

Socrates and Sophistry *Keith Crome*

The sophistic movement flourished in and around Athens in the latter half of the fifth century BC. It almost immediately acquired a bad reputation, and this reputation has stuck: a sophist, we say, is a quibbler; someone who indulges in mere argument for argument's sake; someone who, by playing on words, makes issues problematic that are not. It is frequently observed that Plato played no small part in this: he produced the definitive picture of the sophists, and fixed for posterity their poor reputation. This observation is true, but I shall argue it is only partially so, the glaring evidence of Plato's hostility having obscured the complexity of his treatment of sophistry. Further to this, I will suggest that recognising this complexity can make apparent to us an essential aspect of Plato's philosophising.

First let us consider sophistry's bad reputation. It has been pointed out that this reputation is more puzzling than is often assumed: the period in which sophistry flourished, 450 – 400 BC, was 'in many ways the greatest age of Athens',¹ and although the majority of the sophists were not native Athenians, writings from the time show that they played a major role in this thriving city. It is testimony to the political influence of the sophists that one of their number, Protagoras of Abdera (ca. 490 – 421 BC), was invited by the great Athenian statesman Pericles to draw up the laws for his planned Pan-Hellenic colony in Thurii, Southern Italy. Just as marked was the influence of the sophists upon the artistic and intellectual culture of the era. The tragic dramatist Euripides was reputed to have been one of Protagoras' pupils, and it is said that the historian Thucydides was a 'disciple' of Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 483 – 376 BC). If Socrates was never taught by the sophists, he was certainly familiar with their works, arguments and methods.

The sophists' influence was rooted in their mastery of language: they were expert in the practice and theory of rhetoric, and in what we now call linguistics, i.e. the study of the form and grammar of language. They lived on their wisdom: they exercised political power by using their rhetorical expertise in law courts and assemblies, and acquired a fortune from the very high fees they charged for teaching their oratorical skills.

It is sometimes suggested that it was *because* of their successes, rather than despite them, that the attitudes of the ancient Greeks towards the sophists were not wholly positive. In the early 5th century BC the Greek word *sophistes* (sophist), which is closely related to the words *sophos* (wise) and *sophia* (wisdom), was used of someone who was skilled in a particular craft or who was an expert in particular discipline. A little later it came to be associated with wisdom in general matters – a sort of practical and even political wisdom. Finally, it was applied to the sophists proper – the group of individuals who taught (or boasted of teaching) the art of persuasive discourse. Initially, then, the term *sophistes* was used in a positive way of esteemed individuals: the poets Homer and Hesiod, the sage Solon, and the great mathematician Pythagoras were all described as sophists. However, by the time sophistry proper was thriving, the term had already acquired derogatory connotations.

John Dillon and Tania Gergel have suggested that this was in part due to the 'natural suspicion of the man in the street for experts in any particular arcane discipline, or for intellectuals in general'.² Allied to this 'natural suspicion' of experts and intellectuals, was a distrust of the power that words can exercise. The rhetorical displays in which the sophists excelled were seen as akin to sorcery. That the sophists could persuade a jury, sway an assembly, even in the most unpromising circumstances, led to their words being likened to charms or spells, which enchanted those who happened to hear them.³ Such powers excited admiration and fear in equal measure.

If there was almost immediately a suspicion of the sophists, then by the time of Socrates' trial in 399BC this suspicion had hardened to hostility. The charges of corrupting the youth of Athens and making new gods (amounting to a charge of impiety), brought against Socrates by Meletus, Anytus and Lycon, were accusations frequently made against the sophists. Protagoras was forced to flee Athens for teaching disbelief in the gods, and his books were reputedly burned by the Athenians. Socrates was condemned to death. In the dialogue entitled *Protagoras*, Plato has the eponymous sophist suggest that these accusations derive from envy at the sophists' success in getting the youth of Athens to associate with them in order to acquire the rhetorical skills they taught. Protagoras explains to Socrates:

A man has to be careful when he visits powerful cities as a foreigner, and induces their most promising young men to forsake the company of others, relatives or acquaintances, older or younger, and consort with him on the grounds that his conversation will improve them. Such conduct arouses no small resentment and various forms of hostility and intrigue.⁴

Whilst such behaviour provoked the anger of a great many Athenians, threatening the dissolution of traditional social ties, it also aroused the opposition of Socrates. Socrates was concerned that the tuition of the sophists encouraged a dereliction of virtue in favour of vanity, political power and wealth.

Because we possess only a very few original fragments of the sophists' writings, the Platonic dialogues are the principal source of information about the sophistic movement and its leading figures. Consequently, Socrates' hostility, presented so forcefully in Plato's work, has served, for the most part, to fix the way in which the sophists have been viewed. According to convention, Plato opposes Socrates, the prototypical philosopher, to the sophists, and henceforth the difference is taken as absolute. The sophist may well appear to be like the philosopher, but is not: the philosopher is concerned with truth, and virtue; the sophist with appearance, power and money. The philosopher is serious, arguing about substantive issues, making us aware of genuine problems concerning our claims about the nature of things; the sophist is frivolous, arguing over things unworthy of genuine concern.

Some scholars of the sophistic movement have cautioned against taking Plato's account of sophistry at face value: as a declared enemy of the sophists, he is always likely to distort the truth.⁵ Attempts have been made to correct these distortions by suggesting that behind Plato's polemic we can discern the serious contribution made by the sophists to the disciplines of ethics, epistemology and ontology, and to the study of language.⁶ Certainly such claims help us to put to one side sophistry's bad reputation. But, more often than not, such rehabilitations are intrinsically limited,

because they only serve to assimilate the sophists to a standard of philosophy that is itself Platonic. They suggest that in effect, if not in fact, the sophists were Presocratics, i.e. intellectual forerunners of Socrates and thus merely precursors to philosophy proper.

However, if, as the great 19th century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel suggests, 'the antithesis between Socrates and the sophists [...] is the literary form in which the philosophy of Plato works out its development through the criticisms of contemporary opinions and doctrines',⁷ then the interest of Plato's portrayal lies not only in what tells about the sophists, but in what it tells us about his philosophy. We can profitably consider this portrayal because whilst the Platonic opposition of the philosopher and the sophist has itself come to be accepted as self-evident, it is, as Hegel argues, 'very unlike what later interpretations have made of it'.⁸ In what follows, I want to show how slippery the distinction between Socrates and the sophists is, and then I want to try to suggest how Plato exploits this slipperiness.

In the dialogue entitled *Sophist*, Plato attempts to clarify the nature or being of the sophist. In the course of the discussion between the two principal characters, Theaetetus and the Stranger from Elea, several definitions of the sophist are advanced. The sixth is that of 'the refuter', that is, someone 'who cross-examines a man's words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing and easily convicts him of inconsistencies in his opinions' (230b). By making apparent these inconsistencies, the refuter purges his interlocutor of his or her prejudices and thus achieves a positive good. This definition recalls Socrates' cathartic maieutics, and the Eleatic Stranger who has advanced it shrinks from calling the one who practices it a sophist, for 'fear of ascribing to [him] too high a function' (231a). However, as Theaetetus notes, the 'description has some resemblance' to the sophist (231a). The Stranger admits the similarity, but cautions that a 'man should above all be on his guard against resemblances; they are a very slippery sort of thing' (231a). The Stranger concludes by declaring that the practice of refutation is 'sophistry that is of noble lineage (*he genei gennai sophistike*)' (231b).

This definition serves to bring the philosopher and the sophist close together, and risks confusing rather than clarifying the latter's being. The risk is, however, unavoidable. As the Stranger goes on to argue, the sophist is a 'wizard and imitator of real things' (235a), who by feigning to speak of divine things, of all things visible in the sky and earth, of becoming and being, puts on the appearance of the philosopher. This picture of the sophist has exercised a powerful hold over the philosophical imagination. For example, Aristotle repeats it in the *Metaphysics*, arguing that by declaring themselves able to talk about anything the sophists assume the same figure as the philosopher, who is concerned with what is.⁹

Under the influence of this picture it is easy to assume that it is the sophist who imitates the philosopher. But things are a good deal more slippery in Plato's dialogues. Take the *Lesser Hippias*, for example. This early dialogue gets its name from Socrates' interlocutor, the sophist Hippias, who, we are told, is an expert in almost every conceivable art and branch of knowledge. When the dialogue begins, Hippias has just finished an epideictic speech on 'Homer and diverse other poets' (363c). Socrates begins by asking Hippias whether he agrees with the traditional view that of the two Homeric characters, Achilles and Odysseus, heroes of the *Illiad* and

Odyssey respectively, it is Achilles who is the better man. Hippias follows tradition, citing as evidence Odysseus' epithet *polutropos*.

One of the meanings of the Greek word *polutropos* is 'much-travelled' or 'much-wandering'. In this sense it has a very obvious application to Odysseus. However, the term also had the meaning 'turned in many different ways'. It hence carried the metaphorical sense of craftiness or wiliness, of being able to shift this way and that, displaying this or that facet of oneself whilst concealing others. Hippias understands or interprets the epithet to mean that Odysseus is false (*pseudes*), in contrast to Achilles, who is straightforward and honest. Socrates thus attributes to Hippias the view that 'the true man is not the same as the false' (365c). From this point, Socrates proceeds to put the argument through a number of devious turns, confusing the separation of the true and false man, and concluding with the distinctly sophistical claim that those who do wrong voluntarily are better than those who do wrong involuntarily.¹⁰

But it is not just Socrates' conclusion that is sophistical: to reach such a conclusion Socrates employs a whole gamut of sophistic devices and techniques. For example, the sophists were famed for making paradoxical claims, claims that contradicted established opinion. This is what Socrates does when he denies the common belief, espoused by Hippias, that Achilles is a better man than Odysseus. Instead, Socrates argues that since only the man who knows the truth about something can convincingly and consistently be false, Odysseus and Achilles are alike: 'If Odysseus is false he is also true, and if Achilles is true he is also false, and so the two men are not opposed to each other, but they are alike' (369b).

Hippias protests the wrongness of Socrates' argument and reiterates the conventional distinction between Achilles and Odysseus. Socrates' response this time is to invert the distinction, arguing that it is Odysseus who is straightforward whereas Achilles is false and wily. Hippias protests that Odysseus is intentionally false, whilst if Achilles is false, he is so unwittingly. To this Socrates responds that not only does Achilles mislead Odysseus intentionally, but he is so cunning that he deceives most people, and remains undetected.

The complex argumentative strategy used by Socrates is the eminently sophistic one of *retorsion*. Aristotle was the first to formally identify this strategy. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle speaks of the retorsion, or turning back of an argument against the one who makes it.¹¹ Not only is the sophist a master of argument in the sense that he or she can always issue a retort to an adversary, but he or she can turn their adversary's argument back against them, showing that the arguments they thought favourable are unfavourable. For Aristotle this technique is exemplified by an argument attributed to Corax of Sicily, the tutor of Gorgias. Corax takes the case of a strong man, accused of assault. According to Corax, the claim made against his client, namely that he is strong and therefore likely to have committed the crime, is implausible precisely because it is so plausible. His client's strength is enough to accuse him in advance, and so rather than it being likely he committed such an act, it is all the more likely that he steadfastly avoided all brutality in order to avoid such an indictment. Corax makes what the prosecution thought counted for them, speak against them. Similarly, Socrates *retorts* Hippias' every concession. When Hippias admits Socrates' contention that Achilles does speak falsely, but with the qualification that he does so

unintentionally, Socrates seizes on it as evidence of Achilles' supreme duplicity, for he is able to dupe even the wily Odysseus. And when Hippias repeats the claim that Achilles is innocent, Socrates turns it back against him: if, as Hippias claims, Achilles lies unintentionally whilst Odysseus does so intentionally, then it is the latter and not the former who is the better man, since as Socrates has already argued, the better man is the one who does wrong voluntarily.

Like Homer's Odysseus, the cunning and wily Socrates of the *Lesser Hippias* could himself be characterised by the epithet *polutropos*. Turned in many different ways, having many different facets or faces, the *polutropic* individual is able to show one particular aspect of their self whilst concealing others from view; he is able to display himself in different lights, and thus disguise himself. This is exactly what Socrates does, taking on the guise of sophist. It is not by chance that Socrates should do this in a dialogue that hinges around the term *polutropos*. The *polutropic* ability is inherently sophistic: as an imitator and artificer, the sophist would put on many guises, including that of the philosopher, in order to win an argument.¹² Here, Socrates imitates the imitator, making use of certain sophistic resources, repeating the tricks and techniques of sophistry, turning its argumentative resources, its *tropes*, back upon the sophist Hippias.

Because of the nature of its depiction of Socrates, and because Socrates argues for a position that Plato will in subsequent dialogues show to be false, the *Lesser Hippias* has excited much perplexity amongst commentators. In a recent study, Charles H. Kahn has suggested 'we can well imagine that, if this dialogue were not expressly cited by Aristotle, many scholars would have judged it as unworthy of Plato and hence inauthentic'.¹³ If Kahn is correct, and without the authority of Aristotle many commentators would have judged the dialogue unworthy of Plato, this cannot be because it is lacking in literary qualities: although it is short, the dialogue produces a subtle, sophisticated, picture of Socrates and Hippias, dislocating the identities of sophist and philosopher, just as Socrates dislocates the traditional identities of Odysseus and Achilles. What, I imagine, would concern commentators, and what would lead them to judge the dialogue unworthy of Plato, is the prevalence of literary technique over philosophical substance. The Plato who wrote the *Lesser Hippias* looks like he was a more sophisticated Plato than we are used to admitting.

Without doubt, it is possible to argue, as Kahn does, that by having Socrates maintain the obviously sophistic thesis that voluntarily doing wrong is better than involuntarily doing wrong, Plato intends to provoke the reader to a *philosophical* reflection concerning the nature of virtue, of right and wrong. Less positively, it would also be possible to argue that Plato's intention is to expose the frailty of the sophist Hippias' pretensions to wisdom through his inability to show Socrates where the flaws in his argument lie. I do not want to claim that either interpretation of the *Lesser Hippias* would be wrong; however, I do want to introduce another consideration.

This consideration is suggested by the final lines of the *Lesser Hippias*. At the end of their discussion, Hippias tells Socrates that he cannot agree that it is the better person who does wrong voluntarily. Socrates is moved to admit that, even if such a conclusion is the inevitable result of his argument, he cannot agree with himself. That Socrates should end by admitting to being at variance with himself is certainly in keeping with the entire pattern of a dialogue in which identities and differences are

constantly confused; but it is also something more than a final flourish. In order to see this it is helpful to consider the opening of the *Apology*, Plato's record of Socrates' trial. Socrates opens his defence by admitting that the words of his accusers (which Plato has not recorded), whilst not true, were effective: for they had moved him, carried him away, and almost induced him to forget himself (17a). Their words (*logos*) are intended to function like spells or drugs, 'bewitch[ing] the soul with a kind of evil persuasion'.¹⁴ Socrates goes on in the *Apology* to contrast his own manner of speaking to that of his accusers: he will not use 'flowery language like theirs, decked out with fine words and phrases' (17c); rather, he will use 'straightforward speech' (17c) to say the truth. Here we find the supposedly standard Platonic contrast between the seductive and dangerous power of rhetoric, which plays on the irrationality of the emotions, and the trustworthy and stable arguments of philosophy, which appeal to reason.

However, the *Lesser Hippias* shows that this abstract opposition of reason and emotions, philosophy and sophistry, is not wholly true to Plato. The dialogued depicts a Socrates who *argues* sophistically and who, by doing so, reaches a fallacious conclusion, but it ends with a Socrates who admits to a philosophical *feeling*. Having argued as he has, that to do wrong intentional is better than to do so unintentionally, Socrates *feels* at odds with himself, despite the apparent necessity of the conclusion of his argument. It is no argument, nothing rational, but a mute emotion (*pathe*), that draws him back, recalls him to his true self, and that possesses the intelligence to see that the conclusion is wrong in the face of the argument itself. Indeed, if the sophist Hippias can stand firm against Socrates' sophistic argument, and if Socrates can himself resist his own conclusion, it is because it is *passion*, and not reason, that moves us. The *Lesser Hippias* recalls us to this essential aspect of Plato's philosophy and philosophising; it reminds us that the word philosophy names an affective disposition, the *love* of wisdom, and it is, in this respect, more sophisticated than is normally assumed.

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¹ G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), p. 1

² J. Dillon & T. Gergel, eds. *The Greek Sophists* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. x

³ Gorgias appeals to this 'irrational', magical, power of words in *The Encomium of Helen*: 'Inspired incantations conveyed through words/ become bearers of pleasure/ and banishers of pain;/ for, merging with opinion in the soul,/ the power of incantation beguiles it/ and persuades it/ and alters it by witchcraft.' This translation is taken from *The Greeks Sophists*, p.78. The same association of words with charms is found in Homer and Aeschylus, and later in Plato, where the connection is critically exploited in relation to sophistry.

⁴ *Protagoras*, 316c-d. All references to Plato's dialogues are taken from *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996). Subsequent references to the dialogues will be given in brackets in the main text.

⁵ For example, Jacqueline de Romilly, in her seminal study of the sophists, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), notes that Plato is our richest source of information about the sophists. However, she is, she says, 'also a biased one, for although Plato sets the sophists on stage, he has Socrates refute their theses. We are accordingly to be wary of following his testimony, sensing that the sophists are in danger of being served ill by this distorting spotlight' (p. x)

⁶ See, for example, G. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (op. cit.)

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel: *Hegel's Logic*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975), p. 325

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See *Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Camb. Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1933), Book Gamma 2, 1004b

¹⁰ See, for example, the immoralism of the sophistical Callicles, the third of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. Callicles effectively argues that the better person is the one who does wrong voluntarily rather than suffers wrong.

¹¹ See *Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Camb. Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1926), 1399a 15

¹² The term *polutropos* is also applicable to the sophist in a slightly different, if related, sense. Antisthenes, a contemporary of Plato, draws out the etymological connection between *polutropos* and *tropes* or figures of speech. Someone who is said to be *polutropos* is someone who knows many *tropes* and can express something in many ways, someone who is clever in conversation, who can turn a phrase, and who is consequently skilled in dealing with men; in other words, the sophist.

¹³ C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 118.

¹⁴ The phrase is Gorgias': see *The Encomium of Helen*, in *The Greek Sophists*, (op. cit), p. 82