

«Plato is our most important source of information about the fifth-century Sophists but what he tells us about them needs to be treated with caution. He presents them as teachers of false wisdom, of success in argument without regard to the truth, as morally subversive outsiders who corrupt the youth. This is still how they are regarded and words like “sophist,” “sophistical” and “sophistry” still have negative connotations in their ordinary uses.

However, Plato is a hostile witness whose testimony needs to be examined carefully, taking into account his purpose in the dialogues where individual Sophists appear or where sophistry is discussed. In fact, his presentation of Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Prodicus is not unsympathetic, even as he shows them philosophically inferior to Socrates. But this result is not surprising since they claimed to be not philosophers but educators, and Plato, who invented the concept of philosophy (φιλοσοφία), did so precisely in order to define Socrates’ practice and to contrast it with sophistry (σοφιστική) and demonstrate its superiority.

In this lecture I will set out a different view of the Sophists on the basis of which I will attempt to account for the disconnect between the way Plato portrays individual Sophists and his almost entirely negative view of “the sophist” as well as the Sophists’ evident popularity despite their questionable reputation.»