

Outline how the Sophists in Ancient Greece contributed to the development of philosophy.

Philosophy comes from the 2 Greek words Philo meaning love Sophia meaning knowledge/wisdom. To wonder is to philosophise. Everyone philosophises whether consciously or not. Human beings have always wondered about the nature of the universe. Before 5th/6th Century people had a mythical understanding of the reality. The universe, destiny, the physical world and natural disasters made people wonder. Wonder in ancient times led to creation of myths. They answered the mysterious and complex questions of life using myths. During the 5th/6th Century people began to develop a rational understanding of reality. Human beings gradually became aware of the big questions in life and they began to reflect on this awareness instead of accepting the status quo. A number of people began to form rational theories to answer the complex questions of reality. They would ask: Why does the world exist? Why do people behave the way they do? How should we behave? Each philosopher used rationalism to develop their own responses to each question. The natural philosophers: concerned themselves with natural world and the source of everything. Each pre-Socratic philosopher all claimed to have discovered the truth about the origin of things, however they all differed about the nature of this truth. Thales claimed that everything originated from water. Anaximenes claimed that everything originated from air. Heraclitus claimed that everything originate from fire.

In 5th/6th Century BCE Ancient Greece was at the height of its civilisation. Athens became the cultural centre of Greece. It was politically influential, artistically creative and financially wealthy. This development in civilisation led to people looking at the world in a different way. The Sophists were a group of travelling teachers who emerged in Ancient Greece during this era. They focused on people and their place in the world. They were employed by the upper classes during a time when the concept of democracy was dawning in Greece. This emerging

democracy in Greece required educated men. The Sophists' new ideas appealed to the younger generations of Greek men who were politically ambitious. People wanted new answers to complex questions about the nature of reality - answers that were not influenced by myth. People in this period were particularly ambitious and desired the skills that Sophists obtained. Law and Politics were the most respected professions during this time and skills related to these professions were highly valued. The Sophists could effectively teach these skills. Their students were taught how to be good statesmen and generals. They were also taught grammar, rhetoric (persuasion), literature, debating, arguing, public speaking and how to apply logic.

By primarily focusing on understanding a person's place in the world rather than concerning themselves with the natural world (like the pre-Socratic philosophers) they turned away from the common mythological beliefs used to answer complex questions about life and instead attempt to discover new answers to the key questions of life. By encouraging the belief that there are no absolutes they influenced people to question their own personal opinions on what is good and evil or right and wrong. As a result people began reflecting on the traditional beliefs that they held and began philosophising. Therefore Sophists contributed to the development of philosophy by helping it emerge in Ancient Greek society.

Protagoras was a famous Sophist born in 480 BCE. He is widely considered to be one of the first philosophers. He conceptualised the Theory of Relativity. This principle teaching of the Sophists stated that truth is a matter for each individual and each person's position is valid. A vital skill Sophist's taught was being able to argue and win regardless of your personal opinion. According to relativism it is impossible to claim something is right or wrong, good or evil. Truth was a matter for each individual and every individual's position is valid; what is true for you may not be true for me but both positions are valid. The students of the Sophists were taught to win an argument on both sides of a question as a result. Some problems arose as a result of this skill. Instead of prioritising the good of society the ability to argue was emphasised. Another issue was the breakdown of moral order as a result of the Sophists teaching that there were no absolute norms such as good and evil.

By focusing on the person the Sophists concluded that a person's idea of truth and justice was a product of habit and circumstance formulated by those who hold power e.g. the government. Another Sophist, Thrasymachus expressed this belief by stating that "justice is simply the interest of the stronger". The Sophists believed that people in power sought to control others and they formed concepts on what is good and what is evil to suit their own interests. This way they could protect themselves and their power. By questioning authority the Sophists contributed to the emergence of scepticism and existentialism.

In conclusion the Sophists philosophical theories contributed to the development of philosophy by encouraging people to question their beliefs and think about what truth and justice is or if good and evil exists. Their focus on people's place in the world contributed to the improvement of skills such as the art of debating, rhetoric and persuasion. The move from myth to rationalism when answering questions also contributed to the emergence of science as both require logical thought. They also emphasised people and their place in the world contributing to ethical thought. By questioning authority they contributed to scepticism and existentialism in the later centuries. They also contributed to the development of philosophy by encouraging people to formulate their own opinions. Socrates opposition to the Sophists is how many of his great ideas came about, such as his idea that absolutes do exist.