What is the Sophistic Movement?

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The intellectual trend called “Sophistic Movement” (cf. G. B. Kerferd) started in the latter half of the 5th century BC, when the Professional intellectuals and teachers called sophists appeared, beginning from Protagoras, and continued into the Roman Empire (the so-called “Second Sophistic” era). This article discusses how we can treat the “Sophistic Movement” by focusing on earlier sophists of the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

The Greek word “sophistēs” derives from “sophos” (wise). The original meanings of these words are often assumed to be synonyms, but my examination suggests that the word “sophistēs” had developed a derogatory connotation even during the earliest period.

Due to a scarcity of evidence, however, it is difficult to reconstruct the original thoughts of the sophists, but we should remember that they are mainly interested in giving oral lectures rather than writing treatises. It is Plato, their severest critic, who provides us with the most vivid and detailed accounts of their thoughts and activities. We should therefore carefully consider the essence and importance of the sophists’ thoughts and activities in the extant works and testimonies by taking these conditions into account.

Some scholars suggest that we cannot discuss the sophists as a group on the grounds that they engaged in different activities and showed quite different, often contrary, features. So the name “sophist” may be regarded as a mere label. But we can regard one feature “charging fees for teaching” as their essence, since it indicates professionalism that differentiates them from philosophers. It is Plato who invented the contrast between the “sophist” and the “philosopher” in defense of Socrates.

I suggest that we can see the historical and philosophical importance of the sophist in challenge to philosophy. First, they encouraged critical examination of traditional thoughts, in particular religion and morality. Second, their main interest lay in language (logos), which was necessary for their teaching of rhetoric, and started new studies of grammar and philosophy of language. Third, the civic education of the sophists opened intellectual activities to the general public, and thus created a new culture of the European tradition. The sophists certainly constitute an intellectual movement, which contributed to the history of philosophy by raising fundamental questions of philosophy.