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THE SOPHISTIC WAY TO MORAL PERFECTION

The theories of ancient Greek philosophers (and they do not differ in this respect from other philosophers) and their different concepts are quite often, as it is not so difficult to see, encumbered with a serious logical error, which is known as an error of unjustified or inadequately validated premises. This is an error, which as a matter of fact, disqualifies these theories and concepts on the grounds of logical correctness. Theses introduced as conclusions from unjustified or inadequately validated premises cannot be considered as being absolutely true. However, this does not completely disqualify these theories or concepts, because they can be treated as inspirations of sorts to one's own considerations, particularly if they are connected with metaphysical or moral issues. Such a procedure is licensed because, as we also know from logic, the fact of initial theses being unjustified in the logical inferences (which form logical reasons for conclusions which can be reached from them) does not preordain the falsity of these conclusions, although obviously it does not validate them logically. They can be true but they can also be false. This is simply the result of logical entailment, which allows for truth to be logically inferred not only from truth but also from falsehood, and vice versa. Falsehood may logically lead both to truth and falsehood. Obviously, no one who is sensible – that is no one who understands these logical implications will make these theories absolute, and in general will make any such branches of knowledge absolute; after all, they might be accused of an error of unjustified premises, or even an error of lack of truthfulness (the so called material error), which happens to be the case with almost all ideas and ideologies, not only

with philosophical ones. A sensible person will be prevented from doing so by the rule of an adequate right, which demands logical justification for all theses and theories deemed true or just. However, they can form inspirations for one's own deliberations and can help in the search for one's own solutions when we are aware of their logical infirmities and that these are proposals which cannot be deemed faultless, let alone exclusive.¹ The text which follows should be treated in this way, that is not as a scientific research paper, but it includes deliberations of sorts inspired by the philosophical and moral ideas of Greek Sophists, particularly of Protagoras from Abdera, which still seem to be topical and are definitely interesting and inspiring.

The deliberations which follow are concerned with one such ancient theory, which is very doubtful in the area of logical correctness for the reasons presented above, but a theory which is by all means worthy of attention, particularly because it is concerned with one of the fundamental moral issues, which still has not been solved. This issue is undoubtedly philosophical. It is one of the issues philosophers have to cope with, but at the same the issue is existential, with which all people have to cope with, or at least people who care for moral maturity (let us add that they have to cope with it not necessarily in the theoretical sense, constructing some theory on it, but definitely in the existential sense). The problem is sources of human moral consciousness. This is not a theoretical problem, or at least not an exclusively theoretical one. This is a predominantly existential problem. It can be claimed that this problem is more existential than theoretical, one of the problems which are barely contained in the purely rational systems, and which cannot be easily and finally, if at all, studied and grounded in purely rational categories, and

¹ The author of this text has a special key (or maybe only a lock pick) to deal with these problems: he refers to what he calls (obviously only for his own use) a natural internal moral and spiritual sensitivity, and to existential experience connected with it. At the same time he is, obviously, aware that referring in philosophy to such tools as internal sensitivity and existential experience leads to the subjectivism of such philosophy and of all ideas derived from the application of such tools.

definitely not in the canons of logical deduction (although such attempts have also been made). This is an extremely important problem. One or another solution to this problem (not necessarily, as has been mentioned, rational) influences in some ways the ethical quality of our life.

The problem of sources of moral consciousness is in fact a question about the basis of our individual consciousness of good and evil. In other words, this is a question about the ways through which we know that something is good and something else is bad, and the grounds on which we are capable of morally judging the behaviour of ourselves and of other people. In more comprehensive terms, this is a question about the sources of moral law in general. It is known that ancient philosophers dealt with such issues, although not always in direct ways, and these theories still provide us with, as it is said, food for thought, and are worthy of consideration.

In Antiquity there were several solutions to this issue. One of the most interesting solutions was the proposal of Greek Sophists from the fifth and partly fourth centuries B.C., particularly the proposal of the above mentioned Protagoras.

The Greek Sophist movement was at the same time very complex and varied. It is possible to present some of its common themes and some common ways of dealing with these themes, and also ideas which allow us to treat this movement holistically. In the most general terms the Sophist movement had its ideological sources in the Ionian philosophy of nature, and it was mostly from there that it drew its inspirations, although it shifted the focus from nature to man, and more specifically to man in his natural habitat, that is, in their view, in a (state) society and culture understood in very wide terms. On the other hand, this movement, and particularly its moral and political ideas, were shaped by social and political (and as a result also institutional) changes in Greece in the seventh, sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and particularly by the rise of democracy with all the consequences connected with it, such as an obligation to participate in the political life of a state (in Athens from the times of Solon it was regulated by law). This was accompanied by changes

in the moral sphere. The idea of virtue (and the idea of nobility connected with it) underwent a process of re-evaluation. Nobility, from the value characterizing “noble”, that is aristocratic background, became the feature of a noble character (which can be noticed in Greek poets, particularly the authors of tragedies). Virtue, which had been earlier (that is in the times of the rule of aristocracy) identified with knightly valour and ideals promoted as early as Homer, ideals unequivocally connected with aristocracy, which had little in common with moral nobility, started to take on social significance, but also internal or even spiritual significance.² Political and institutional changes forced the changes in the sphere of morality and culture in general. The Sophists were a part of this process. It can even be claimed that their role, if not fundamental, was at least very important: they were the authors of what is known as the Greek Enlightenment. The first step was taken by the Ionian philosophers of nature; a very important one indeed. They caused “demythologization” (and “rationalization”) in the way in which Greeks looked at the world of nature, but also “rationalization”³ (and “demythologization”)

² Treating virtue as an internal and spiritual value will be characteristic mostly of philosophers. With the flow of time this ‘internal’ understanding of virtue as a feature of a soul and a character will eliminate understanding of virtue as a political value, but this will happen as late as the Hellenistic period, when political activities cease to be a moral obligation, or even necessity - kings will reign on their own, without the help of the people.

³ I am using the terms “demythologization” and “rationalization” here, obviously, not in the contemporary manner, but in the way the ancient Greeks used it (hence the parentheses). The world in the eyes of the Greeks was always rational, because it was ruled by a rational God (this is particularly well seen in Hesiod). It was rational, not with human, but with divine rationality, although human rationality was taken to be a natural part of the divine rationality ruling the world. The rules of this world were also rational. However, they were not fulfilled through sapience only. Paradoxically, the rational order of the world was fulfilled not through reason alone, but through love (Eros). The world was rational to the extent that love ruled it, exactly in the same way as it happens in human life. Let us remember that the Greeks usually called a man a microcosm, but probably they thought in reverse terms—probably the world was a “macro-anthropos” for them. Similarly to the life

of the concept of divinity. These philosophers rationalized the Greeks' views about the world. They discovered natural mechanisms in which the world exists, and natural mechanisms behind all natural phenomena; phenomena which according to myth had been ruled by gods. All phenomena, which till this moment had been understood as the results of the actions of mythological gods, were explained by them through natural structures and mechanisms of the world. The Ionian philosophers discovered that the world is governed by its own, natural rules, which are a natural way of existence of this world, and which derive from its internal structures. Both these structures and these laws are, according to them, the effect of the internal process of development of this world; the world develops as the result of natural, internal and absolutely autonomous forces, which are embedded in it—are embedded in what is its existential, organic centre, which is also the source of its vitality. This entity was called, since the times of Anaximander, "arche", that is the rule, the original source. Its immanent attributes are creativity and dynamism. These are the features which make it develop in the process of the peculiar dialectic evolution (perennial) of the cosmos. These features of "arche" caused both the creation and the ceaseless development of the world.

The Ionian philosophers discovered one more important thing. They discovered that the nature of the world is rational and intelligent. That is, that apart from creativity and dynamism it has one more attribute: sapience. This thesis is very important because it means

of man, this world was ruled by rational order, when it ruled by love (and similarly in the life of man it is ruled by rational order only when *man* is directed by love). The rationality of the world, however, eluded human rationality. It was bigger than man. It was a mystery to him. What was divine was in fact inconceivable. It could not be expressed in categories of the human mind, geared towards research and understanding of the world of nature, not of the supernatural (divine) world. The human mind was, in fact, left just with one option: to actively accept the rules and verdicts of the gods lurking behind them. Both these rules and verdicts were inevitable and inescapable. Greek tragedies, particularly those of Aeschylus and Sophocles, tell about it in a specific way.

that the world is ruled by rational law.⁴ The first to notice it was Anaximenes, who decided that air, that is the beginning, the first source, the first cause of everything, is intelligent. It was Heraclitus from Ephesus, in his philosophy of Logos, who most strongly, of all the Ionian philosophers, stressed the rational order of nature and its rules. Heraclitus, in general, identified the laws of nature with divine Logos, the internal Reason of the world. The rationality of the laws of nature also means that they can be understood by human minds. And reason is their spokesman. These findings are very important because they later re-appeared in some way in the philosophy of the Sophists and Socrates.

In a manner of speaking, similar demythologization and rationalization was applied by the Ionian philosophers of nature to the Greek concept of divinity. According to these philosophers, there do not exist two realities—that is of the cosmos on the one hand and God or gods (from the myths of Homer or Hesiod) on the other. There is just one reality: Cosmos. However, divinity was not removed from the world or from the natural consciousness of Greeks; it was only modified. It was only the mythological gods who were removed. Divinity, as such, remained. What is more, the world itself became divine; divine, that is creative and dynamic, in general perennial and non-created

⁴ In Greece, the conviction about the rationality of reason governing the world existed for a long time, since Homer and Hesiod. The laws of Homeric Moira, which form the foundation of moral laws from people and gods, are rational (although they are fulfilled not through the power of reason). Their spokespersons and guardians are the minds of gods; anyway human minds know and understand them, while in the poems of Hesiod the world is ruled by Zeus, with his reason and integrity. Reason and Integrity are Zeus's wives, and therefore, in a way, his attributes. Reason and Integrity will, sometime later, become intrinsic attributes of the divinity ruling the world, and, in general, attributes of the divinity or god. Xenophanes stressed it very strongly, and at the same time he mocked the anthropomorphism of Greek theology. Anaxagoras, Plato and Aristotle followed suit. At the same time, however, the philosophers were aware that it was not reason but love that was the foundation of the rational order of the world. It was Empedocles who was most emphatic in this, but even the greatest of Greek rationalists, Aristotle, noticed it.

(the world constantly creates itself; it ceaselessly processes itself⁵). Creativity and dynamism plus sapience and eternity are, obviously, divine features, attributes of—so to say—the gods or divinity. These are the features of the world's nature. That is why it is divine. In this way divinity was identified with the nature of the world, or anyway, with what is most important and at the same time most rational in it. It became an immanent, creative, yet rational power of nature. There is no other divinity. These philosophical conclusions derived from the Ionian philosophy were still valid in Greece in the fifth century B.C., that is in the period of the most distinguished Sophists, although in Athens the religious attitude to moral laws was still dominant, according to which, moral laws are of divine nature—they are given by the gods, and the gods are their guardians. It is connected with the conviction about the absolute and inescapable character of these laws. In consequence, all moral acts which are incompatible with divine laws must have their repercussion in punishments sent by the gods. The specific aspect of such morality is the conviction that these punishments might affect a criminal not necessarily in a direct way, but through one of his/her relations, even in the next generation (the rule of inheriting guilt). This understanding of moral laws was promoted by the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and even by the historical writings of Herodotus.

Such religious morality was, of course, strange to the Sophists, who were brought up on the rational Ionian philosophy. What is more, they decided to tackle and rationally solve the problem of the source of religion and beliefs in gods. It is not difficult to guess that divinity in their thinking was reduced to nature, to its laws. The Sophists transferred the most important conclusions from the philosophy of nature onto man and the world of culture and civilization created by him. They inherited admiration for the law of nature and its rationality from the Ionian philosophers, although, in general, they did not inherit interests in the nature of the world. It was the nature of man which was of interest to them. Moreover, they were interested

⁵ That is, it expands and develops, (see, the Latin verb *procedere*.)

in the aspect of culture and civilization rather than biology or nature, although they also took these aspects into consideration.⁶

As mentioned above, the Sophists did not found a school of philosophy. However, some common ideas could be drawn from their views. As far as the theme of the present text is concerned, the most important one was the conviction that man is a child of nature and as such carries all its laws. He is subjected to biological laws, like all living creatures, but unlike other species he is also subject to moral laws. A specific aspect of humankind in contrast to other “children of nature” is that man has created culture and civilization, including states and all the institutions connected with them. State laws, similarly to morality connected with culture, have also been created by man. His creative powers are the result of his reason. Intellect puts man above all other creatures. The Sophists relied greatly on this, but they also knew about its limitations. Human reason is a source of knowledge (although limited in its possibilities), but also a gauge of moral issues. The intelligence and rationality of man is, in a way, a heritage of the intelligence and rationality of nature. That is why human intellect can decide moral issues. In particular, this intellect can pronounce what happens according to the law of nature, and what happens against it, and in this way what is good and what is bad. Such capabilities, as stated above, are the result of the fact that man is the heir of rational nature. The laws of nature, as rational, can be rationally explored, but not at one go, if one might use this expression, or in one cognitive move. What is more, for an inadequate intellect, that is for an intellectually and morally uneducated and improperly prepared man, such laws present a kind of mystery. However, a man properly educated and brought up in the spirit of the laws of nature is capable of recognizing such laws, and also of recognizing things which are not them. It is reason which decides here. However, man’s first moral guide is something which might be called the moral instinct, which is also inherited from nature. It is capable of leading man, similarly to the biological instinct. However,

⁶ Particularly Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis, and even Gorgias of Leontinoi.

there exists one pre-condition: this instinct should not be silenced by, most broadly speaking, bad upbringing and education. Intellect is an ally of this instinct, which functions as moral sensitivity and a sense of integrity of sorts. This moral instinct must be, in a way, awakened through proper education in the spirit of integrity and righteousness. Apart from intellect, with which it is, in a way, associated, it is man's natural endowment. Protagoras, while telling about it in the Platonic dialogue entitled "Protagoras", uses the myth in which Zeus, worried that people with no sense of righteousness or moral shame hurt each other, were ready to annihilate one another, orders Hermes to bring to them a sense of shame and righteousness in order to introduce order into human societies. Of course, this a myth, or rather a (philosophical) parable which is to explain some key aspects and mysteries of human nature. It is the message, not the plot which matters here, or to be most exact, this plot might have been important, but not for Protagoras himself, who was probably an atheist or at least an agnostic who did not believe in deities like Zeus and Hermes. Paradoxically, it could have been important for Plato, who most probably believed in absolute and divine character of moral values, while Protagoras probably did not believe in it. For him, the fact which was important in this myth was that each man has developed, to a greater or lesser extent, the conviction of righteousness and moral shame. This is man's generic endowment, one of man's natural dispositions. At the same time, however, it remains as something 'divine' in man; anyway it is something most noble in his nature, something that puts him above other creatures, which are, like him, children of the same nature. Man, in the Sophist convention, is the same sort of child of nature as animals, but only man has consciousness, including moral consciousness, which reveals itself first of all as natural moral sensitivity. It should be added at this point that although this moral sensitivity and the moral consciousness built upon it belong to the generic endowment of man, they are something that is his from the moment of birth; but as a type of natural disposition, it must be developed into the shape of mature moral consciousness. This sensitivity is developed, together with moral

consciousness, in the process which occurs in a certain social, legal and moral culture. In fact, it should be stated that man develops morally during the development (and to be exact, during the awakening) of his internal moral sensitivity. He achieves his moral maturity together with the formation in him of moral consciousness, built on internal moral sensitivity; this should be remembered, because it is important here, because it introduces a specific (not only for the Greek Sophists, but in general for a mature moral culture) perspective. The perspective of off-internal morality, opposite to the so called casuistic off-external morality, is characteristic particularly for totalitarian ideologies. Moral consciousness is something internal. It is a kind of moral constitution of man, but it is not shaped exclusively by an internal conviction about natural law and moral shame, as Protagoras would have said, but also by external factors connected with the process of education, upbringing and generally growing up in a specific social, political, legal, moral and religious culture. It is only at the level of full moral maturity that man can fully autonomously and independently from circumstances, formed by an external moral and legal culture, build the world of internal moral values and rely on them in his relations with other people. Upbringing and education should prepare him for this and develop proper instruments, first of all strengthening his conviction of his own subjectivity and the moral autonomy connected with it. The Sophists were educating young people (with various results) in the spirit of respect for the whole cultural tradition, in which they also included morality, but at the same time they warned against treating this tradition and these values (moral, religious, political and all others) functioning within it as absolute, not as changeable in nature and changing with the culture in which they were grounded (and, in fact, they are its elements, equally changeable as this culture). According to them—and this should be stressed very strongly, because it was a crucial thing in their educational programme—all values (moral, religious, legal, political) are grounded in culture, depend on this culture, and change together with it. It is an individual man who is the creator and the subject of culture. Therefore, man is, in effect of this, the proper

creator of all values, including moral values, which this culture endows, and the creator of this culture itself. The only 'constant' and also a point of reference for these values is the natural law and man's moral instinct, sensitive to this law. The Sophists believed that man, after achieving moral maturity, which is founded on sensitivity to natural law, is capable of independent judgement about what is in accordance with this law and what is not (natural moral law becomes, in a way, an element of his internal moral culture). And in this way man is capable of judging established moral values connected with the external culture, and is even capable of changing them. Although his internal moral consciousness, that is his internal moral culture, has been to a certain extent shaped in the process of education through the culture (external) in which he lived, at the moment of achieving moral maturity he becomes fully autonomous in the face of this (external) culture. Thanks to this, a man mature morally, while respecting cultural values, fulfils (almost instinctively) natural moral law, to which fully developed internal moral sensitivity is susceptible. Therefore, the most important role of culture in the process of education is to create conditions for the internal development of man in the direction of awakening in him internal moral sensitivity, and together with it, the sense of subjectivity and moral autonomy and, at the same time, responsibility also in the context of culture. The Sophists believed that man, if properly educated, is himself directed, instinctively (by the power of his internal moral sensitivity, which serves as a moral compass of sorts), in the direction of moral law, and that such a man, in the spirit of this natural law, builds his own world of moral values, and together with it his moral consciousness. Culture created by man is gradually diverted in this direction, and accordingly to different determinants and circumstances, and this culture is endowed with man's moral instinct and sensitivity. We know from elsewhere that this external culture (which later influences us) is created by men of different moral consciousness, and therefore it cannot be made absolute and put above an individual man. Culture cannot be turned against an individual, and first of all, it cannot destroy this individual's autonomy. Its most

important role is to awaken the internal moral sensitivity of an individual man.

The philosophical parable of Protagoras tells us that the sense of righteousness mentioned above has to be a source of social order and unity of a state's citizens. First of all, it is the source of man's moral consciousness. However, it does not operate straight after man's birth, but develops together with man's moral education and his enculturation. It reaches its full maturity together with man's social and political maturity. This is what the Sophists meant when they spoke about learning virtue. Obviously, they meant political virtue, which is a kind of ability which allows man to function in a state.

Together with man, the creator and subject of all culture and state civilization, his moral instinct is inherited by culture and civilization, which, thanks to it, can, in a sense, instinctively (but carried by men with a properly developed sense of righteousness) move towards the law of nature, that is towards the goal of optimal absorption of natural laws. The Sophists, so it seems, trusted that in the manner of a man with a properly developed sense of righteousness, human societies also develop, each at its own speed, appropriately to cultural and all other differences between them, in the direction which gradually allows them to absorb and enact natural law, which is superior to laws constructed by men. It is also the direction in which man-made state laws follow. The education and upbringing of people, according to the Sophists, should be based on teaching them to live in a society according to the law which regulates the life of citizens in a state, and at the same time should awaken in them the sense of moral autonomy, and the ability (connected with it) of critical attitude to this law.

The Sophists were fervently against making any cultural values (including moral ones) absolute. They treated them as derivative of changing civilization and culture, and as such they handed them to an individual and ethically autonomous man as their subject and the main author. It was this intelligent man who, according to them, should decide, for his own use, what is good and what is bad. The Sophists' ethical ideal was a citizen of a state who respects

state laws, but at the same time is aware of their changeability and does not take as absolute the law and morality connected with culture and the civilization of political morality, such a citizen supports humanism and tolerance (ethical, religious, political) understood in very wide sense; in the name of humanism and tolerance, such a citizen grants to each man the right to live in the world of his own ideas; and because he is aware that his ideas are not absolute, he does not force them onto anyone, he respects the right of other people to their own convictions, and the only thing such a citizen allows himself to do is to use words in an attempt of convince other people of the ideas he believes in, using the tools of rhetoric in the process. That is why the art of rhetoric was so popular with the Sophists, and it was treated by them as the main art of citizens. While teaching rhetoric they taught their students (with various results) the ethical rules they believed in. However, according to many people, the Sophists' teaching tended to leave in the minds of their students a residue of cognitive and ethical relativism, dangerous for the social order. This cognitive and moral relativism of the Sophists had its ultimate source in the conviction about impossibility or difficulties in recognizing natural law, but it was mostly the result of the humanism so dear to them and the conviction growing out of it that each man, thanks to his natural moral instinct (the sense of righteousness and of moral shame connected with it), is able to create ethical (political, religious and other) rules, proper to him, and while doing so respect not only natural law, but also the laws of other people, or at least abstain from hurting other people. This relativism did not have to lead to extreme egoistic attitudes (for example, as the ones described in Plato's work about the young generation of the Sophists⁷). However, it could create an intellectual climate conducive to such attitudes. However, that was not the main moral goal of this relativism. In fact, it was to teach young people to have a mature and critical attitude to the political, legal and moral reality around them. And this was its goal. Critical thinking connected with—and we should remember

⁷ Cf.. Platon, *Państwo* 338 C, Warszawa 1958, vol. I., 48.

this—an attitude of respect for the state's laws and tradition⁸ was a part of the educational programme of the Sophists; a programme which was to shape morally mature individuals, fully aware of their moral autonomy, but at the same time morally sensitive and able to question anything their moral sensitivity was against. Moral sensitivity functions here as a natural moral instinct of sorts. However, it is connected with moral maturity, that is with a long process of moral development which relied on—let us remind ourselves once again at the end of this paper—constant awakening in the process of the education of man's natural moral sensitivity, and at the same time of his sense of responsibility, subjectivity and moral autonomy in the context of culture.

⁸ The point was, as is known, not make absolute state laws and the whole of social tradition, and this was to prevent—using the contemporary language—all kinds of totalitarianism, which could be potentially initiated by such 'absolutism'.