

**Maimonides Scholar Yehuda Even-Shmuel (Kaufman)**

**On The Sophists**

**–An Appreciation And Brief Translation, by Scott Alexander**

In preparation for the study of Maimonides' *Introduction* to Volume II of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I have been reading Yehuda Even-Shmuel's Hebrew prefaced his commentary on Volume II the *Guide*.

This great commentator is mostly unknown to the American audience, and for that reason I have translated below several impressive pages from his introduction. Since Maimonides' *Introduction* summarized Aristotelian physical and cosmological thought in a famous if little understood series of 26 Propositions, Even-Shmuel prepares us to read the Propositions by presenting here a lengthy review of pre-Aristotelian philosophy.

The brief portion that I translated deals with the Sophists. Though we might have expected Even-Shmuel to attack them, and he does get to that, he, characteristically, shows us why the times called the Sophists forth, and shows us their enduring contribution to thought. The anti-philosophical stance of the Sophists come down to us in the "Kalām" of the Church Fathers, and in the real Kalām of their Islamic successors, as well as with major opponents of philosophy (who, of course, become part of the philosophic canon) like R. Yehuda HaLevi and Ibn Ghazali.

I found Even-Shmuel's entire essay, in addition to this section on the Sophists, to be gripping. A large part of it is about the pre-Socratic philosophers. It was prepared during the same early 20<sup>th</sup> century era when German scholars organized the "fragments" of pre-Socratic thought (Diels-Kranz). It was when Heidegger laid claim to that pre-Socratic thought in opposition to Plato and Aristotle. This became part of the Nazi program of the Aryanization of the pre-Socratics. He seems to be the unmentioned nemesis of Even-Shmuel's essay.

Heidegger had asserted, in support of his existentialist romanticism, that the pre-Socratics still had access to the direct appreciation of "the thing" unmediated by the formal structures of the

Athenian metaphysicians. Against Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger demanded a return to the simple relationship of the man to the things about him, both of which are *thrown* into the world.

Of course, this meant rubbishing classical philosophy and religion, which also conformed to the ideology of the Nazi party, which Heidegger formally joined in 1933. In unspoken, but apparently direct response, Even-Shmuel prepared his Hebrew review of Hellenic philosophical thought, located its many Jewish roots and connections, and supported the traditional account of the Athenian overcoming of its Ionian, Eleatic, and Thracian roots. In particular, he emphasizes its spiritual, and religious underpinnings, not existentialist romanticism, the atheists' substitute for God.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel (Kaufman), 1887 – 1976, was a student of Rabbi Chaim Tchernowitz in the Odessa Yeshiva, and went on to study at University of Paris, eventually obtaining his doctorate at Dropsie College in Canada. He edited several US and Canadian journals, and was a founder of the *Poalei Zion* movement in the United States. In 1926 H. N. Bialik invited him to Israel edit the comprehensive English-Hebrew dictionary. He was the head of the Department of culture of the Jewish government under the British Mandate. Even-Shmuel was the first editor of the humanities department of the Hebrew Encyclopedia. The first volume of his four volume Hebrew commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the most extensive of its kind, was published by in 1935. He received the Israel Prize in 1973 for his translation of *The Kuzari* of Yehuda Ha-Levi from Arabic to Hebrew.



Photo (Wikimedia Commons) THE ELECTED ASSEMBLY IN SESSION IN JERUSALEM. דיון באולם המליאה של אספת הנבחרים הרביעית בירושלים. From right to left: Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel, Yitzchak Ben Zvi, Rabbi Issac Herzog and

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Here is my translation of Yehuda Even-Shmuel's introduction to Volume II of his commentary to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, pages 42-44 [my comments are in brackets]:

The Sophists emerged in opposition to the intellectualism compelled by [the pre-Socratics] Anaxagoras and Parmenides. The Sophist Protagoras scorned and mocked the intellectualism of the philosophers, to reinstate the ancient crown: that nothing is true but sense-data. Moreover, there is no single truth for all men: truth is entirely individual, and even for one individual there is no single truth for all the days of his life – nothing can be more changeable than the valuation of truth.

With this foundation of sensualism and relativism, the Sophists waged war on man's inclination to philosophize. They even began to deny natural science. They asked: On what possible basis could man construct a science? What can a man observe, after all, to support his speeches about heaven and earth? How could he even know himself? Why does man boast of his intellectual cognition? The mind errs. All it can do is to apprehend a thing and its opposite. The intellect cannot even bring two men to agree on a single conclusion of their investigations. So how are we able to confirm anything except what we can recognize from our senses? Everyone who is not deceived agrees to the evidence of the senses. This recognition teaches us that "man is the measure of all things."

(Footnote 133: this statement was preserved by Plato in the *Cratylus*. Most saw it as a doctrine of relativism, while others, such as Plato, thought that its intent was to emphasize man as an individual [individualism, as such, being a new idea])

The Sophists posited that man should be the center of all inquiry. The philosophers, they claimed, were interested in the heights of the heavens and the depths of the earth, in the heavenly spheres, in matter, in forces, in motion, in being, and even in nothingness, – but they had no recognition of man himself. Humanity was for the philosophers a tool for the recognition of the world as an object, but man as subject, they did not seek to understand. Their revolt against the

philosophers sought instead: “being” is only “being” in so far as man recognizes it as such. And nothingness, only in so far as man recognizes nothingness.

The Sophists, therefore, called for humanism, but their humanism was distorted. The sum of their critique was: since man is the true measure of all things, he did not need to seek the truth – truth has no existence apart from man.

The only thing clear to man is that which benefits him; – this recognition of benefit is entirely personal, and is the only thing sufficiently worthy of the interest of each man. Moreover, there are only two beneficial paths to this benefit: the attainment of pleasure and the attainment of power.

The Hellenic philosophers, who had been begun by rejecting mythology, trusting the human intellect, ended with the Sophists’ rejection of the sovereignty of the mind. They also rejected social morality, raising egoism to the level of moral law. Their answer to the question “What is justice?” was just my hegemony over all around me, – not only “He who is strong prevails,” but even “Might makes right.”

In the war against this dangerous degeneration there were only two possibilities: revolt against humanism, or the aspiration toward a moral humanism. In the grove of Hellenic thought there arose, one after the other, three great philosophers who chose the latter possibility. They constructed the basis for such a moral humanism, like the humanism of the prophets of Israel.

The question that emerged before the Socratic – Platonic – Aristotelian philosophers would be “What was the correct path for humanism?” The sophists established the basis for a proper critique of one-sided intellectualism, but their positive response was not acceptance of human thought, but a turn to sensual appearances. They denied man the first taste of the fruit of the teachings of consciousness [literally: “the Torah of consciousness”].

Still, a total rejection of thought was not possible for the sophists: they reduced the human intellect to a weapon in the war of the one against the many, a tool for disputatious speech and for perverted ends, an instrumentality for mischief and for sport. In their reply, the new philosophers had to determine the criterion for truth, and the power of mind to assess the true

essence of things. They began by declaring the existence of the absolute truth of the eternal values: the good, the just, love, beauty, and the sacred.

According to Socrates and Plato, Greek philosophy had come to bankruptcy in all three of its principal roots: 1) The Ionian school, which taught that The One was the source of all things; 2) The Eleatic school, who taught that The One was the totality of all things; 3) The Pluralist school, that virtually rejected the existence of The One. This degradation was completed by the Sophists for whom all speculation was a lie, and who encouraged mere intellectual gymnastics, and claimed that our senses were our only witness and guide to the understanding of the world.

At its origin, Greek philosophy had committed one decisive error: it sought to know only the natural causes of things, but never asked what the essence of those things was, nor grasped that this essence could not be corporeal. Those first thinkers never perceived the fundamental incorporeality of the real, and that the most important of all things was elemental form.

There was only one school that announced this principle during the era of Ionian philosophy, the school of Pythagoras....

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