

Article

Is Critias a Sophist?

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Abstract: The coherence and indeed the reality of the sophists as a philosophical school or movement has been contested and debated in modern scholarship, with inconclusive results. While their collective identity, not to mention their exemplarity, is subject to probing scrutiny, we usually have a fairly good idea of which historical figures we mean when we speak of the sophists. However, the case of Critias, the most infamous of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, is particularly challenging since he does not seem to fit the professional profile of the other figures who are generally recognized as sophists and with whom his fragments have been edited and collected. This essay will briefly reconsider Critias' candidacy as one of the ancient Greek sophists, not on the basis of what might be conjecturally reconstituted as his own philosophy, but rather on the basis of his association with the notion of the Greek or Sophistic Enlightenment. This notion and the periodization that it implies will be the focus of attention.

Keywords: Critias; Euripides; Pierre Bayle; Enlightenment; Sisyphus; atheism

The collective identity of the ancient Greek sophists was established by the modern editorial tradition, and there has been a large degree of consensus among editors as to who deserves inclusion in this infamous cohort. Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Hippias, and Antiphon are the six most prominent names on the list, and Lycophron and Xenias are usually included as well. Euthydemus, Alcidas, Antisthenes, Evenus, Calicles, and even Socrates have all been candidates for this dubious honor,¹ but the most controversial candidate seems by far to have been Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants who ruled Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War and the disciple whom Socrates never wanted to acknowledge. The sophists were first edited and established as a coherent group of nine figures, including Critias, by Hermann Diels, and then Walther Kranz in their numerous consecutive editions of the fragments of the Presocratics beginning in 1903. The recent Greek–English edition of the sophists by André Laks and Glenn Most omits Critias for the very good reason that he was never an itinerant teacher, or indeed any kind of teacher, and therefore does not belong to this “loose socio-professional group” (Laks and Most 2016, p. 4), but they do include some of his fragments in an appendix on philosophy and tragedy (Appendix A). In Jean-Paul Dumont's edition of the Presocratics, Jean-Louis Poirier tries to finesse the question by calling Critias “*un sophiste, mais un sophiste à part*” (Dumont 1988, p. 1563). The new *Cambridge Companion to the Sophists* (2023) identifies Critias, like Thrasymachus, as a “boundary case” (20), someone “in close connection with Sophists” (358), in short, a “semi-canonical Sophist” (500) (Billings and Moore 2023). In my view, the inclusion of Critias among the sophists constitutes a criterion for recognizing the ideological coherence of the group, and this criterion is the rationalist critique of supernatural belief, which I will call atheism. The inclusion of Critias constitutes the sophists as a sort of Enlightenment movement that was first recognized and acclaimed as such in the European Enlightenment. Thus, Critias' identity as a sophist is contingent both upon the definition of the sophists that we advance here, which is hardly the object of consensus, and upon his authorship of the fragments attributed to him, which, as we shall see, are in some cases attributed to Euripides as well. He is a sophist conditionally rather



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than conclusively. In that respect, he may not be alone, since there does not seem to be any consistent definition of sophist that applies equally to all candidates for the title.

Before I advance my own argument, I should acknowledge that there is one theory that fully accredits Critias as a sophist on the basis of political criteria. In her treatise on sophistic and ancient democracy, Margherita Isnardi Parente identifies Critias as a paradigmatic figure in the transformation of sophistic from a democratic movement to an anti-democratic one as a function of the vicissitudes of the Athenian polis at the end of the fifth century (Parente 1977). For Isnardi Parente, Critias is all the more characteristic of the sophists for having been part of the regime of the Thirty Tyrants: “uno dei più geniali esponenti del movimento sofistico, Crizia, non a caso sarà, dopo la sconfitta della democrazia nel 404, fra I Trenta Tiranni” (Parente 1977, p. 4). Far from being a peripheral or minor figure, Critias becomes a central personage when we define sophistic in relation to ancient democracy. Moreover, Isnardi Parente hails Critias as a “uomo di punto del razionalismo sofistico” (Ibid., p. 26), which agrees pretty well with my own argument, but which seems to me to be independent of his embrace of tyranny. In any event, I will pursue a different avenue in order to answer the question as to whether Critias is a sophist.

We can start with an inventory of Critias’ frankly scant literary remains as collected by his editors. Diels and Kranz (hereafter DK) make Critias their 88th Presocratic writer and the last of the nine named sophists. DK collect 23 testimonies about Critias, the largest from Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists*, and the others from Diogenes Laertius, Plato’s dialogues, Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and *Hellenica*, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the Attic orators, Hermogenes, and even a Latin testimony from Cicero, *De oratore* 2.93, to which could be added one more Ciceronian testimony, *Brutus* 29. All this testimony does vouch for the notoriety of Critias in antiquity, and the two Ciceronian testimonies establish his credentials as an orator or even a paradigmatic orator for his generation. After the testimony in Section A, DK collect 75 fragments of Critias in Section B. These are divided into 29 verse fragments and 44 prose fragments, plus two spurious fragments. The verse fragments include 9 miscellaneous fragments, hexameters, and elegies, and 20 fragments drawn from Critias’ dramas. DK identify these latter as the three tragedies *Tennes*, *Rhadamanthus*, and *Pirithous*, plus the satyr play *Sisyphus*.² After an initial fragment taken from a life of Euripides that identifies the three tragedies by title (DK 88 B10), DK include two fragments of *Tennes*, three from *Rhadamanthus*, nine from *Pirithous*, one from *Sisyphus*, and four *incerta*. The largest number of fragments is assigned to the *Pirithous* (DK 88 B16–24), but the most important fragment by far is assigned to the *Sisyphus* and known as the Sisyphus fragment (DK 88 B25). This is the fragment, conserved by Sextus Empiricus in his *Adversus mathematicos* 9.54, that has ensured Critias’ literary legacy and his enduring interest to scholarship. As for the 44 prose fragments, the first 14 (DK 88 B30–43) are primarily associated with various political treatises, especially the *Constitution of Sparta* attested to by Athenaeus. Critias was a notorious Laconist and anti-democrat, as we have noted. The remaining non-spurious prose fragments (DK 88 B44–73) are brief citations from lexicographers like Julius Pollux. Unlike some of the other sophists in DK, Critias does not have a Section C for imitations. The extant corpus of 23 testimonies and 75 fragments attest to Critias’ reputation as a playwright and a political thinker, neither one of which suffices to identify him as a sophist. Interestingly, according to one observer, his fragments indicate that he was “a firm believer in education and training” (Rankin 1983, p. 73), which is a sophistic trait.

The other major edition of the fragments of the sophists, by Mario Untersteiner, assigns to Critias the same assortment of 23 testimonies and 75 fragments divided into verse and prose, from identified or unidentified works. It is the same corpus as DK, but with Italian translations added, along with an extensive and provocative commentary. The commentary on Critias, by Antonio Battezzatore, helps to elicit some of the major tendencies of Critias’ thought or at least of his reputation. For instance, the commentary on DK 88 B22 highlights the antinomy of *tropos* and *nomos*, or character and law. The fragment, assigned to the *Pirithous* and spoken perhaps by Hercules, says that the *rhētor*, or speaker in a democratic assembly, can subvert the law, but he is helpless against *tropos chrestos*, or noble character.

Here is Donald Norman Levin's translation from Rosamond Sprague's anthology: "An honest manner is more steadfast than a law. No orator could ever distort the one; but, stirring the other up and down with speeches, he frequently does dishonor" (Sprague 1972, p. 258). The Italian has a different reading: "*Più saldo della legge è un buon carattere; un oratore non mai potrà questo abbattere, ma quella egli in tutti i sensi coi discorsi spesso sovverte e oltraggia*" (Untersteiner 2015, p. 927). Battagazzore takes this as a tyrannical variant on the standard sophistic dichotomy of *physis* and *nomos*, or nature and law,³ where *tropos* represents the individual nature of the strongman, who is impervious to rhetoric though an orator himself perhaps. This must have all seemed rather repugnant to the democratic audience in the theater. For fragment B49, quoted by the pseudo-Dionysius from an unknown work, the commentary zeroes in on the concept of *Ate*, or fatality, which no man can escape, according to a strikingly pessimistic worldview, which the commentator links to Critias' atheism or "*l'impossibilità assoluta che aveva Crizia ad accettare positivamente un ordine delle cose di carattere trascendente*" (Untersteiner 2015, p. 975). Having denied divine reality (in the Sisyphus fragment), Critias is left with a tragic sense of the futility of human endeavor. This reading may underestimate Critias' investment in sophistic rationality. Finally, DK 88 B52 shows us a Critias who is a premodern Machiavelli in the way he analyzes Athenian policy toward Sparta in terms of what we would now call reason of state. Here is the fragment, again in Levin's translation: "Critias says that, whereas Ephialtes hindered and protested against aiding and raising up a city to rival Athens, but [advised] allowing the pride of Sparta to lie low and be trampled under, Cimon, having placed the aggrandizement of his homeland after the advantage of the Spartans and having convinced the populace, went forth to the rescue with numerous heavily armed troops" (Sprague 1972, p. 267). Cimon, we infer, allowed himself to be distracted by some inopportune principle of solidarity, while Ephialtes made the right call, but the people, as usual, followed the wrong orator.

Quite recently, Alessandro Boschi re-edited the dramatic fragments for his volume, *Crizia Tragico* (Boschi 2021). He lists the testimony and fragments by play, recognizing only three of the standard four titles, *Tennes*, *Rhadamanthus*, and *Pirithous*, and transferring the Sisyphus fragment (now labeled F20) to the rubric *Incertarum fabularum fragmenta* while strongly suggesting that we count it as a fragment of the *Pirithous*. He no longer counts *Sisyphus* among Critias' works. Boschi recognizes 24 dramatic fragments as opposed to the traditional 20 fragments in DK (88 B10–29), and he counts six testimonies: two *testimonia de arte tragica*, one testimony to the *Pirithous*, one to the *Rhadamanthus*, and two to the *Tennes*. Of the twenty-four fragments, sixteen are from DK while the eight others can be categorized as follows: three are new fragments from papyrus, two are from lexicographers, one is from Stobaeus, and two others (F6 and F8), also from papyrus, were recognized by DK but exiled to their appendix, *Nachtrag zum zweiten Band*, as B15a possibly deriving from the *Pirithous* (Diels and Kranz 1952, p. 427). In sum, this reorganization of Critias' literary remains does not add much to the corpus, on which we must base our tenuous assessment of the deuterio-sophist. It does, however, constitute a coherent dramatic corpus that highlights Critias' role as a tragedian but tends to elide his role as a social thinker. We shall see if it can advance his credentials as a sophist. Boschi's commentary to DK 88 B22, now F12, Hercules' speech in the *Pirithous*, calls the speaker a hero of dialectic, "*capace di formulare un'antitesi squisitamente sofistica*" (Boschi 2021, p. 171), namely, the antithesis of *tropos* and *nomos*. That is promising, and we will come back to Boschi in conclusion.

In the meantime, and as a way of approaching Critias' claim for inclusion among the sophists, we need to take a look at Plato, the most formidable adversary of the sophists and the ancient source of their collective infamy. According to Rankin, "Critias appears as a wise and impressive personage in the later dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and is respectfully treated in the early work *Charmides*" (Rankin 1983, p. 74). Monica Centanni echoes this sentiment in her monograph on Critias: "*nel Carmide, nel Timeo, nel Crizia, Platone—e per lui, nella finzione dialogica, Socrate—tratta Crizia con grande rispetto*" (Centanni 1997, p. 34). This does not look good for Critias the sophist, who ought to have appalled Plato if he wanted to make the cut. However, Alessandro Iannucci reminds us that the identification of the

speaker Critias in the dialogue *Timaeus* remains a vexed and open question, and therefore, we may not be able to read too much into the portrayal of Critias in the Platonic dialogues.⁴ In the *Critias* and the *Timaeus*, there are several chronological details, highlighted by Luc Brisson, that suggest that the speaker Critias is not the same as our Critias, but someone much older (Brisson 1994, pp. 513–15). If indeed it is the same Critias, then Plato let him off easy, perhaps out of family bias, but at least in this one respect, Plato has not shaped the legacy of the sophists, for history has not let Critias off easy. As Centanni puts it, “*sul Crizia ‘tiranno’ grava la condanna della storia*” (Centanni 1997, p. 11). A scholium to Aeschines, included in the testimony to Critias as DK 88 A13, preserves the following epitaph for the fallen tyrant and his fellow oligarchs: “This is a memorial to good men who restrained the accursed populace of the Athenians from arrogance for a brief period” (Sprague 1972, p. 247). The eulogistic tone helps Boschi to date this epitaph to the period immediately following Critias’ death in 403 BCE. In his reasoning, if we date it any later, it would have been impossible to remember Critias without publicly vilifying him.⁵

With this context in mind, we can now turn to our main topic of inquiry, which is also the title of our essay, and ask: is Critias a sophist? The case for his exclusion has been made perhaps most forcefully by Marie-Pierre Noël in an article that poses the deceptively challenging question, “who and what are the sophists?” (“*que sont et qui sont les sophistes?*”) (Noël 1998, p. 21). Going rather radically against the current, Noël affirms that sophistic has no historical existence of its own and that the rubric “sophist”, although convenient, is historically inexistant or at least inaccurate.⁶ *À la limite*, no one is a sophist, but Critias is disqualified well before we reach the limit. Noël points out quite astutely that the standard corpus of ancient Greek sophistic depends on the dubious authority of L. Flavius Philostratus, author of the early third-century *Lives of the Sophists*, whose presentation of the fifth-century BCE sophists is “purely anachronistic” (Ibid., p. 32). It was this work that exercised a preponderant and, in her view, abusive influence on Diels and Kranz when they incautiously included Critias under the heading “*ältere Sophistik*” in their anthology, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. A further argument involves Plato’s dialogues: we know the sophists because Plato bad-mouthed them, but he does not bad-mouth Critias, so Critias stands apart from Socrates’ more notorious antagonists such as Gorgias or Hippias. The case against Critias is well reasoned and well documented, but it is beside the point, or at least my point. The question is not, “was Critias a sophist?”, but rather, “is he a sophist”, in our understanding of the past, and how does that understanding change when we grant him full-fledged membership in the sophists?

Here, I would like to invoke the authority of one of the earliest representatives of the radical Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle, whose *Dictionnaire historique et critique* devotes a chapter to Critias that seems to have escaped the attention of classicists and *dix-huitiémistes* alike.⁷ After rapidly summarizing the life and death of the tyrant, characterized as “*un très-méchant homme*”, Bayle remarks that Critias was distinguished for his nobility, his eloquence, and his poetry. At the lemma, *Eloquence*, he appends a long note lettered E (his notes are always longer than the text he annotates) in which he quotes Nicolas Caussin: “*Le Pere Caussin compte Critias entre les anciens Sophistes, et le loue beaucoup*” (Bayle 1740, 227 E). Bayle somewhat qualifies this judgment as follows: “*J’aimerois mieux faire remarquer à mes lecteurs que Critias fut l’un des trente Tyrans d’Athenes, que de l’appeler simplement Sophiste*”. So, Critias was a tyrant and not simply a sophist, perhaps because the other sophists were not political rulers. The inference is that sophists exercised cultural rather than political authority. Still, Bayle agrees, presumably with Caussin, that Critias is considered a sophist: “*Je demeure néanmoins d’accord que Philostrate donnant trop d’étendue à ce mot, a mis Critias parmi les anciens Sophistes*”. Philostratus enlarged the category of sophist in order to fit Critias in it. So far, this is all pretty consistent with modern skepticism toward Critias’ qualifications as one of the ancient Greek sophists—one has to stretch the category to include Critias.

Bayle also points out that Critias was considered an atheist, which inspires an extravagantly long note (H). Here, Bayle only needs to cite one authority, Sextus Empiricus, who transcribed a long verse fragment of Critias in book nine of his *Adversus mathematicos*, which

Bayle probably knew in Gentian Hervet's Latin translation. This is the *Sisyphus* fragment (DK 88 B25) that has become the primary focus of modern scholarship on Critias, whether by historians of philosophy, rhetoric, or theater. A recent commentator hails the fragment as "arguably the most important single document in the history of ancient atheism" and recognizes in it "a number of sophistic and Presocratic tropes and motifs" (Whitmarsh 2014). Bayle includes in note H a French translation of the entire fragment, both Sextus' introductory commentary and the 42-verse citation. Since this fragment is readily available in German, English, and Italian versions, I hereby transcribe Bayle's rather loose French version, which predates, as far as I know, all other vernacular translations.

Critias, l'un des trente Tyrans d'Athènes, dit-il [Sextus], semble être du nombre des Athées. Il prétend que les anciens Législateurs voulant empêcher que personne ne fit du tort en cachette à son prochain, feignirent qu'il y a une Providence qui prend garde si les hommes vivent bien ou mal, & qui punit ceux qui font mal. Selon son Système, il avoit été un tems où les hommes déréglez comme des bêtes, & ne récompensant point les bonnes actions, ni ne punissant les crimes, ne suivoient aucune autre règle que la loi du plus fort. Ensuite, il y eut des hommes qui établirent des peines, & alors la justice exerçoit son autorité sur l'injustice, comme un maître sur son esclave. On punissoit ceux qui faisoient quelque mal. Puis comme on se fut apperçu qu'à la vérité les Loix empêchoient les hommes de pécher publiquement, mais non pas de faire en secret une action mauvaise, il s'éleva un homme d'esprit qui connut qu'il rendroit un très-grand service au genre humain, s'il faisoit ensorte que les méchants craignissent d'être punis, lors même qu'ils pécheroient secretement, & qu'ils ne feroient qu'avoir de mauvais desseins. Il inventa donc un Dieu, c'est-à-dire une Nature immortelle qui voit & qui connoît toutes choses: il lui attribua le gouvernement du Monde, le mouvement des Cieux, les foudres, & les tonnerres, & tout ce en général de quoi les hommes ont peur: c'est ainsi, concluoit-il, qu'un habile homme fit accroire aux autres l'existence d'une Divinité (Ibid., pp. 227–28).

In this way, the *Sisyphus* fragment became known to a polite audience in French before it became the exclusive province of classical scholars.

In the same article, Bayle remarks that Plutarch, in *De placitis philosophorum*, attributes a similar verse passage to Euripides, and he thereby opens the main dossier in Critias studies: the controversy over whether the *Sisyphus* fragment is by Critias or Euripides. Modern day opinion is divided between the two competing theses of Ulrich von Wilamowitz (Wilamowitz 1875), who favors Critias, and Albrecht Dihle (Dihle 1977), who favors Euripides.⁸ Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp offer a handy summary of the scholarly debate in an appendix to their edition of Euripides' fragments for the Loeb Classical Library, where they conclude "that on the evidence at present available the question of authorship must remain unresolved" (Collard and Cropp 2008). In an article from 1981, Sutton intervened in the debate to point out that whoever authored the fragment did not necessarily espouse the views expressed by the speaker in the play, presumably *Sisyphus*, and thus, the attribution of this fragment cannot establish anyone's credentials as an atheist (Sutton 1981). Theater is a genre which protects and obscures the views of the author.

For his part, Bayle cites approvingly the view of a certain Parisian medical doctor, Pierre Petit, whose neo-Latin miscellaneous observations attribute the verses to Euripides but for reasons of which Bayle does not approve. Bayle agrees with Petit that our manuscripts of Sextus may have a lacuna where Critias was cited and where the same sentiment was then attributed to Euripides, who is the author of the extant citation, not Critias. In other words, both authors maintained that God is a human invention meant to maintain social order and enforce obedience to political authority. Unlike modern professors, Bayle does not really care who wrote the verses, just so long as we grant that Critias is just as good an atheist as Euripides. However, he rejects Petit's argument that since Euripides was known to be a friend of tyrants, he was more likely than Critias to have concealed his views "*sous le personnage de Sisyphe*" out of fear of the Areopagus, since there is no connection between monarchism and surreptitious atheism.⁹ You can favor monarchy over republicanism and still express your views on religion without inhibition, which is precisely what Bayle did and what makes him both radical and conservative. Bayle seems

to use this philological question of authorship, which remains unresolved today, to advance his own critique of religion, not without some subterfuge of his own. In any event, and in conclusion to the interminable note H, Bayle summarizes the view, which Critias shared with Euripides, in the following terms: “*Les Spinozistes s’accommoderoient aisément de cette pensée*” (Bayle 1740, 229 H). So, Critias is a sort of pre-Spinozan, regardless of whether or not he is a sophist. If he is both, then we have a Sophistic Enlightenment.

We have to turn to the German Enlightenment to find a more emphatic integration of Critias into the sophists. Recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to the fortunes of the Presocratics in the modern and early modern periods, and consequently, we are now better able than before to measure the place of the sophists in Enlightenment historiography. For instance, in the volume *The Presocratics from the Latin Middle Ages to Hermann Diels*, Georg Rechenauer highlights the place of the Presocratics in German university lectures and comprehensive histories of philosophy from the eighteenth century, and here, we learn that in 1798, Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, of the University of Jena, included in the first volume of his history of philosophy a short history of the sophists featuring Gorgias, Prodicus, Protagoras, Diagoras, and Critias (Rechenauer 2011, p. 271). The name that stands out in this list is Diagoras of Melos, the proverbial or prototypical atheist of antiquity, and in fact Prodicus, Protagoras, Diagoras, and Critias all bore, at one time or another, the reputation of being atheists. In a fragment from the treatise *On nature* conserved by Philodemus, Epicurus offers the inaugural roll call of atheists, including Prodicus, Diagoras, and Critias.¹⁰ In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, while rehearsing opposing views on the gods, Sextus Empiricus lists Diagoras and Critias with Theodorus of Cyrene as the champions of atheism (3.218). In *Adversus Mathematicos*, before transcribing the *Sisyphus* fragment which he attributes to Critias, Sextus lists Diagoras, Prodicus, and Theodorus as atheists and then adds Critias to the list (9.51–54). In *De natura deorum*, Cicero names Diagoras, Theodorus, Protagoras, Prodicus, and Euhemerus as those who undermine both religion and superstition, while also paraphrasing the *Sisyphus* fragment without identifying the author (1.117–119).¹¹ Tennemann’s roll call of sophists therefore suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century, the sophists had achieved a collective identity on the basis of their rationalist critique of religious superstition, which was a legacy that the European Enlightenment was eager to claim as its own.

This association of sophistic and enlightenment became, in the course of time, such a commonplace that the English historian John Burnet, writing in the early twentieth century, deplored that “German writers in particular continue to be much influenced by a superficial analogy between the ‘age of the Sophists’ and the eighteenth century *Aufklärung*” (Burnet [1914] 1953, p. 109). He did not deny the pertinence of an ancient Enlightenment but thought that it went back earlier than the sophists to the Ionian philosophers. E. R. Dodds offers an interesting reaction to this historiographic cliché in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, in which he feels it necessary to point out “the ‘*Aufklärung*’ or Enlightenment was not initiated by the Sophists. It seems desirable to say this, because there are still people who talk as if ‘Enlightenment’ and Sophistic Movement were the same thing” (Dodds 1951, p. 180). Thus, by the time Dodds delivered this series of lectures in 1949, the Sophistic Enlightenment was something of an *idée reçue*. He adds, emphatically, that “the Enlightenment is of course much older; its roots are in sixth-century Ionia”, though we may have thought it was much newer. In his classic study, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, Wilhelm Nestle recognizes a “philosophical and sophistic Enlightenment” whose *Kernpunkt* is rationalism.¹² He furthermore describes the sophists—Critias among them—as “the propagandists and encyclopedists of the Enlightenment established by Ionian philosophy, which they broadened and extended through their own thought”¹³. In *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, when surveying sophistic thought on the origin of religion, Werner Jaeger draws our attention to “the remarkable criticism of religion that we find in the remaining long fragment of Critias’ lost satyr-drama *Sisyphus*”, which he takes to be the expression of “enlightened radicalism” (Jaeger 1948, p. 186). More recently, W. K. C. Guthrie defends the idea of a Sophistic Enlightenment against Burnet’s complaint of a superficial

analogy: “As a general rule such warnings against facile analogies are salutary, but the resemblances between the Enlightenment and the age of the Sophists are certainly many and striking” (Guthrie 1971, p. 48). He feels that it is meaningful to recognize a “sophistic Age of Enlightenment”, and he points to Peter Gay’s treatment of “The First Enlightenment” in his volume *The Enlightenment* of 1967. Friedrich Solmsen’s last monograph (1975) sums up this historiographic tradition in the following terms: “The Greek Enlightenment of the fifth century B.C., also known as the Rationalistic Movement or the Age of the Sophists, is generally associated with progressive or revolutionary ideas and even more, perhaps, with their negative correlate, the questioning of time-honored beliefs and values” (Solmsen 1975, p. 3). Finally, in 1980, Michael Emsbach entitled his monograph on Protagoras *Sophistik als Aufklärung*. Of course, all of this testimony is at least a couple of generations old, and the idea of a Sophistic Enlightenment may well have gone out of fashion since the twentieth century, but perhaps not entirely. The new *Cambridge Companion to the Sophists* includes a chapter entitled “The Sophists in the Fifth-Century Enlightenment”, which tends to validate the concept of a Sophistic Enlightenment, but this validation comes with an important qualification. The author of the chapter, Joshua Billings, wants to disassociate enlightenment from any rationalist critique of religion: “the term ‘enlightenment,’ on this understanding, does not describe the triumph of reason over superstition or the emergence of humanity from its self-imposed immaturity, but a consciousness of rupture and rapid intellectual change” (Billings and Moore 2023, pp. 125–26). Moreover, the chapter mentions Critias only in passing and only for his ethnological writings (as distinct from his dramatic fragments). So, this revisiting of the question affords but little solace to my interpretation.

Perhaps Critias was provisionally a sophist but is no longer considered one. His identification with the sophists depends on what characteristics of this movement we privilege and whether we recognize it as a movement at all. Guthrie seems to be representative when he says, “The Sophists were certainly individualists, indeed rivals, competing with each other for public favour. One cannot therefore speak of them as a school” (Guthrie 1971, p. 47). However, “it is perfectly justifiable to speak of a sophistic mentality or a sophistic movement in thought” (Ibid., p. 48). If we think of this movement primarily in pedagogical terms, we can concur with Jaeger’s famous judgment on the sophists: “It would be wrong to look for their real achievement in the field of philosophy and ethics. Their strength lay in the brilliant new system of formal education which they invented” (Jaeger 1969, p. 331). This characterization would seem to exclude Critias, who did not contribute very much to advancing education by tyrannizing over his fellow citizens. However, if we associate the sophists primarily with rhetoric, or eloquence, as Bayle says, then Critias, although no teacher, certainly has strong credentials as an orator. And yet, Sutton reminds us of Xenophon’s testimony in the *Memorabilia* that as a member of the Thirty Tyrants, Critias was responsible for a law forbidding the teaching of rhetoric (Sutton 1981). Critias remains a tantalizingly elusive figure.¹⁴ In effect, his credentials seem to wax and wane according to what values or what lessons we want to retrieve from the past and what we want to leave behind. For my part, I would privilege the image of Critias as a paradigmatic social thinker who laid bare the function of religion in society and politics and thereby weakened that function. This is the aspect of his legacy to which Enlightenment historians were most sensitive and least hostile. This aspect also seems to have revived professional historiographic interest in the sophists as a group, before the twentieth century undertook the editorial task of collecting and publishing their fragments.

I want to remark in conclusion that the most recent monograph on Critias, Boschi’s *Crizia Tragico* (2021), devotes over 65 pages to an edition, translation, and commentary on the *Sisyphus* fragment, now identified tentatively as a fragment from the tragedy *Pirithous*. The commentary reminds us that the *Sisyphus* fragment is traditionally interpreted “come espressione di nuove riflessioni di stampo sofistico a proposito della religione tradizionale”¹⁵. Since Critias is accepted as the author of this fragment, and since the fragment bears the stamp or imprint of sophistic thought, then Critias must be a sophistic thinker, but that does not explain what this “stamp” is. For further elucidation, the commentary refers us to Walter

Burkert's history of Greek religion, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (1977). If we turn to the pages indicated in Burkert's compact, one-volume history of religion in ancient Greece, we find a subchapter entitled "The Crisis: Sophists and Atheists"¹⁶. The two terms certainly overlap in Burkert's presentation. We do not have to wait long for the *Sisyphus* fragment, which perhaps should now be called the *Pirithous* fragment, to be considered as the most complete expression of sophistic atheism. For Burkert, the discovery of atheism can be thought of as one of the most important developments in the history of religion. Practical atheism may predate the sophists, but theoretical atheism arises "in der Epoche der Sophistik" (Burkert 1977, p. 466). Burkert rounds off his crisis with a nod to Euripides' *Bacchae*, where the downfall of Pentheus portends the end of an era: "Irrationalismus erhebt sich gegen die 'Aufklärung'" (Ibid., p. 468). Atheism, Enlightenment, and sophistic, together again.

Even if Critias is not a sophist, he has been and probably will be once more. He is a sort of barometer of our interest in the past and of the attraction and repulsion exerted on us by its most radical figures. This is one of the most important legacies of the sophists: they force us to continually reassess our understanding as well as our periodization of the past. They pose a permanent challenge to any accepted notion of historical process.

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Appendix A. The Names of the Sophists According to Their Editors (Not Counting Anonymous Sophistic Texts)

Diels and Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edition, vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952) 252–399.

Protagoras
Xeniades
Gorgias
Lykophron
Prodikos
Thrasymachos
Hippias
Antiphon
Kritias

Mario Untersteiner, *Sofisti, Testimonianze e frammenti, Testi a fronte* (Milan: Bompiani, 2015). The first edition appeared in four volumes from 1949 to 1962.

Protagora
Seniade
Gorgia
Licofrone
Prodico
Trasimaco
Ippia
Antifonte
Crizia

Rosamond Sprague, *The Older Sophists* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972; reprint Hackett, 2011).

Protagoras
Xeniades
Gorgias
Lycophron
Prodicus

Thrasymachus
 Hippias
 Antiphon
 Critias
 Euthydemus
 Jean-Paul Dumont, *Les Présocratiques*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 983–1159.
 Protagoras
 Xéniade
 Gorgias
 Lycophron
 Prodicos
 Thrasymaque
 Hippias
 Antiphon
 Critias
 Laks and Most, *Early Greek Philosophy*, vols. 8–9, *Sophists*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
 Protagoras
 Gorgias
 Socrates
 Prodicus
 Thrasymachus
 Hippias
 Antiphon
 Lycophron
 Xenias

Notes

- ¹ Guthrie (1971) lists Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Antiphon, Thrasymachus, Critias, Antisthenes, Alcidas, and Lycophron as sophists. Rankin (1983) has a chapter on “Less Prominent Sophists” in which he lists nine figures: Antiphon, Calicles (a speaker in Plato’s *Gorgias*), Critias, Alcidas, Lycophron, Evenus, Xenias, and the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.
- ² Dana Sutton reminds us that it was Ulrich von Wilamowitz in his *Analecta Euripidea* who established Critias’ authorship of this tetralogy, an attribution accepted by DK but challenged by others. See (Sutton 1981).
- ³ See Guthrie (1971) ch. 4 “The ‘Nomos’-‘Physis’ Antithesis in Morals and Politics” and Heinimann (Heinimann 1945).
- ⁴ Iannucci (2002, p. 3): “L’identità tra il ‘Crizia’ del dialogo e il Crizia ‘tiranno’, figlio di Callesco, leader del governo dei Trenta, è invece questione ancora aperta e vessatissima”.
- ⁵ Boschi (2021, pp. 5–6). Bultrighini (1999, pp. 316–19), has a detailed analysis of the epitaph, which he similarly dates to the years 403 to 401 BCE.
- ⁶ Noël (1998, pp. 34–35): “La sophistique n’a pas d’existence historique propre” and “les auteurs rangés sous cette rubrique commode, mais historiquement inexistante”.
- ⁷ Bayle (1740, pp. 226–29). Glenn Most has a chapter on “Bayle’s Presocratics” in Rechenauer (2011, pp. 237–46), but he skips Critias.
- ⁸ Wilamowitz (1875, pp. 161–72) attributes the Sisyphus fragment to Critias and Dihle (1977) to Euripides.
- ⁹ Bayle (1740, 228 H) III: “On ne voit nulle liaison entre préférer la Monarchie au Gouvernement Républicain, & n’oser dire directement sa pensée sur la Religion”.
- ¹⁰ See Sedley (2013, p. 329). For a transcription of the fragment conserved by Philodemus, see Centanni (1997, p. 156, n. 49).
- ¹¹ Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.118: “Quid i qui dixerunt totam de dis immortalibus opinionem fictam esse ab hominibus sapientibus rei publicae causa, ut quos ratio non posset eos ad officium religio duceret, nonne omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt?” Arthur Pease had no difficulty recognizing these lines as a paraphrase of DK 88 B25 in his edition of the *De natura deorum* (Cambridge, MA, 1955; reprint Darmstadt, 1968), 513. Cicero certainly understood the import of Critias’ most famous fragment as a fundamental subversion of religion.
- ¹² Nestle (1942, p. 486): “Als Kernpunkt der philosophischen und sophistischen Aufklärung lässt sich der Rationalismus bezeichnen, wenn man dieses Wort in seiner weitesten Bedeutung versteht”.

- ¹³ Nestle (1942, p. 261): “Die Propagandisten und Enzyklopädisten der von der ionischen Philosophie entfachten Aufklärung, die sie in die weitesten Kreise tragen und durch eigene Gedanken ergänzen”.
- ¹⁴ Or, as Luc Brisson puts it, “Critias semble être un personnage particulièrement contradictoire” Brisson (1994, p. 519).
- ¹⁵ Boschi (2021, p. 253). Centanni regards the Sisyphus fragment as sophistic for a different reason: “Crizia compie un passo ulteriore nel senso del più radicale relativismo sofistico” (150). Critias makes religious belief relative to the individual’s perception of natural phenomena, which might resemble the subjective relativism associated with Protagoras.
- ¹⁶ Burkert (1977, pp. 460–68): “Die Krise: Sophisten und Atheisten”.

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