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The Sophists, Human Nature, and the First Political Societies: a Reply to Robitzsch

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Abstract

In a series of recent works, Jan Maximilian Robitzsch has argued that a number of sophistic authors deny that humans are naturally social animals. According to Robitzsch, the accounts of early human political history in these authors take humanity's weakness as a starting point and, building upon that, they maintain that humans entered into political society out of a concern for their own well-being rather than any natural inclination. Robitzsch's interpretation is unfortunately overly simplistic and at times presents an inaccurate picture of the early Greek thinkers and what they thought about human nature and history. Features of his interpretation are also shared by other scholars, who make similar errors. In this article, I argue against Robitzsch and show that there was more diversity among the sophistic authors than he suggests *vis-à-vis* the question of why humans first entered society and also that in a number of relevant texts, there is a clear sense in which humans are naturally social animals.

Keywords

Sophists – Plato – Protagoras – Democritus – Anonymous Iamblichus – political philosophy

In a series of recent papers as well as a new monograph, Jan Maximilian Robitzsch has argued that Democritus,¹ Plato's Protagoras,² and the sophistic authors more generally³ deny that humans are naturally social animals. According to Robitzsch, the accounts of early human political history found in these authors take humanity's weakness as a starting point and, building upon this starting point, they maintain that humans entered into political society out of a calculated concern for their own well-being rather than any natural inclination towards the company and support of other people. Because Robitzsch assumes that such an inclination would be necessary for humans to be naturally social animals, this leads him to infer at one point that these 'weakness accounts claim that the coming to be of the community is conventional, rather than natural.'⁴

It seems to me that Robitzsch presents an overly simplistic and at times misleading picture of the early Greek thinkers and what they thought about human nature and history. In fact, only some of these thinkers emphasized the species' physical weakness in their explanations of why humans joined together to form the first communities. Others emphasized instead the aggressive tendencies of certain individuals to explain why most humans first took steps to establish ordered societies regulated by laws. Moreover, though it is true that the sophistic authors who emphasized human weakness tended to suggest that humans first entered society out of a concern for their own well-being, one should not conclude from this that these authors denied humans are naturally social. On the contrary, the fact that humans were unable to live alone and needed others is precisely what explains why humans are in a sense naturally social animals for these authors.

In what follows, I shall argue against Robitzsch and make the case both for thinking that there was more diversity within the sophistic authors than he suggests vis-à-vis the question of why humans first entered into society and also that in a number of relevant texts there is a clear sense in which humans

1 J.M. Robitzsch, 'Democritus on Human Nature and Sociability', *Ancient Philosophy* 44 (2024), pp. 1–15. See also the discussion in his 'The Epicureans on Human Nature and its Social and Political Consequences', *Polis* 34 (2017), pp. 1–19, at p. 10.

2 J.M. Robitzsch, 'Protagoras on How Political Communities Come to Be', *Classical Philology* 188 (2023), pp. 387–398.

3 The important sophistic text known to us as the Anonymous Iamblichi as well as 'the Sophists and Plato' are mentioned explicitly by Robitzsch. See his 'Democritus', p. 2 and p. 4 respectively. See also J.M. Robitzsch, *Epicurean Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 1–13, where Robitzsch also discusses Antiphon and the sophists more generally.

4 Robitzsch, 'Democritus,' p. 4.

are naturally social animals.⁵ But my purpose in this article is not simply to respond to one contemporary scholar. In responding to Robitzsch, I take myself to be addressing a larger shortcoming of past research. Scholars have often treated the sophists as a homogenous group and generally ignored the subtle but real differences in our extant texts.⁶ Robitzsch offers a more sensitive treatment of the evidence than most, and yet even he overlooks important points that, I hope to show, are indicative of significant moral and political disagreements. Nor is Robitzsch the only scholar recently to overlook the specific point that some sophists regarded humans as naturally social while others denied this.⁷ Therefore, in what follows I shall highlight the heterogeneity in the sophists' texts and what these texts imply about human nature and history. We will find that there were important and pregnant differences among these thinkers, most of whom took themselves to be addressing foundational issues in moral and political philosophy.

1 Why Did Humans First Enter Political Society?

Following the work of Peter Steinmetz, Robitzsch distinguishes between accounts of the development of political communities that emphasize human

5 I will freely speak about Democritus as a sophistic author. The boundaries between the Presocratics and the sophists were not nearly as sharp in the ancient period as scholarship makes them seem. And when it comes to moral and political topics, there is considerable overlap. I agree with Arthur Adkins, who once remarked that the 'atomist Democritus may be broadly classed with the sophists when he is concerned with ethical topics'. See his *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 103.

6 For a recent discussion of past scholarship and its tendency to overgeneralize, see J. Billings and C. Moore, 'The Problem of the Sophists', in J. Billings and C. Moore (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 1–29. Exceptions to this overgeneralizing trend that have influenced my thinking about the sophists' ethics and politics include Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Richard Bett, 'Is there a Sophistic Ethics?', *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002), pp. 235–262; and Rachel Barney, 'The Sophistic Movement', in M.L. Gill and P. Pellegrin (eds.) *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), pp. 77–97.

7 Phillip Horky has recently suggested that the Anonymous Iamblich is an important background text for understanding Glaucon's discussion of the origins of justice in *Republic* II. (See his 'Law and Justice among the Socratics: Contexts for Plato's *Republic*', *Polis* 38 (2021), pp. 399–419.) He appears to believe that the Anonymous Iamblich influenced Glaucon. But if the argument presented below is correct, the view put forward by the Anonymous Iamblich comes from a different tradition of thinking about human history and nature than the view presented by Glaucon.

nature and those that emphasize human weakness.⁸ According to the former sort of account, the primary reason humans enter society is an inherent desire that humans have to live together with others – to achieve a good that can only be achieved in a group. The paradigmatic example of this sort of account is, of course, the one developed in Aristotle's *Politics*. 'By contrast', we are told, 'according to weakness accounts, most humans are naturally weak, and communities come to be from a calculation of what is beneficial, that is, as a result of the decision to unite with others for protection. Human beings are not social animals by nature, on this account, but their living together is artificial'.⁹ Robitzsch mentions Democritus, Protagoras, and Glaucon in *Republic II* as offering weakness accounts.

In the following section I will object to the suggestion that accounts in which communities come to be from a calculation of what is beneficial are each of them accounts in which living together is artificial. For the moment, let us consider whether it is true that all these relatively early Greek authors thought that humans first entered into political society because of their weaknesses. My answer, in brief, is 'no'. Though some authors certainly believed this, others thought otherwise.

Robitzsch is correct to suggest that Democritus and Protagoras in the so-called 'Great Speech' advance a view of this sort. Diodorus Siculus' discussion of human history from 1.7–8 of his *Library of History*, which, following Reinhardt and others, Robitzsch takes as evidence about Democritus' thought,¹⁰ emphasizes that early humans were weak and assailed by animals. The text makes it clear that humans, who originally lived alone as individuals or in relative isolation,¹¹ faced daily existential threats, which ultimately led them to join together in groups (1.7.2–6):

8 Peter Steinmetz, 'Staatengründung – aus Schwäche oder natürlichem Geselligkeitsdrang? Zur Geschichte einer Theorie', in Peter Steinmetz (ed.) *Politeia und Res Publica. Beiträge zum Verständnis von Politik, Recht und Staat in der Antike* (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner, 1969), pp. 181–199. Steinmetz begins with and takes his cue from later, Stoic material. It is only in the last few pages of his chapter that he works his way back from this material to Platonic and pre-Platonic texts, and his discussion of these earlier texts is very much influenced by his analysis of Stoic texts.

9 Robitzsch, 'Democritus', p. 4.

10 Karl Reinhardt, 'Hekataios von Abdera und Demokrit', *Hermes* 47 (1912), pp. 492–513. In this article, I will assume – like Robitzsch – that the material in Diodorus 1.7–8 is broadly Democritean.

11 At 1.7.1 humans are said to live 'σποράδην' – 'scattered about' or 'here and there'. As Robitzsch, 'Democritus', p. 6 notes, there is some controversy over what this term means. Some commentators have taken it to imply that human beings lived as individuals, alone from one another. Others think this word is compatible with humans already living in

[2] και πολεμουμένους μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων ἀλλήλοισι βοηθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ συμφέροντος διδασκομένους, ἀθροίζομένους δὲ διὰ τὸν φόβον ἐπιγινώσκειν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ μικρὸν τοὺς ἀλλήλων τύπους... [5] τοὺς οὖν πρῶτους τῶν ἀνθρώπων μηδενὸς τῶν πρὸς βίον χρησίμων εὐρημένους ἐπιπόνως διάγειν, γυμνοὺς μὲν ἐσθήτος ὄντας, οἰκήσεως τε καὶ πυρὸς ἀήθεις, τροφῆς δ' ἡμέρου παντελῶς ἀνενοήτους. [6] καὶ γὰρ τὴν συγκομιδὴν τῆς ἀγρίας τροφῆς ἀγνοοῦντας μηδεμίαν τῶν καρπῶν εἰς τὰς ἐνδείας ποιείσθαι παράθεσιν· διὸ καὶ πολλοὺς αὐτῶν ἀπόλλυσθαι κατὰ τοὺς χειμῶνας διὰ τε τὸ ψύχος καὶ τὴν σπάνιν τῆς τροφῆς.

[2] When they were attacked by wild animals, they came to one another's help, being taught by utility, and, gathering together out of fear, they gradually came to recognize one another's features ... [5] Now the first people lived wretchedly, since none of the things useful for life had been discovered: they were bare of clothing, ignorant of dwellings and fire, completely unaware of domestic food. [6] Indeed, knowing nothing of the communal provision of wild food, they made no reserves of fruits against eventual need. And that is why many of them died during the winters, because of cold and scarcity of food.¹²

Humans lived a miserable existence early in their history. They were attacked by wild animals, and their frail bodies were ill-equipped to deal with the extremes of nature. Our weak ancestors faced existential threats every day, and they needed to unite into cooperative communities to survive.

We find something similar in Protagoras' Great Speech from Plato's *Protagoras*.¹³ After humans and the other animals were created by the gods,

small, spread-out groups. (For the two sides of this debate see, e.g., P.P. Nicholson and G.B. Kerferd's 'Protagoras on Pre-Political Man: An Exchange', *Polis* 4 (1982), pp. 18–29.) Though I do not believe the evidence is decisive, I agree with Robitzsch that in Diodorus Siculus' discussion it is more likely that in the first historical stage of our existence humans lived completely isolated lives.

12 Both the Greek of Democritus' texts and its translations follow A. Laks and G.W. Most's edition of *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume VII* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

13 For the purposes of this article, it is best to avoid a detailed treatment of the vexed question of whether and to what extent Plato presents us with an accurate representation of the historical Protagoras' views. However, it is worth emphasizing that the similarities between Protagoras' Great Speech and what we find in other early texts suggest that Plato may have been inspired by 5th century material when he wrote *Protagoras*. For a defense of the idea that the core claims of Protagoras' Great Speech reflect genuinely Protagorean views, see Bernd Manuwald, 'Protagoras' Myth: in Plato's Protagoras: Fiction or Testimony?', in J. van Ophuijsen, M. van Raalte, and P. Stork (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 163–177.

our species was in a dire situation. Though early humans were gifted the technical skills needed to supply themselves with food, shelter, and clothing, they remained in constant danger because they were in every way weaker than the other animals (διὰ τὸ πανταχῆ αὐτῶν ἀσθενέστεροι εἶναι, 322b2–3).¹⁴ The attacks we suffered from these animals posed an existential threat. Protagoras makes this much clear by noting that Zeus feared the whole species might be annihilated (322c1). Our ancestors attempted to band together to fend off the attacks of wild animals. At first this failed because our species did not yet have the political art, which allows humans to live together peacefully. But once given the political art, the species succeeded in founding cities and secured themselves against the wild animals (322c1–d5).

Here, too, we are clearly dealing with a text that, despite its mythological accouterments, offers a historical account of the development of political communities that emphasizes human weakness.¹⁵ There is one more text that is worth discussing at this juncture. That is the so-called Anonymous Iamblichi – a sophistic text which champions justice and which is preserved in the 20th chapter of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*.¹⁶ Robitzsch mentions this text only in passing, but it contains an account of early human political history strikingly similar to the one found in Protagoras' Great Speech.¹⁷ It is worth quoting the relevant sections of the text in full (100.9–18):

14 Greek from the *Protagoras* comes from Burnet's OCT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

15 Like most other recent commentators, I do not think the mythological packaging of the first part of Protagoras' Great Speech is meant to be taken literally. Behind it lies a naturalistic account of how human beings developed into political creatures. For an insightful defense of this naturalistic reading, see Adam Beresford's 'Fangs, Feathers, & Fairness: Protagoras on the Origin of Right and Wrong,' ['Fangs, Feathers, & Fairness'] in J. van Ophuijsen, M. van Raalte, and P. Stork (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 139–162, at pp. 139–148.

16 For a helpful discussion of the Anonymous Iamblichi, and its place in Iamblichus' work, see Phillip Horky, 'Anonymous Iamblichi, *On Excellence: A Lost Defense of Democracy*', in D.C. Wolfsdorf (ed.) *Early Greek Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 269–292. Horky is attracted to the possibility that Democritus may have been the ultimate source for the material found in the Anonymous. I am less attracted to this possibility. I share the view of Klaus Hoffmann – articulated in *Das Recht im Denken der Sophistik [Das Recht]* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), p. 332 – that the author is an unknown sophist, not identifiable with any well-known figure.

17 Rachel Barney has recently noted some of the similarities between the Anonymous Iamblichi and Protagoras' Great Speech. See 'Protagoras and the Myth of Plato's Protagoras', in Christoph Rieweg (ed.), *Philosophie für die Polis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 135–160, at 136–141.

εἰ γὰρ ἔφυσαν μὲν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἀδύνατοι καθ' ἓνα ζῆν, συνῆλθον δὲ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τῇ ἀνάγκῃ εἴκοντες, πᾶσα δὲ ἡ ζωὴ αὐτοῖς εὐρηται καὶ τὰ τεχνήματα πρὸς αὐτήν, σὺν ἀλλήλοις δὲ εἶναι αὐτοὺς κἂν ἀνομίᾳ δαιτιάσθαι οὐχ οἷόν τε (μείζω γὰρ αὐτοῖς ζημίαν οὕτω γίγνεσθαι ἐκείνης τῆς κατὰ ἓνα διαίτης), διὰ ταύτας τοίνυν τὰς ἀνάγκας τὸν τε νόμον καὶ τὸ δίκαιον ἐμβασιλεύειν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ οὐδαμῇ μεταστῆναι ἂν αὐτά· φύσει γὰρ ἰσχυρὰ ἐνδεδέσθαι ταῦτα.

For if humans were indeed born incapable of living in isolation, and necessity compelled them to come together with each other, and if their whole livelihood and the devices for securing it have been invented by them, and if indeed they were not able to live with one another in a state of lawlessness (for the cost of living together in this way is greater than for living a solitary life) – because of all these necessities, law and justice rule as a king among human beings, and there is no way they could be altered. For they are strongly held in place by nature.¹⁸

Although threats from animals are not mentioned explicitly here, this text contains an account of human history that also emphasizes human weakness and our inability to live successfully outside of communities. Note that – as was true for both the Democritean and Protagorean stories presented above – the Anonymous Iamblichus implies that in the earliest historical period humans attempted to live as isolated individuals. But unable to do so successfully, they were forced by necessity itself to join together at some point in the past (NB the aorist ‘συνῆλθον’). Subsequently, they developed a new way of life and the devices necessary to sustain themselves. This saved the species, whose members are ‘incapable’ of living in isolation and depend on cooperative groups.

These three texts can fairly be described as presenting a weakness account of how human beings first entered into political societies. Three features seem to me characteristic of the accounts just mentioned. First, they hold that human beings once lived outside of political communities in (at least) relative isolation from one another. Second, they suggest that during this time our ancestors were under constant threat, mainly from other animals but also from the extremes of nature. Indeed, so dire were our circumstances in this pre-political stage that all the texts surveyed above indicate in one way or another that individual humans or even the entire species were at serious risk

18 The Greek of the Anonymous Iamblichus as well as its translation (with some modifications) follows Anders Sørensen's Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

of being destroyed. And finally, these accounts suggest that humans at some point entered into cooperative groups in order to overcome their weaknesses and ensure their survival.

It must be stressed, however, that not all the accounts identified by Robitzsch as weakness accounts fit this mold. In particular, the account offered by Glaucon in Book II of Plato's *Republic* strikes me as importantly different from these weakness accounts. For Glaucon's account – and at least one other 5th century account similar to it, which I discuss below – does not emphasize the weakness of the human species at all. It emphasizes instead the desire to avoid suffering injustice at the hands of other people. I begin by presenting Glaucon's account in its entirety (358e4–359a5):

πεφυκέναι γὰρ δὴ φασιν τὸ μὲν ἀδικεῖν ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀδικεῖσθαι κακόν, πλέονι δὲ κακῷ ὑπερβάλλειν τὸ ἀδικεῖσθαι ἢ ἀγαθῷ τὸ ἀδικεῖν· ὥστ' ἐπειδὴν ἀλλήλους ἀδικῶσί τε καὶ ἀδικῶνται καὶ ἀμφοτέρων γεύονται, τοῖς μὴ δυναμένοις τὸ μὲν ἐκφεύγειν τὸ δὲ αἰρεῖν δοκεῖ λυσιτελεῖν συνθέσθαι ἀλλήλοις μὴτ' ἀδικεῖν μὴτ' ἀδικεῖσθαι. καὶ ἐντεῦθεν δὴ ἄρξασθαι νόμους τίθεσθαι καὶ συνθήκας αὐτῶν, καὶ ὀνομάσαι τὸ ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἐπίταγμα νόμιμόν τε καὶ δίκαιον, καὶ εἶναι δὴ ταύτην γένεσίν τε καὶ οὐσίαν δικαιοσύνης.

They say that doing injustice is naturally good, and suffering injustice bad, but that the bad in suffering injustice far exceeds the good in doing it; so that, whenever they do injustice to one another and suffer it and taste both, it seems profitable – to those who are not able to escape the one and choose the other – to set down a compact among themselves neither to do injustice nor to suffer it. And from there they began to set down laws and compacts and to name what the law commands as lawful and just. This, then, is the genesis and essence of justice.¹⁹

This explanation of the development of the first communities regulated by laws is very different from the ones found in the three texts discussed above. In the first place, there is no implication that human beings lived in relative isolation from one another in the earliest historical periods. Glaucon's account begins with human beings committing injustice against one another, which

19 The Greek of *Republic* comes from Slings' OCT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Translations follow Allan Bloom's *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), sometimes with minor changes.

suggests that they have always lived together.²⁰ There is, moreover, nothing in Glaucon's account suggesting that the human species was weak and at risk of being destroyed, either from the elements or from the other animals that featured so prominently in Democritus and Protagoras' discussions. The only threat mentioned in Glaucon's speech is *other human beings*. It is not even the case that Glaucon claims that humans as a species or even as individuals needed to enter society in order to preserve themselves and survive. On the contrary, he claims that no "true man" (ἀληθῶς ἄνδρα) would ever agree to neither do nor suffer injustice (359b2–5). These men would rather stay in a natural condition and remain free to continue practicing injustice upon others. Presumably, were they to do so both they and the people they prey on would continue to survive.

This is all clearly distinct from what we find in the weakness account.²¹ I suggest that Glaucon's account of why humans first entered into political communities derived from a different tradition of thinking about this issue, one which is expressed in other early texts. Most important for us is the so-called Sisyphus Fragment. This 5th century text of disputed authorship contains 42 lines of a play discussing the development of religious belief.²²

20 Consider that in Protagoras' Great Speech it is only when humans come together and first attempt to found cities that they commit injustice upon one another (ἡδίκουν ἀλλήλους, 322b7). There is no mention of injustice being done when humans live apart from one another.

21 An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that there is a way of interpreting Glaucon's account that closes some of the distance between it and what we find in the weakness accounts. The thought is that Glaucon may be assuming humans began living apart and only later came together and perpetrated injustice against one another. He may simply have glossed over the part of human history where they joined together for reasons of space, perhaps because this is what his audience would have assumed in any case. I think, however, the evidence mitigates against construing Glaucon's account this way. That is because later, when Socrates begins to respond to Glaucon's account of the origin of human society at 369a–c, he is careful to go back to a time before Glaucon's account began and to explain how human beings first gathered in a single place. We are clearly meant to see his stepping back in time as a theoretical difference that makes his account more explanatory than Glaucon's, who begins his relatively simplistic account with us already existing together. I take this to be Plato's way of highlighting that the Glauconian account is missing something of crucial importance, not merely glossing over something in a trivial and haphazard way.

22 Ancient sources offer conflicting information about the origin of our text. Sextus (*adv. Math.* 9.54 and *Pyrroh.* 3.218) attributes the text to Critias; Aetius (1.7.2) attributes it to Euripides. Contemporary scholars continue to debate the authorship of the text. Albrecht Dihle has put forward an influential argument in favour of Euripidean authorship. See his 'Das Satyrspiel "Sisyphos"', *Hermes* 105 (1977), pp. 28–42. More recently, Dana Sutton has

The text begins with an account of why human beings established a society governed by laws. Consider the following (DK88 B25.1–8):

ἦν χρόνος ὅτ' ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος
καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ' ὑπηρέτης,
ὅτ' οὐδὲν ἄθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν
οὔτ' αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίγνετο.
κάπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους
θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα δίκη τύραννος ᾗ
<....> τήν θ' ὕβριν δούλην ἔχη·
ἐζημιούτο δ' εἴ τις ἐξαμαρτάνοι.

There was a time when the life of humans was disordered
And animal-like, and subservient to force,
When neither was there any prize for good men,
Nor inversely any punishment for evil ones.
And then, it seems to me, humans established laws
To punish, so that justice would be the absolute ruler
<> and it would hold arrogance enslaved;
And if anyone committed a transgression he would be punished.²³

This brief discussion of early human history presents an account much closer to the one offered by Glaucon than the weakness accounts discussed earlier.²⁴ Here, too, the principal motivation people have for creating laws and entering into a regulated society is the desire to stop other people from doing injustice to them. We know from the later sections of the text that certain individuals will practice injustice when they think they can do so without suffering any

argued that Critias is the author. See his 'Critias and Atheism', *The Classical Quarterly* 31 (1981), pp. 33–38.

23 Both the Greek of the Sisyphus Fragment and its translations follow A. Laks and G.W. Most's edition of *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume IX* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

24 Charles Kahn has noted the similarity between this text and Glaucon's discussion in *Republic*. Speaking about the Sisyphus Fragment he says, 'the account of the state of nature and the origin of civil laws is brief ... I suggest that in this respect the author is not innovating but making use of an earlier account of how "human beings first established laws", an account similar to that which Glaucon refers to in *Republic* II'. See his 'The Origins of Social Contract Theory', in G.B. Kerferd ed. *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), pp. 92–108, at p. 97.

punishment for their bad behaviour.²⁵ And we are told that humans established laws *so that* (ἵνα) justice would rule among them and whoever did wrong would suffer punishments.²⁶ There is no suggestion anywhere in the extant parts of the text that humans as a species are especially weak or were in danger of dying out from the elements or the other animals. This is not what drove us into political communities, according to the author of the Sisyphus Fragment. The only threat that the text emphasizes as needing to be overcome is people and what they do when they practice injustice against other people. Other sophistic authors may have advanced views similar to the one in the Sisyphus Fragment as well.²⁷

My claim, then, is that already in sophistic and Platonic texts we see two different traditions of thinking about why human beings first entered political society. There are, on the one hand, weakness accounts, which emphasize how naturally weak and isolated humans, whose survival is threatened by the elements and other animals, ultimately chose to enter into political society in order to secure their survival. But there is also what I shall call the ‘avoiding injustice account’, which we find expressed by Glaucon in *Republic* II and the Sisyphus Fragment. The avoiding injustice account does not present early humans as isolated or in a desperate situation. Rather, they are presented as already being in close proximity. Some people are assumed to have a propensity

25 Lines 9–11 read: ‘Then, as the laws prevented them from committing acts of violence in public but they did commit them in secret ...’ The implication is that the laws which were instituted to prevent injustice only drove people to commit injustice in secret. This confirms that prior to the institution of the laws people were practicing injustice in public. After the establishment of laws injustice was committed secretly because perpetrators wanted to avoid suffering punishments.

26 It is probable that, in addition to wanting to punish those who did wrong, the early humans of the Sisyphus Fragment also wanted those who did well to be rewarded. I take this to be the implication of the complaint in line 3 that there were no prizes for good people.

27 There are some hints suggesting that Antiphon may also have thought people developed laws to restrain the injustice of their peers. Consider, for example, his remark at DK87 B44 5.25–6.9:

“So, if the laws provided some protection for those submitting to these kinds of things, and provided some loss for those who do not submit but resist, then to obey the laws would not be unprofitable. But now justice which derives from the law appears to be incapable of coming to the aid of those who submit to these kinds of things.”

Antiphon is raising the possibility that the laws can successfully protect citizens from being harmed by others. He thinks that the laws cannot do this and are, therefore, unworthy of being respected fully. Yet by introducing the possibility that the laws might be able to prevent citizens from being harmed, this might suggest that this is why the laws were invented in the first place.

to practice injustice. The experience of suffering injustice drives the majority of these early human groups to establish laws that will punish, deter, and ultimately prevent the unwanted behaviour of those who do wrong.²⁸

Further evidence that the weakness and avoiding injustice accounts really are distinct can be found by considering the practical implications of the two accounts. It is notable that the authors of the texts that emphasize human weakness ultimately defend the value of cooperation for human beings. In one way or another Democritus, Plato's Protagoras, and the author of the Anonymous Iamblich all recognize the need that human beings have for one another, and this recognition becomes foundational for their respective contributions to moral and political philosophy. They all promote the value of organized, cooperative communal behaviour. Moreover, they are all of them moralists: they ultimately believe that it is rational for humans to be just and avoid injustice. (All of this will turn out to be true of Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, too, as we shall see below). This is very much in contrast to the other texts we have looked at that emphasize conflict. Both Glaucon and the author of the Sisyphus Fragment portray humans as selfish and *pleonectic* creatures. They suggest there is a real conflict between what is good for the community as a whole and the individual, and partly for that reason they encourage individuals to break the law in pursuit of their own self-interest.²⁹

There is, thus, a deep connection between the attitude the texts surveyed above have with regard to human nature and history, on the one hand, and their moral and political philosophy, on the other. But to see this clearly we must distinguish the weakness and avoiding injustice accounts. If one identifies Glaucon's discussion of how humans entered political society as a weakness account, one obscures the diversity of thought we find in the texts of early Greek political philosophy. The sophists put forward different explanations of why humans first entered society. As we shall see in the next section, recognizing the differences in their explanations is also important for answering

28 A fair question to ask is whether these two traditions are distinct from the 'natural' account of why humans first entered into society, which was raised earlier in the context of Steinmetz and is famously advanced by Aristotle's *Politics*. This is a complicated question that cannot be fully addressed here. But in the following section I will suggest that some weakness accounts in fact imply that humans are naturally social animals. It seems likely to me that these accounts are important precursors to the view we find developed in Book I of Aristotle's *Politics*.

29 On these various authors, see the discussion in chapters two and three of my *Just Prospering? Plato and the Sophistic Debate about Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

the question of whether these authors thought that humans are naturally social animals.

2 Are Humans Naturally Social Animals?

The question of whether human beings are naturally social animals is a complicated one – one that has been debated over the history of philosophy. Given the complexity and high stakes of the question, one might expect to find that the early Greek thinkers answered it in a variety of ways. And this, as I will argue below, is what we do find. But this seems not to be what Robitzsch (and others) think.³⁰ As we saw in the previous section, he claims that the defenders of weakness accounts – which for him include Democritus, Protagoras, and Glaucon – hold that humans live together not by nature but by artificial compact. Let us begin by examining the evidence adduced for this position.

He relies crucially on the observation that the authors of the weakness accounts claim that human beings entered political society out of a calculation for their own self-interest rather than any inherent desire or drive to be with one another. Consider what he says about the Democritean account:

Diodorus does not give any indication that anything besides calculations of benefit plays a role in the coming to be of society; there is no mention of an inherent drive or desire that human beings have to live together with other people. As a result, it seems very difficult to classify the account that is preserved in Diodorus as anything but a representative of the [weakness] account. Yet on such an account it is difficult to see how human beings are social animals by nature.³¹

A similar point is made about Protagoras and the view he advances in the Great Speech as well.³²

³⁰ Robitzsch cites authors who are broadly in agreement with him on this point. He cites, i.e., C.C.W. Taylor's edition and commentary of *Plato: "Protagoras"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). As noted in the introduction, I take myself to be responding to more scholars than just Robitzsch.

³¹ Robitzsch, 'Democritus', p. 7.

³² Robitzsch, 'Protagoras', pp. 391–392: 'Protagoras highlights human weakness as the foremost reason for building political communities', where this is apparently at odds with the Aristotelian idea that humans are naturally social. 'Aristotle's account implies that, from the beginning, human beings were oriented towards living a life with others; in other words, humans have always been political animals (1253a2–3). Not only is such an idea

Robitzsch appears to infer from the fact that an author claims that humans first entered society out of a calculation of their own benefit, rather than any inherent desire to be with others, that the author rejects that humans are naturally social. Two points should be made in response to this move. First, it should be noted that neither Democritus nor Plato's Protagoras explicitly denies that humans have an inherent desire to be with one another. To be sure, neither of the relevant texts claims in so many words that humans have such a desire. But the authors may have thought that early humans possessed such a desire all the same. I will suggest below that there is reason to suspect that Protagoras thought exactly this. For the moment, however, consider that neither author claims early humans desired to have sex either. Yet both must have believed that early humans reproduced sexually and that our ancestors had a desire to have sex – presumably, in just the same way people desire sex today. So, Democritus and Protagoras may well have assumed people desired to be together. And, second, even granting that humans entered society out of a calculation of their own benefit, it would be a mistake to infer from this that humans are not naturally social. There is an obvious counterexample to this line of thought: the view advanced by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*.

For Socrates, too, advances a weakness account of how human beings first entered society. He begins his discussion by claiming that 'a city, as I believe, comes into being because each of us isn't self-sufficient but is in need of much' (369b7–8). The view advanced here is not unlike the one we found earlier in Democritus, Protagoras, and the Anonymous Iamblichii. Like the account in Diodorus Siculus, Socrates claims that human need (χρεία) will make the city (369c10).³³ Moreover, Socrates is explicit about the fact that people first entered into, and later participated in, cooperative society out of a calculation for their own benefit. 'Now, does one person give a share to another, if they do give a share, or take a share, in the belief that it's better for themselves (οἰόμενος αὐτῷ ἄμεινον εἶναι)?' 'Certainly', is Glaucon's immediate reply. (369c6–8).³⁴

And yet it is also quite obvious that, for Plato in his *Republic*, humans are in some robust sense naturally social animals. Later in the discussion of the development of the first city we are told that humans are born with different natures and that different people are naturally suited for different jobs in the city (370a7–b3). Similarly, the myth of metals from Book III maintains that every

absent in the *Protagoras*, but [it] also grossly distorts the view advanced in the Great Speech, which seems consequentialist and ad hoc'.

33 Compare this with *Library of History* 1.7.7: 'need itself became a teacher of human beings'.

34 Note that Plato does not claim in *Republic* that the first humans have a desire to be with other human beings (though he will make this very claim later in *Laws*; see 678e–679a).

person is born with one of a few types of metal in their soul, each of which corresponds to a different job or station in the well-run city (414d1–415c8). Most humans are evidently unable to live the sort of life that any reasonable person would want outside of the city. Thus, at the outset of Book IV Socrates indicates that he trusts nature to distribute human εὐδαιμονία appropriately and fairly in the well-constructed society (421b5–c5). Even the philosophers who resent having to rule are in some profound sense naturally political creatures. The language of growth that Plato uses to discuss the philosophers in Book VII is very telling in this respect. The philosophers' nature can only 'grow' (αὐξανομένην) into every virtue if they are given a suitable rearing (492a1–5); though the philosophical nature may accomplish something outside of a well-run city, only if they are in such a city will they accomplish the greatest things and grow (αὐξήσεται) to completion (497a3–7). All of these claims would be quite strange if Plato did not think humans were naturally social creatures.

Even if it strikes us as a bit strange, it is entirely possible to think that human beings first entered political society out of weakness or out of a calculation for their own benefit and also that humans are naturally social. *Republic* testifies to this. Now, it does not follow from this that human beings are naturally social animals according to the weakness accounts discussed in the previous section. But I take myself to have shown that Robitzsch's principal consideration for denying that humans are social animals according to the Democritean and Protagorean view is a poor one. The fact that these authors do not claim that humans exhibit an innate desire to be with one another is not sufficient to show that they believe, or mean to assert, that humans are not naturally social.

We need a different way to evaluate whether humans are naturally social, according to these early authors. The way to do this, I suggest, is to ask whether, according to any given account of human nature and history, there is some compelling human need that cannot be achieved outside of minimally functional political groups. For several authors discussed above the answer to this question is clearly 'yes'. Cooperative groups are necessary for the survival of individual humans and, moreover, the species itself. For these authors, the fact that human beings need other people in order to survive – let alone thrive – is precisely what makes us naturally social creatures.

Indeed, a good case can be made for thinking this is one of the central points of Protagoras' myth. To see why, we must look at the broader context of the myth. At first, we are told, the gods molded humans and the other animals inside of the earth. When the gods were ready to introduce their creations to the world, they tasked Epimetheus and Prometheus with equipping all living creatures with the powers (δυνάμεις) needed to survive (320c8–d6). Epimetheus did a fine job with the non-rational animals: all were given, first,

sufficient protection from the natural elements and, beyond this, a way to avoid being killed by the other animals (320d7–321b6). But Epimetheus used up all the powers of preservation on these animals, and humans were left entirely without any means of self-preservation (321b6–c7). Seeing our vulnerability, Prometheus stole the technical skills along with the fire needed to exercise those skills from Athena and Hephaestus. This intervention allowed our ancestors to feed themselves and protect themselves from the extremes of nature (321c7–322a7). But humans still could not defend themselves from the other animals. To protect themselves from predatory animals, they needed to join together. But to do this, they first needed to be given – in addition to technical skills – the political skill that would allow them to cooperate with one another and practice the art of war. It is only once Zeus began to fear for the annihilation of the human species that he granted us the political skill (322a7–d5). This is what enabled humans to successfully form cities and to finally preserve themselves against the attacks of other animals.

What this brief survey shows is that humanity's technical savvy as well as our sociality are the two crucial tools that enable us to survive.³⁵ The myth presents them as very much on par with the two kinds of gifts Epimetheus granted the other animals. Recall that those gifts were things like thick fur and tough skin, which allowed the animals to withstand the extremes of nature (321a2–b6); and things like size or speed, which allowed the animals to save themselves from the attacks of predators, either by enabling them to run away or stand their ground (320d7–321a1). The text thereby suggests that reason and sociality are the endowments ensuring our species' survival, just as thick fur and an aggressive disposition are the endowments that ensure the survival of wolves or bears. In both cases we are invited to see these endowments as natural gifts.

Protagoras' myth thus presents humans as naturally social animals because it presents cooperative and just cities as necessary for the survival of the human race. And this very point is underscored after the myth has concluded where Protagoras notes that everyone rightly thinks humans must share in justice 'or they shall not be among humankind at all' (*μη εἶναι ἐνάνθρωποις*, 323c1–2).

We find essentially the same idea expressed in the Anonymous Iamblichi. Consider again:

For [1] if humans were indeed born incapable of living in isolation, and [2] necessity compelled them to come together with each other,

35 This point has been made earlier by Beresford, 'Fangs, Feathers, & Fairness', pp. 147–148.

and [3] if their whole livelihood and the devices for securing it have been invented by them, and [4] if indeed they were not able to live with one another in a state of lawlessness (for the cost of living together in this way is greater than for living a solitary life) – because of all these necessities, law and justice rule as a king among human beings, and there is no way they could be altered. For they are strongly held in place by nature.

The passage in question is one long, four-part conditional sentence that draws a conclusion about humanity's current condition from its history. Because the text affirms the apodosis of the conditional, the author presumably assumes that the four parts of the protasis (this time numbered for ease of understanding) hold true. As I indicated in the previous section, we learn from this passage that at some time in the past human beings tried to live as individuals, they then united together because they were unable to live alone, and they next developed a new, communal way of life [$\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\alpha \eta \zeta\omega\eta$] as well as the tools to support it. Finally, this important stretch of text informs us that humans are not able to live together in a state of lawlessness. This is because living in a condition where everyone practices injustice against others is even worse than living alone.

The author's point is that humans need to live together if they are going to survive, and, additionally, they need to live in societies ruled by justice. Living alone in the wild is not something that creatures like us are cut out for. Neither are we cut out for living in lawless groups where our conduct is unregulated by laws and justice. As history has shown, it is simply a fact about us that we need to live in cooperative groups ruled by laws and justice. That is why the text can conclude from the four necessities that 'law and justice rule as a king among us, and there is no way they can be altered'.³⁶ This conclusion is tantamount to the claim that humans are social animals. And this conclusion is, I think, reinforced by the final clause of the above passage. Though the Greek is difficult to construe and has been the subject of dispute, the clause should be understood as a claim about or implicating our nature. A number of scholars have translated it to convey just that.³⁷

I have argued that, according to Protagoras' Great Speech and the related view found in the Anonymous Iamblichi, humans are naturally social animals

36 My emphasis.

37 Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff translate the final line of the above paragraph, 'For [the law and justice's] strength is ingrained in our nature'. See their edition of *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 293. Cf. Hoffmann, *Das Recht*, pp. 304–306.

because they need to live in lawful, cooperative groups in order to ensure their survival. Now, I believe this is true whether early humans had an innate desire to be around other people or not. The relevant point is simply that our nature is such that we humans cannot really survive outside of groups. But I think it is also clearly true that both Protagoras and the author of the Anonymous Iamblichus presume that humans have a natural desire to live and live well. This is precisely why early human individuals joined together early in their history. Doing so afforded each individual a better chance to continue living and to prosper. And it does not seem at all strange to me that Protagoras and the author of the Anonymous Iamblichus would think that because being with other people was the indispensable means to satisfy their natural desire to continue living and to possibly live well, early humans developed or inherited a natural desire to be with other people. In fact, I think this is strongly suggested at least in the case of Protagoras. For he claims that bonds of friendship arise when the earliest communities first develop, and these bonds presumably indicate mutual love between all the citizens (322c2–3). Here, then, is some indication that early humans really did desire to be and stay with one another.³⁸

It seems to me entirely possible that Diodorus Siculus' account of human history advances basically the same view found in Protagoras' Great Speech as well as the Anonymous Iamblichus and that Democritus believed that humans are naturally social. Unfortunately, however, I do not think we are in a position to claim this with any certainty. Much depends on whether the text implies that humans cannot live successfully as individuals in their original condition, and on this point the evidence leaves room for doubt.³⁹ One might think that the overall similarities between the three accounts mitigate in favour of the possibility that Democritus also holds humans need each other to survive. But I will not press the point here. Instead, I turn to the view advanced by Glaucon in *Republic* II. I shall argue that, as Robitzsch himself suggests, the account in this text, as well as the one in the Sisyphus Fragment, is one in which humans are not naturally social creatures.

The reason why should be obvious by this point: Nothing in Glaucon's account suggests that humans need minimally functional political groups

38 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing passage about *philia* to my attention.

39 At *Library of History* 1.7.4 we are told that humans in the original condition often perished because of the cold or a lack of food. But the text never explicitly indicates that humans are unable to live successfully in such a condition or that they need the help of others if they are to survive.

to secure any pressing need. As I argued in the previous section, Glaucon's account is not one that stresses human weakness. To be sure, the pre-political condition he describes is one where some people exhibit a propensity to commit injustice. Glaucon makes it clear that it is upsetting to suffer injustice at the hands of another. One would much rather do injustice than suffer it. That is why justice is ultimately described as a mean between what would be best for an individual – practicing injustice against others without suffering it in turn – and what would be worst – suffering injustice without being able to practice it (359a5–b2). But neither justice nor the laws that enforce it are ever said to be required for human survival or anything else. Indeed, the very fact that justice is presented as a compromise suggests rather strongly that it is not something that early humans needed to secure their survival. It is rather an agreement early humans entered into with one another to improve most of their lives.⁴⁰

I conclude, then, that Glaucon's account is not one according to which humans are naturally social. It is one according to which humanity's entrance into political society is the result of an artificial compact. The same is true of the account we find in the Sisyphus Fragment. For here, too, neither justice nor the laws are required to secure any pressing human need such as the survival of the species. In the original condition humans lived like the other animals. This may not have been a maximally pleasant existence, but, as Robitzsch himself acknowledges,⁴¹ an animal-like existence need not be a dangerous or violent existence. It was not human weakness that led humans to enter into political society. Much like the account in *Republic* II, the Sisyphus Fragment suggests that early humans established laws principally so that injustice would be curtailed. Some early humans evidently disliked being harmed by their peers. However, the text does not suggest that the species was seriously threatened by the practice of injustice. Even after the laws are established and punishments for crimes are finally instituted, some people continue to practice injustice (albeit in secret, DK88 B25.9–12). The text presents injustice as a normal though onerous fact of life.

The weakness accounts and the avoiding injustice accounts do not only present different stories about how and why humans first entered political society.

40 Though not, of course, all of their lives. Glaucon emphasizes that no 'true man' would ever agree to avoid doing injustices to others (359b2–5). They would prefer to continue in a pre-political condition in which everyone can harm everyone else. This is further evidence that, on Glaucon's view, the human species does not actually need to live in societies ruled by laws and justice.

41 See Robitzsch, 'The Epicureans', pp. 9–10.

They imply crucially different conclusions about human nature. According at least to the version of the weakness account found in Protagoras' Great Speech and the Anonymous Iamblich, human beings are naturally social creatures because we need one another to continue living and to live well. Whether or not early humans had an innate desire to be with others, they certainly had a desire to live and live well. And this they could not do absent political communities ordered by law and justice. Not so, according to the versions of the avoiding injustice account surveyed here. For Glaucon and the author of the Sisyphus Fragment, humans do not enter political communities out of a need to secure their survival. They do so instead to afford themselves the convenience of not having to deal with those of their peers inclined to practice injustice and harm others. The agreements they make are artificial or merely conventional because they are not required to meet any pressing human need.

3 Conclusion

The texts discussed above contain some of the earliest theoretical reflections bearing on several foundational questions in political philosophy. In them we find rich and nuanced thoughts about human nature and the origins of the first political societies. There is a history of scholarship that downplays the differences and neglects the nuances in the sophistic authors. In contrast, I have tried to show that we find the sorts of philosophical disagreements and debates in the sophistic authors that one would expect among serious thinkers engaged in serious philosophy. Though it is true that Democritus, Plato's Protagoras, and the author of the Anonymous Iamblich imply that humans are naturally weak creatures who first banded together in order to preserve the species, this is not what Glaucon in *Republic* or the author of the Sisyphus Fragment believed. They locate the origins of political society not in human neediness but in the desire of our ancestors to avoid suffering injustice at the hands of others. These differences have clear implications for the resulting moral and political philosophies of these various thinkers. Those authors who emphasize human weakness tend to stress the value and rationality of justice for the human species, whereas those who emphasize the strength and selfish desires of individuals tend to be more comfortable with antisocial behaviour and certain individuals breaking the law to promote their own well-being. These differences also lead to different answers about the natural sociability of humans. Though Glaucon and the Sisyphus Fragment deny that humans are social, the weakness accounts in Plato's Protagoras and the Anonymous are

designed to highlight that humans need one another if they are to survive, and this very fact explains why it is that humans are naturally social creatures.⁴²

42 Thanks to the anonymous referees at *Polis* and Anders Sørensen, who shared his new edition of the Anonymous Iamblichus with me before it was published and read an early draft of this article.