In this view, truth is created within society rather than found in nature. A central figure in this discussion, Michel Foucault, maintained that truth is inextricably linked to authority. He believes that institutional mechanisms, which decide which discourses are credible and which are excluded, create and maintain truth. For instance, what constitutes "scientific truth" is influenced not only by logic and observation but also by funding priorities, academic gatekeeping, political interests, and prevailing paradigms. As a result, what a society accepts as valid knowledge is more important than truth's correspondence to reality.[24]

This perspective is supported by historical data. In the past, societies believed as "truth" that the Earth was the center of the universe, that women were intellectually inferior to men, or that some races were naturally superior. Religious, scientific, and governmental institutions maintained these socially established truths, which were not isolated errors. The truth shifted over time as a result of changes in social values and power dynamics. This indicates that truth is dependent and changeable, rather than absolute or timeless.

24 Berger P. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Anchor Books), p. 59.

The notion that truth is created is reinforced by language. Our understanding of the world is mediated by language categories, not direct interaction with it. However, language is not unbiased; rather, it reflects the prejudices and priorities of the culture that employs it. Depending on the society, what one may define as terrorism, another may see as resistance. A condition that one generation refers to as mental illness, another may see as deviation. These instances illustrate how cultural, political, and historical factors affect what is considered to be truth.

If truth is just a social construct, as opponents of this viewpoint contend, then all beliefs are equally valid and objective investigation becomes pointless. However, this is a misconception. Truth is not arbitrary, according to constructivism, but rather it is contingent upon the frameworks and social processes through which it arises. [25]The requirements for justification, coherence, and usefulness can still be high, but these requirements are themselves a component of a socially shared epistemological framework. Additionally, recognizing that truth is socially constructed promotes critical consciousness. It enables us to challenge accepted narratives and assess who gains from them. It gives place to underrepresented voices and a variety of ways of knowing, particularly those left out of conventional "objective" systems. Such knowledge is necessary for fairness and mutual understanding in a pluralistic, globalized society.

25 Searle J. (1997), *Construction of Social Reality*, (New York: Free Press), p. 56.

3.3 DEFENCE OF THE SOPHISTS NOTION OF TRUTH

One of the oldest and most commonly accepted tenets of philosophy that truth is objective and universal is contradicted by the idea that truth is relative. Relativism states that truth is not absolute but rather depends on personal, linguistic, historical, or cultural viewpoints. In other words, what is true in one context, culture, or individual may not be true in another. Although this view has strong historical foundations, it is still contentious and has generated significant philosophical discussion. The discussion here is on the concept of truth as relative, covering its historical roots, primary manifestations, supporting justifications, criticisms, and ramifications for knowledge, morality, and society. In contrast, the Sophists took a much more relativistic and skeptical approach. According to them, truth was the product of human perception and persuasion, not an objective reality that existed waiting to be discovered. Rather than concentrating on eternal truths, the Sophists gave more weight to how ideas function in everyday situations, especially in the fields of law and politics.[26]

Protagoras and the Relativistic Theory

"Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not," declared Protagoras, one of the most famous Sophists. Epistemological relativism, which is reflected in this statement, is the idea that truth is

26 A.J Ayer, (1936), *Language, Truth & Logic,* (London: Gollancz Press), p. 54.

contingent upon the individual or group holding a certain opinion. According to Protagoras, there is no way to compare one belief as being more legitimate than another since what is true for one person may not be true for someone else. This perspective immediately refutes the idea of a single truth and sets the stage for relativism and cultural pluralism. For example, democracy might be considered fair in one culture, while monarchy is favored in another. Protagoras held that every perspective is valid within its cultural context, and neither is objectively true nor incorrect.

Gorgias and Skepticism

The subject was advanced by Gorgias, another Sophist. In his essay On NonBeing, he made three contentious statements:

1. Nothing exists.

2. Something cannot be known even if it exists;

3. Even if it is known, it cannot be shared.

Even if Gorgias's argument was likely meant to be a rhetorical exercise or satire, it highlights the limits of language and human understanding. If truth cannot be understood or expressed, it cannot serve as a firm foundation for morality or knowledge. Therefore, Gorgias refuted the entire idea of truth, claiming that appearances and persuasion are more potent than reality.

3.3.1 The Relativist Conception of Truth's History

Truth-relativism is not a recent development. It goes back at least to the ancient Greek Sophists, such as Protagoras, who famously stated, "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not. " This aphorism is frequently seen as a kind of epistemological and truth relativism, suggesting that reality is contingent upon one's perspective or evaluation. Aristotle and Plato both opposed relativism fiercely. Socrates condemns Protagorean relativism in Plato's Theaetetus for eroding the potential for real knowledge. Later, in opposition to relativistic tendencies, Aristotle developed the concept of noncontradiction, a foundational tenet of classical logic, which holds that two contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same way at the same moment. In the 19th and 20th centuries, thinkers like Nietzsche brought relativism back to the forefront in a variety of forms. Nietzsche argued that truths are illusions that we have forgotten are illusions and that objective truth is questionable. In the 20th century, postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault advocated for relativism, claiming that what is considered to be true is frequently the result of power, language, and social norms rather than objective reality.[27]

II. Forms of Truth Relativism

27 Segal L. (1986), *The Dream of Reality: Heinz Von Foerster's Reality*, (New York: W.W Norton), p. 49.

The concept of truth relativism is not a unified theory. Depending on the nature of the truth that is believed to be relative and to what it is relative, it manifests in a variety of ways.

A. **Cultural Relativism**: According to this theory, truth varies between cultures. Different cultures may hold conflicting beliefs about morality, religion, or history. As an example, in certain cultures, sickness may be attributed to ancestral spirits, while in others, it may be explained by pathogens.

B. **Linguistic or Conceptual Relativism**: This theory holds that truth is contingent upon the linguistic or conceptual context in which words are expressed. For example, the proposition "the Earth is in motion" is valid in a heliocentric framework but was seen as incorrect in a geocentric one.

C. **Moral or Ethical Relativism**: The view that moral principles are relative to the norms and values of a given person or community. What is right or wrong is not absolute. For instance, some cultures believe that capital punishment is justifiable, while others believe that it is not.

D. Subjectivism, which is the most extreme version, claims that truth is completely based on personal opinion. Someone believes a statement if and only if it is true for that individual. For instance, under subjectivism, "Chocolate is the best ice cream flavor" is not merely a matter of taste; it is a sort of personal truth.

Modern Thought Relativism

Relativism has shaped discussions on identity, knowledge, and power in contemporary discourse, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. The notion that truth is a result of conversation, ideology, and power dynamics is frequently supported by postmodernism. According to thinkers like Foucault, what is referred to as "truth" is frequently the outcome of institutional authority rather than objective research. Relativism, on the other hand, has grown contentious in the public arena, particularly in the context of "posttruth" politics, where factual accuracy is outweighed by appeals to emotion, personal conviction, or tribal allegiance. Relativism, according to critics, has contributed to this epistemic catastrophe by eroding regard for facts and logic.[28]

Truth is often seen as objective, universal, and accessible via logical deduction or empirical study. But this viewpoint is contradicted by a prominent school of thought in modern philosophy and social theory, which argues that truth is, at least in part, a social construct. According to this viewpoint, social norms, historical conditions, power dynamics, and social practices all influence what is accepted as true. It is contended that truth arises via discursive processes, institutional frameworks, and societal consensus, rather than existing independently of human mind and society. The concept of truth as a social construct is examined in this essay, along with its intellectual foundations, main

28 Schwartz, R. (2019), *Pragmatic Perspectives: Constructivism beyond Truth and Realism*, (London: Routledge Publications), p. 33.

tenets, prominent theorists, criticisms, and consequences for knowledge and society. The traditional conception of truth as objective and independent of human perspective is challenged by the social construction of truth. It highlights how social conventions, discursive practices, institutional authority, and cultural circumstances influence our perception of reality. Although this viewpoint is helpful in understanding the variety of human thinking and in criticizing authority, it also poses serious philosophical issues. One of the most pressing issues in modern philosophy is striking the balance between recognizing the social aspect of truth and preserving the potential for a common comprehension. In the end, understanding the artificial nature of truth calls for both humility and vigilance: humility in our assertions to knowledge and vigilance in evaluating whose interests that truth serves.

Social constructivism is the belief that a large portion of our reality, including knowledge, identity, ethics, and truth, is created through social interaction rather than simply found. While this viewpoint does not always refute the existence of an outside reality, it holds that language, culture, and power structures mediate our perception of it. According to constructivism, truths are not discovered in the world but are created through human agreement, discussion, and negotiation when applied to truth. This method focuses on how something becomes generally recognized as true, not on whether it conforms to any objective reality.

Intellectual and Historical Roots

Truth as a social construct has philosophical roots, but it rose to prominence in the 20th century as a result of the confluence of numerous intellectual currents.

A. **Sociology of Knowledge**: By examining how knowledge is socially conditioned, the early 20th-century works of Karl Mannheim and Émile Durkheim set the stage. Mannheim, in particular, maintained that social interests and class standing influence even scientific and rational knowledge.

B. **Epistemology based on Constructivism**: The concept of objective scientific truth was fundamentally questioned by Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962). According to Kuhn, science advances via paradigm shifts, in which entire frameworks for comprehending the world are replaced, rather than linearly. With the prevailing scientific paradigm, what is considered a "true" change varies.[29]

C. **Postmodernism and Poststructuralism**: Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and other poststructuralist scholars expanded upon this notion by asserting that reality is contingent upon discursive formations and institutional authority. For example, Foucault maintained that systems of knowledge and authority, such as criminal justice, medicine, and psychiatry, create regimes of truth.

Truth as a Social Construct: The Main Arguments

29 Kukla A. (2000), *Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of science,* (New York: Routledge Publications), p. 81.

A. **Reliance on Language**: Our perception and description of reality are shaped by language, which is inherently social. According to the Sapir Whorf hypothesis in linguistics, the speaker's worldview is impacted by the way language is organized. Truth may change between cultures if it is conveyed through language, and language differs between cultures.

B. **Historical Contingency**: Throughout history, ideas about what is true have evolved significantly. Historical transformations from geocentric models of the universe to heliocentric ones, from humoral notions of health to germ theory indicate that truths are dependent upon prevailing beliefs and values rather than being timeless.

C. **Institutional Authority and Reality**: Institutions (such as schools, hospitals, and jails) do not just find truth, according to Foucault; they generate it. Psychiatric discourse and institutional conventions, for instance, influence what is considered a mental illness. According to this perspective, reality is the outcome of the interaction of power and knowledge.

D. **Cultural Relativism**: The world's truths vary between communities, ranging from religious cosmologies to legal structures. Common traditions, rituals, and social conventions support these truths, which are not always reducible to a shared objective core.

Truth in Human Perspective

What is the truth? Philosophers have struggled with this issue for a long time, with opinions ranging from truth as correspondence with reality to truth as coherence inside a framework of ideas. However, an increasingly popular and persuasive perspective argues that truth is a result of human perspective that is influenced by our unique and shared experiences, cognitive frameworks, and sociocultural environments, rather than by an objective, universal viewpoint. Truth, from this vantage point, is not found in a purely external world, but rather created or understood through the lenses of perception, language, and faith. This article examines the notion of truth as grounded in the human viewpoint by looking at its philosophical foundations, analyzing its main points, contrasting it with competing ideas, answering criticisms, and emphasizing its ramifications for epistemology, ethics, science, and society. [30]

Rather than giving up on the search for truth, seeing it as a result of the human viewpoint merely reframes it. It's an acceptance of the fact that the way we perceive our biology, language, culture, and experience determines how we see reality. This perspective fosters humility, communication, and a greater awareness of the variety of human ideas. Truth is made more complex but also more interesting by allowing us to see it as something alive, changing, and very human rather than as a cold, isolated object. Understanding the perspectival nature of truth may be one of the most crucial steps towards knowledge in a world characterized by diversity, complexity, and disagreement.

---

30 Ayer, A.J (1936), *Language, Truth & Logic*, (London: Gollancz Press), p. 67.

The notion that truth is fixed, objective, and independent of the knower is contradicted by the assertion that truth is a result of human perspective. In contrast, this viewpoint holds that;

(a) **Truth is subjective**: We experience the world through the lens of our cognitive filters, emotional state, language, and past experiences.

(b) **Truth is contextual:** The historical, cultural, and linguistic context of a statement or belief influences what is considered to be true.

(c) **Truth is relational**: It comes about through the connection between the human mind and the world, not through either one. This perspective reconceptualizes truth as partial, perspectival, and situated rather than abandoning or rendering it meaningless.

II. Past and Philosophical Context

A. **Existentialism and Phenomenology**: The notion that truth is perspectival has its origins in phenomenology, particularly in the writings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. According to Husserl, consciousness is always intentional directed toward something and our experience of truth is influenced by how things seem to us through this intentional consciousness. Heidegger promoted this perspective, highlighting that truth (aletheia) is the discovery or revelation a process that is profoundly ingrained in human existence (Dasein) rather than correspondence.

B. **Friedrich Nietzsche**: Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously said that there are only interpretations and no facts, provided one of the strongest criticisms of objective truth. According to Nietzsche, truth is a human creation influenced by linguistic conventions, historical forces, and psychological impulses. He contended that the truth is frequently nothing more than a collection of illusions that we have forgotten are illusions, which are made holy by repetition and authority.

C. **American Pragmatism**: William James and John Dewey, among other philosophers, championed a pragmatic understanding of truth, in which the worth of a belief resides in its practical effects and usefulness in human existence. "What works" is how James defined truth, giving experience and action priority over abstract correspondence. In this way, truth develops along with human investigation and is sensitive to human needs and interests.[31]

The Main Arguments in Support of the Truth Being Shaped by Humans

A. **Cognitive and Perceptual Filters**: Our perception of the world is not entirely objective. Cognitive biases, expectations, and past experiences shape our perceptions, which are restricted by the limitations of our senses. Due to these inner filters, what seems "true" to one individual may not seem so to another. For instance, optical illusions

31 Haberma, J. (1987), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), p.56.

show how our perception of the world might differ from objective reality, implying that truth is frequently influenced by what we see, not only what is seen.

B. **Linguistic and Conceptual Frameworks**: Language is the medium through which all human knowledge is communicated, but language itself is a human creation with inherent limitations and cultural biases. The boundaries of our language are the boundaries of our world, as Wittgenstein noted. As a result, the language and grammar at one's disposal influence the way truth is expressed. For instance, the truth is experienced and expressed differently by speakers of different languages because some languages use several words to represent ideas that others combine into a single word.

C. **Historical and cultural context**: Different cultures and historical eras have different notions of what is considered to be true. Different societies hold different truths about the universe, morality, identity, and existence. These truths are frequently well-supported by their own frameworks, rather than being just mistakes that a better informed perspective may correct. For instance, the notions of self and personhood vary greatly between Western individualist and Eastern collectivist societies.

D. **The Experience's Interpretive Character**: Different individuals might arrive at various conclusions even when presented with the same set of facts. Human perspective is naturally interpretive and influenced by emotion, background, schooling, and ideology.

For instance, depending on one's values and perspective, a demonstration might be seen by some as a demand for justice and by others as a danger to society.[32]

Applications and Implications

A. **The Study of Knowledge**: Acknowledging that truth is influenced by human perspective fosters epistemic humility, which is the understanding that our knowledge is contingent and restricted. Additionally, because no one has a monopoly on the truth, it fosters discussion among diverse viewpoints.

B. **Ethics and Morals**: The existence of right and wrong truths may be perspectival, which may result in a more tolerant and pluralistic society, but it also poses difficulties for creating common standards or universal human rights.

C. **Science**: Perspectivists contend that scientific paradigms are shaped by historical and cultural circumstances (as Kuhn showed), whereas science aims for objectivity. However, science is still a human endeavor that aims at intersubjective consensus and is not arbitrary.

D. **The Media and Politics**: The perspectival perspective explains why different communities live in different reality worlds during a time of polarized media and

32 *Ibid*., p.59

alternate realities. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity of critical thinking, media literacy, and cross-perspective involvement.

.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 EVALUATION

The Sophists of ancient Greece, including well-known people such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias, were traveling educators who taught rhetoric, morality, and public speaking. Their intellectual legacy remains both influential and contentious, largely because of their relativistic and skeptical attitude toward truth. The Sophists' concept of truth, which was subjective, contingent, and frequently rhetorical, stood in contrast to the search for universal principles by philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Despite representing a significant advancement in ancient epistemology and ethics, this point of view also begs for severe critique. Ultimately, the Sophists' notion of truth undermines the possibility of objective knowledge, promotes intellectual opportunism, and destroys the moral basis that is essential for legitimate philosophical investigation.[33]

The Sophists' view that truth is flexible, subjective, and contingent upon persuasion represents a pivotal moment in the history of ideas, as the emphasis switched from metaphysics and nature to human issues and language. But, at the end of the day, this contribution is flawed. The Sophists undermined the very prerequisites for logical reasoning, moral debate, and political fairness by rejecting the existence of objective truth

33 Waterfield, R. (2010), *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*", (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 51.

and prioritizing rhetoric over logic. Their method raises doubts about the possibility of knowledge as well as about their teachings. Our criticism of the Sophists reminds us that truth, however elusive, should still be the primary goal of philosophy, an ideal that should not be given up in favor of usefulness or strength.

1. **Epistemological Incoherence and Relativism**: Protagoras, possibly the most well-known of the Sophists, proclaimed that "man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; and of things that are not, that they are not. " At first glance, this claim supports the idea that people have the right to interpret reality for themselves. Truth, however, is relative to each individual's perspective, which means that no idea can be said to be more truthful than another. This viewpoint results in epistemological inconsistency. The assertion that "truth is not relative" must also hold true for someone if all truths are relative, and cannot be universally rejected. Protagoras' assertion is thus refuted by its own logic. The doctrine of relativism cannot be accepted as a reliable principle if it is true for some people but not for others.

In addition, relativism undermines the logical foundation for conversation and debate. It is pointless to disagree if each side's viewpoint is legitimate and shielded from criticism. The quest for knowledge assumes that there are criteria for evidence, that some ideas are more supported than others, and that truth is above personal opinion. Without shared criteria, conversation descends into a cacophony of disparate viewpoints, none of which can assert its superiority or even its clarity to others. Furthermore, error is not explained

by relativism. Hallucinations, errors in judgment, and illusions would be considered legitimate truths if perception were always accurate for the perceiver. The difference between reality and how it seems, which is crucial to both philosophy and science, is eliminated by this.

2**. Rhetoric Over Reason; Truth as Persuasion**: Many believed that the Sophists, who were experts in rhetoric, saw truth as something that could be created through persuasive discourse rather than something that could be found. This notion was taken to its extremes, especially by Gorgias. He became well-known for saying in his book On NonBeing that:

1. There is nothing.

2. It is impossible to know if something exists;

3. Even if it can be known, it cannot be expressed.

Although they may be satirical or hyperbolic, these claims suggest an excessive doubt about language and knowledge. They equate truth with linguistic competence, implying that the most important thing is not whether a statement matches reality but whether it is persuasive to an audience.

This point of view makes truth dependent on skill and authority, rather than on logical comprehension. Aristophanes' satire of Socrates and the Sophists in The Clouds

demonstrates how a talented orator can "make the weaker argument appear stronger. " By divorcing language from accountability, such a strategy promotes irresponsibility. The convincing power of an argument outweighs its logical soundness or factual accuracy. This is comparable to spin, propaganda, or marketing in today's world: the capacity to influence opinion regardless of the underlying reality. Without a dedication to the truth, public debate may be skewed, and democratic discussion might turn into a battle for verbal supremacy rather than a search for justice or knowledge, which poses an obvious threat.[34]

3. **Moral and Political Repercussions**: Sophisticated relativism applies to ethics and politics as well. Objective values are nonexistent if there are no objective facts. What is "good," "just," or "virtuous" is determined by each culture or person according to custom or practicality. The norm (nomos), rather than nature (physis), determines morality. This has significant ramifications for society. In Plato's Republic, the character Thrasymachus, while not a Sophist in the strictest sense, expresses a perspective that is in line with their relativism: "Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. " This means that right and wrong are determined by political power, and that laws are simply tools that ruling elites employ to maintain their dominance. If ethics is reduced to a function of power, then there is no basis for denouncing injustice, oppression, or tyranny if it is tolerated or enforced by the existing social system.

34 Blackburn, S. (2010), *Truth: A Guide*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 57.

The notion of universal human rights, civic duty, and ethical accountability are all eroded by this. It also narrows education down to simply teaching useful skills and persuasion, rather than fostering personality development or the pursuit of knowledge. The ideal citizen in such a system is not the moral individual dedicated to the good, but rather the astute speaker or strategist who is able to utilize social conventions to their benefit. This idea of virtue, which is based on effectiveness rather than morality, foreshadows the modern politics of perception and Machiavelli's cynicism.

4. **Socratic and Platonic Rebuttals** : Socrates and Plato offered some of the most enduring and persuasive critiques of Sophist thinking. Through his dialectical method, Socrates exposed the internal contradictions and superficiality of many Sophist claims. He refused to accept rhetorical skill as a substitute for knowledge and insisted that the pursuit of truth required definitions, coherence, and intellectual humility. In dialogues like the Theaetetus and Protagoras, Plato engages directly with Sophistic ideas. In the Theaetetus, Socrates challenges the idea that knowledge is perception, showing that perception can vary due to external conditions (e.g., wind may feel cold to one person and not to another) without changing the reality of the object. He points out that subjective experiences can’t serve as a stable foundation for knowledge.

Plato’s own response was to construct the Theory of Forms, which posits that abstract, eternal truths such as justice, beauty, and equality exist beyond the flux of the physical world and subjective opinion. While this metaphysical doctrine is itself controversial, it

preserves a crucial philosophical insight: that truth and value must be objective, universal, and knowable through reason. Plato also criticizes Sophists for charging money for knowledge, suggesting that they are more interested in profit and prestige than in truth. By contrast, the true philosopher is guided by the love of wisdom, not by personal gain. In the Gorgias, Socrates argues that rhetoric without a commitment to truth is a form of flattery akin to cooking or cosmetics designed to please rather than to heal or improve.[35]

4.2 SUMMARY

The Sophists were influential intellectuals in fifth-century BCE Greece who had a unique and contentious viewpoint on truth. The Sophists maintained that truth is relative, subjective, and frequently influenced by language and persuasion, as opposed to being based on an external reality, as philosophers like Socrates and Plato believed. The fundamental principle of the Sophistic viewpoint is Protagoras' well-known assertion that "Man is the measure of all things. " The notion that truth depends on an individual's perception is represented by this form of epistemological relativism. According to this perspective, what appears to be true to someone is true for them, and there are no universal truths. There is no way to assert objective superiority because people and cultures may have different viewpoints. Other Sophists, such as Gorgias, took skepticism to new heights. In his writings He contended in NonBeing that nothing actually exists and

35 Corey D. (2015), *The Sophists in Plato's Dialogues*, (New York: State University of New York Press), p.72.

that even if it did, it would be impossible to know or express it. The Sophists' widespread distrust of established facts and their focus on the dominance of rhetoric over logic are reflected in this extreme skepticism about reality and communication.

Truth, according to the Sophists, was less about identifying everlasting principles and more about what could be effectively argued in a particular social or political situation. Rhetoric was taught by them as a useful skill for achieving success in public life, especially in the courts and assemblies of democratic Athens. They believed that a claim could be considered true in a certain setting if one could persuade an audience of it. The political and moral consequences of this idea of truth were enormous. Many Sophists regarded virtues like justice and morality as just social norms by rejecting the concept of universal moral norms. As a result, critics, particularly Plato, charged them with using their skilled rhetoric to advance intellectual opportunism for personal or political advantage rather than seeking knowledge, which they claimed was detrimental to morality. In response, Socrates and Plato severely criticized the Sophists. They maintained that truth is objective and accessible via reason, and that rhetoric without a basis in reality results in moral corruption and dishonesty. Plato believed that true knowledge should strive for unchanging realities what he referred to as the "Forms"—rather than fluctuating opinions.[36] The Sophists' conception of truth represented a revolutionary and significant break from conventional philosophical thought. They

36 Cassin, B. (2014), *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism,* (New York: Fordham University Press), p.57.

emphasized the complexity of knowledge and language by focusing on subjectivity, perception, and rhetoric. However, their thoughts also raised persistent worries about relativism, manipulation, and the decline of common criteria for truth and ethics.

4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sophists' theory of truth, which prioritizes rhetorical persuasion, perception, and relativism, offers both practical insights and philosophical difficulties. Their notion that truth is not set but rather varies based on personal or cultural viewpoints has had an impact on areas like rhetoric, education, and political theory. But the Sophists' relativistic perspective also runs the danger of eroding objectivity, moral principles, and logical reasoning. Given the benefits and drawbacks of Sophistic thinking, this article provides a number of suggestions for how contemporary philosophers, teachers, and students of philosophy should approach and interact with the Sophists' idea of truth. The Sophists' concept of truth pushes us to reconsider our preconceptions about knowledge, communication, and ethics. They are dangerously at risk if their relativism and focus on rhetoric are carried too far, even though they raise important issues. To engage constructively with Sophistic thinking, one must strike a balance between being receptive to a variety of viewpoints and adhering to moral principles and logical criteria. We can develop a more thoughtful and resilient approach to truth in both philosophy and public life by acknowledging the value of their insights while also addressing their extremes.

1. **Acknowledge the Historical and Intellectual Significance of Sophistic Thought**: The first suggestion is to acknowledge the historical significance of the Sophists in the evolution of Western philosophy. The Sophists were among the first to move the focus of philosophical investigation from nature (physis) to human society (nomos), even though Platonic conversations frequently portray them in a negative light. They challenged traditional ideas of truth, justice, and morality, which paved the way for discussions on language, education, and cultural diversity. The Sophists should be viewed by contemporary readers not simply as liars or manipulators, but as creative thinkers who highlighted the practical and contextual character of human knowledge. Their research served as the foundation for contemporary fields like communication studies, linguistics, and legal theory.

2. **Strike a Balance Between Relativism and the Norms of Rational Investigation**: The Sophists were correct in questioning the notion of absolute truths in many social and moral realms, but their excessive relativism results in practical issues and internal contradictions. As a result, a balanced approach is advised, one that acknowledges the limitations of objectivity while still upholding the value of rational criteria for assessing arguments and beliefs. For example, it's helpful to acknowledge that cultural viewpoints vary and that many moral or political beliefs are context-specific. We must also maintain standards of moral justification, empirical evidence, and logical consistency throughout

our discussions. This fosters a strong dedication to intellectual honesty as well as acceptance of diversity.

3. **Differentiate Rhetoric from Truth-Seeking**: It is also crucial to explicitly differentiate between rhetoric as a means of persuasion and philosophy as a way of truth-seeking. The Sophists frequently blurred this boundary, equating truth itself with persuasive discourse. This confusion can result in misinformation, manipulation, and erosion of public trust, particularly in contemporary settings like politics, advertising, and the media. Rhetoric should be taught by educators and intellectuals not as a replacement for reality, but rather as a talent that must be governed by moral and epistemic accountability. While effective communication is beneficial when used to promote truth and justice, it can be harmful when used to twist or hide the truth.

4. **Promote Critical Engagement Rather Than Dismissal**: Rather than dismissing the Sophists as morally or intellectually bankrupt, we should encourage critical engagement with their ideas. Their critique of conventional philosophy continues to be pertinent, especially in postmodern and multicultural settings. The limits of objectivity, the role of power in influencing belief, and the artificiality of knowledge are still important topics in current discussions. By critically engaging with the Sophists, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of truth, viewing it as a complicated interaction between logic, experience, culture, and conversation rather than a straightforward dichotomy between relativism and absolutism.

5. **Encourage the Moral Use of Language and Persuasion**: The ethical obligations associated with persuasive power must be emphasized. Although the Sophists excelled at rhetoric and argumentation, their apparent disregard for the truth made people fear that these abilities may be abused. In contemporary education, law, and public discourse, it is crucial to teach ethical communication, which includes not just how to make an argument but also when and why to do so ethically. This involves encouraging qualities such as intellectual humility, tolerance of different viewpoints, and a genuine dedication to fairness. This kind of ethical foundation makes sure that rhetorical talent serves to improve group understanding rather than just oneself or one's political agenda.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The Sophists' notion of truth is a turning point in the development of Western philosophy. The Sophists presented a dynamic perspective of knowledge that contrasted with the objective, universal realities pursued by philosophers like Socrates and Plato by emphasizing that truth is relative to human perception and influenced by language, social conventions, and persuasive power. Their strategy emphasized the significance of context, subjectivity, and convention in human comprehension, particularly in areas such as education, politics, and law. Nonetheless, this relativistic viewpoint presents significant ethical and philosophical quandaries despite its originality. The essence of the Sophistic perspective on truth is that it threatens the very basis of ethical evaluation and logical discourse. The quest for knowledge, ethical principles, and critical thinking are

meaningless if all truths are equally valid. When truth is reduced to what is persuasive, manipulation is made possible, and mastery of rhetoric takes precedence over honesty, reason, and fairness. Truth becomes a matter of convenience rather than a commitment to what is real or right in a world that is shaped by such a perspective, where power dictates faith.

The Sophists should not be completely disregarded despite these flaws. Their understanding of the potency of language and the manufactured character of societal realities is still applicable, particularly in today's environment of media manipulation, cultural diversity, and political polarization. The trick is to use the Sophists' contributions while avoiding their extremes. A contemporary reaction must strike a balance between respecting cultural variety and individual viewpoints and a common dedication to logical discourse, intellectual integrity, and moral communication. Ultimately, the Sophists' conception of truth forces us to rethink how we define and protect truth in an ever more complicated and subjective world. Their legacy serves as a reminder that truth must strive beyond opinion and utility, even if perception and persuasion are potent. By engaging with their ideas in a responsible way, we may develop a deeper, more contemplative grasp of truth that respects both the complexity of human nature and the ongoing need for clarity, justice, and wisdom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ayer, A.J. (1936), *Language, Truth & Logic*, London: Gollancz Press.

Baghramian, M. (2004), *Relativism*, London: Routledge.

Beresford, A. (2005), *Plato, Protagoras and Meno*, London: Penguin Books.

Berger P. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Anchor Books.

Blackburn, S. (2010), *Truth: A Guide*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boghossian, P. (2013), *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bradley F.H (1914), *Essays on Truth and Reality*, London: Macmillan Co.

Cassin, B. (2014), *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism,* New York: Fordham University Press.

Corey D. (2015), *The Sophists in Plato's Dialogues*, New York: State University of New York Press.

Crivelli, P. (2007), *Aristotle on Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Delanty G. (1998), *Social Science: Beyond Constructivism and Realism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Guthrie W.K.C. (1962), *A History of Greek Philosophy; The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Guthrie, W.K.C. (1971), *The Sophists*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haberma, J. (1987), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Harman, G. (2000), *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kerferd, G. B. (1981), *The Sophists Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kirk G.S., Raven J.E.,& Schofield M, (1983), *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kukla A. (2002), *Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science,* New York: Routledge Publications.

MacIntyre, A. (1988), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, New York: University of Notre Dame Press.

Poulakos J. (1985) *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greec,* South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.

Rorty R. (1989), *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schwartz, R. (2019), *Pragmatic Perspectives: Constructivism beyond Truth and Realism*, London: Routledge Publications.

Searle J. (1997), *Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press.

Segal L. (1986), *The Dream of Reality: Heinz Von Foerster's Reality*, New York: W.W Norton.

Waterfield, R. (2010), *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Westacott, E. (2011), *The Virtues of Our Vices*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Wong, D. (2006), *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*, New York: Oxford University Press.