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The Greek sophists : teachers of virtue

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THE GREEK SOPHISTS: TEACHERS OF VIRTUE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

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by
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PREFACE

This dissertation began as a study not of the Greek sophists but of the varieties of political skepticism from the ancients to the moderns. Only the first chapter was to examine the sophists—and this, only to show that they were “proto-skeptics.” But, as often happens when projects are too ambitious and hypotheses are set out in advance, my work, once under way, began to take on a life all its own. In particular, the more I explored the surviving fragments of the sophists’ thought, the more I came to realize that these popular teachers of *aretê*, of “virtue” in a broad and practical sense of the word, could not be simply characterized as skeptics. Indeed, more often than not, the sophists appeared to be propounding a moral outlook that could only be characterized as conventional and stubbornly *unquestioning* (hence Plato, *Republic* 492a-493c). As it turns out, what originated as an effort to demonstrate the skepticism of the sophists became an effort to understand the sophists *qua* sophists. And, as the following chapters will show, this approach has produced rather startling results.

Studies of the sophists are abundant. In fact, in nearly every discipline of the humanities, one finds a “re-reading” of the sophists underway.¹ Where once the sophists were regarded as sinister figures, black sheep of the ancient world, they are now touted as significant contributors to philosophy, to rhetoric, to educational theory and to political thought. If it is a general philosophical survey one seeks, there is Kerferd’s very readable *Sophistic Movement* or the third volume of Guthrie’s *History of Greek Philosophy*, now published separately as *The Sophists*.² If one is interested in specific figures, there are detailed monographs on Protagoras, Hippias, and

¹ The language is Susan C. Jarratt’s, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

² G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

other major sophists. So why another study of the sophists? The answer lies precisely in the fact that these figures have too often been studied from within the strict confines of particular academic disciplines. They have been approached *as* philosophers, *as* rhetoricians, and so on; but they have rarely been approached *as sophists* in the full sense of that word. What exactly does it mean to be a sophist? This question has not to this day been adequately answered, and indeed, it is often studiously avoided. Why did the sophists seem so politically threatening to Aristophanes, so pedagogically impotent to Socrates, and so philosophically crude to Aristotle? And what is it about them, anyway, that so engages the modern imagination?

What I offer in the chapters that follow is neither a defense of, nor an attack upon, the sophists; for it is not my view that these figures were exceptionally good or evil. What I offer is an examination of the evidence surrounding the particular sophists' careers and an assessment of what is most characteristic and therefore historically significant about them. The principal claims that this dissertation puts forth are three in number: first, that the sophists have been generally misidentified by modern writers—i.e., that many of the figures we regard as sophists today were in fact not sophists at all; second, that the sophists shared (according to Plato) a common profession as teachers of *aretê*; and, third, that the dramatic conflict between the sophists and Socrates as portrayed in Plato's dialogues, so far from being a conflict between good and evil, is in fact one between equally plausible and equally necessary moral dispositions. Indeed, as I argue below, the conflict is one that rages in the soul of every morally conscious individual; it can neither be avoided nor completely resolved. It is a conflict between the pursuit of the good life through action—which means, necessarily, suspending one's philosophical doubts and *assuming* a knowledge of the "good"; and a pursuit of the good life through philosophy—which means necessarily suspending one's actions in order to investigate their

goodness. These dispositions are not mutually exclusive in the course of a life: the sophists sometimes practice philosophical reflection just as Socrates sometimes performs decisive practical acts; but they exist in a constant state of tension, one with the other.³ For this reason, a study of the Greek sophists and their encounters with Socrates becomes at its best moments a study of ourselves, a study of the way we as individuals and communities balance the necessity for action with the pursuit of wisdom.

³ Hence, as Dana Villa observes, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4: “The moment thinking starts—the moment perplexity about the virtues sets in—the practical side of everyday life is suspended, at least temporarily.”

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TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The standard collection of extant fragments of the Greek sophists is that of Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols., 6th ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951-52), traditionally abbreviated DK. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from Rosamond Kent Sprague, ed., *The Older Sophists* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972).

English translations of other Greek authors are from the following sources unless noted otherwise: for Aristophanes *Clouds*, Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology and Crito and Aristophanes' Clouds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). For Aristotle, Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), except the *Ethics* and *Politics*, for which I use the following: Martin Ostwald, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (New Jersey: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962); and Carnes Lord, *Aristotle: The Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For Plato, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, ed., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), except for the following: for the *Apology*, Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); for the *Gorgias*, James H. Nichols, Jr., *Plato: Gorgias* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); for the *Laches* and *Cleitophon*, John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: The Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); and for the *Republic*, Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). For Homer, Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951); and Richmond Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999). For other ancient authors, see the appropriate volume in the Loeb Library collection.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the Greek sophists as teachers of *aretê* (virtue or human excellence) and a study of the conflict between sophistic and Socratic political values as portrayed in the dialogues of Plato. The first section offers a new definition of the term “sophist” based on ancient sources and attempts to present as clear a picture as is historically possible of the sophists’ activities. The second section examines and evaluates Plato’s criticisms of the sophists drawing attention especially to the dependence of certain criticisms upon a questionable set of epistemological assumptions about the role of knowledge in ethical action. And the final section describes in detail what the sophists understood *aretê* to entail and how they went about teaching it.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING THE SOPHISTS

To say that the Greek sophists have captured the imagination of political theorists and philosophers is an understatement. They have in fact been studied and commented upon by almost every major political thinker since Hegel. In Leo Strauss's work, for example, the sophists feature prominently as the harbingers of what he terms "vulgar conventionalism," the belief that "by nature everyone seeks only his own good" and that the greatest good is "to have more than others or to rule others."¹ In Eric Voegelin, they appear as the "prototype of disorder," thinkers who resist with falsehoods and lies the "true order of the human psyche" and the "one type of true humanity," the philosopher.² In other writers the sophists appear not as villains but as heroes: Eric Havelock presents them as the earliest known "liberals," while Cynthia Farrar more recently casts them (some of them, at any rate) as the first democratic political theorists.³ What is most striking, however, is not that the sophists should be deemed centrally important for the history of political thought—indeed, this might have been expected, since Plato devotes six dialogues to them and mentions them repeatedly in ten others. What is most striking is that there is so little scholarly agreement as to *why* the sophists are so important. One is indeed faced with something of a puzzle here: the sophists cannot be at one and the same

¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 114-17.

² Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 62-3; see also Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 267-331.

³ Eric Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

time elitist power-mongers and liberal democrats, representatives of disorder and the forefathers of the western political ideal, heroes and villains.

What is more, scholars do not even agree on who the sophists were. In Diels and Kranz, they are listed as Protagoras, Xenias, Gorgias, Lycophron, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Hippas, Antiphon, Critias, and the unknown authors of two treatises: the so-called “Anonymous Iamblichus” and the “Dissoi Logoi.”⁴ But the list is both too long and too short for other scholars. Sprague argues (persuasively) that the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus should be included.⁵ Guthrie would take Xenias off but add two students of Gorgias: Antisthenes and Alcidas.⁶ Kerferd thinks Calicles belongs on the list, along with Socrates, who (Kerferd likes to point out) “was quite widely regarded” as a sophist.⁷ Meanwhile, other scholars would dramatically shorten the list by distinguishing sharply between sophists and rhetoricians. Some would eliminate Gorgias; others would remove Thrasymachus; and by this logic, Xenias, Antiphon, Calicles, Lycophron, Antisthenes, and Alcidas do not belong on the list either.⁸ So, who *is* a sophist? There is currently no agreed-upon answer to the question.⁹

⁴ Herman Diels and Walter Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed., vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1952).

⁵ Rosamond Kent Sprague, ed., *The Older Sophists* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 294-5.

⁶ W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), published separately as *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); see especially pp. 261-319.

⁷ G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 57 (Kerferd’s italics).

⁸ See e.g. George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: J. Murray, 1868-70), p. 521; Hans Raeder, “Platon und die Sophisten,” *Proceedings of the Royal Danish Academy* (1938); Hans Raeder, “Platon und die Rhetoren,” *Proceedings of the Royal Danish Academy* (1956); and E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 6-10.

⁹ Hence Voegelin, *World of the Polis*, p. 268: “Not too much importance... should be attached to the term sophist and its definition. We are less interested in defining a term that has become a historiographic convenience than in the process that we characterized as the education of Athens.”

But why should there be such widespread disparity among scholars on the nature and significance of the Greek sophistic movement? No doubt, part of the answer relates precisely to the fact that the sophists have captured the *imagination* of modern interpreters. The fragments of the sophists' writings are few in number, cryptic and yet evocative. They can be made to say many different things; but, what is more, they can be put to many different *uses*. Need an ancient precursor for the "will to power"? Callicles and Thrasymachus are there with their doctrine of "might makes right."¹⁰ Looking for the first "subjectivists," the first "positivists," the first "phenomenalists," or "skeptics"?¹¹ Looking for "historicists," "contract theorists," or advocates of "world citizenship"?¹² The sophists are there with their malleable fragments waiting to be employed. Perhaps the first modern scholar to use the sophists in this way was Hegel. As I show below, his incorporation of them into his famous *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* was not only an act of creativity over scholarly scruple, it was also a new recognition of just how useful the sophists could be.

But the blame for the interpretive muddle that characterizes contemporary scholarship on the sophists cannot be placed entirely on the modern imagination. Indeed, a large part of the problem stems from the fact that much of our "knowledge" of the sophists comes by way of ancient writers who were *themselves* interpreters. Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle all supply

¹⁰ See e.g., Michel Foucault's deployment of the sophists in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp. 76-100; and E. R. Dodds, "Socrates, Callicles and Nietzsche," in *Plato: Gorgias*, pp. 387-391.

¹¹ For the view that the sophists were the first "subjectivists," see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 268-9; "positivists, phenomenalists and skeptics," see Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 4 and 9.

¹² For "historicists," see Leo Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Philosophy," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 29 and 40; "contract theorists," Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 64 and 142; and Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 114; "advocates of world citizenship," Havelock, *Liberal Temper*, pp. 225-9.

invaluable information about the sophists and their impact on Athenian social and political life, but unfortunately (and this is rarely noted) their interpretations do not agree. In fact, they disagree sharply in almost every important respect. The purpose of this chapter is to supply something of a history of interpretations of the sophists in order to show, first, what the principal lines of disagreement were among ancient interpreters; second, how modern writers have both inherited and contributed to an incoherent understanding of the sophists; and finally to point the way towards removing some of this incoherence.

ANCIENT INTERPRETATIONS

The term “sophist” (*ho sophistês*) was not, in its earliest uses, a term of derision;¹³ but it certainly came to be interpreted that way by Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle. No doubt, these writers are chiefly responsible for the extent to which the word “drips with connotations of subversive irresponsibility” even today.¹⁴ To be called a sophist is to be insulted; to make “sophisms” is to make fallacious arguments; and to be “sophistic,” is to be overly clever and cunning. But what exactly was it about the ancient Greek sophists that caused them to become the objects of such vitriolic abuse? The answer, as it turns out, is not at all simple—indeed, it depends upon whom one asks.

Aristophanes

The portrait of the sophists presented in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* is one of the earliest and most influential;¹⁵ it is also one of the most caustic. Aristophanes applies the term “sophist” to

¹³ See, below, chapter 5.

¹⁴ M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 12.

¹⁵ For a general treatment of how the sophists were portrayed in Old Comedy, Wilhelm Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos: Die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates* (Stuttgart: A. Kroner, 1942), pp. 455-76, is still unsurpassed. See also Victor Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes: A Sociology of Old Attic Comedy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1951).

intellectuals of various sorts. Indeed, anyone who earns his living with his mind (rather than through some more traditional occupation such as farming) is liable to be deemed a sophist by Aristophanes, and the term is unquestionably one of abuse. At one point in the *Clouds* (331-3), the various sophistic types are rather comically itemized as soothsayers from Thurii, practitioners of the art of medicine, lazy long-haired ring-wearers, singers who pretend to know about extraterrestrial matters, and do-nothing poets and musicians.¹⁶ Elsewhere, they are described as pale, “pondering thinkers,” men who conduct scientific experiments on fleas and gnats, investigate the things above and below the earth, practice astronomy and geometry, and persuade themselves of odd things—that heaven is a stove and human beings are charcoal, and that the gods do not exist.¹⁷ But whatever their particular profession or belief, the sophists in Aristophanes are also something else, something villainous (*ponêroi*) (102): they are men who, “if paid money,” will teach a person “how to win both just and unjust causes by speaking” (97-98). They are masters of the “two *logoi*,” the stronger and the weaker speeches; and while the weaker speech may be “more unjust,” it can nevertheless be made to win the day, if one is trained by a sophist (111-116).

Chief among the sophists, on Aristophanes’ telling, is Socrates, head of his own *phrontisterion* or “thinking-shop.” When Socrates first appears in the *Clouds*, he is seen contemplating the sun and other “things aloft” from a basket suspended in mid-air. He is approached by Strepsiades, a bankrupt Athenian father, who needs to learn the art of argument in order to elude his creditors in court. Socrates himself is clearly impoverished; his students are

¹⁶ A remarkably broad list. “Soothsayers from Thurii”—Thurii was a pan-Greek colony founded by the Athenians in Southern Italy in 444-3, in response to the destruction of Sybaris by the Crotoniates. The sophist Protagoras was commissioned by Pericles to compose laws for the colony, and the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were residents there, until they were kicked out (Plato *Euthydemus* 271c).

¹⁷ Aristophanes *Clouds* 100-103, 144-165, 185-194, 95-98, 246-7, 367.

hungry; and this is perhaps why he accepts Strepsiades as a paying student.¹⁸ But however that may be, he agrees to help the old man become a “smooth, rattling, fine-as-flour speaker” (260).

As it turns out, Strepsiades proves too old and recalcitrant to master the sophistic arts, but his spendthrift son Pheidippides is able to become the student that his father could not. After a private session with Just and Unjust Speech (personifications of the old and new forms of education in Athens), and after a bit of polishing up by Socrates, Pheidippides is turned into a “shrewd sophist” (*sophistên dexion*) (1111), a pale and miserably unhappy master of petty lawsuits! Socrates is clearly instrumental in the teaching,¹⁹ and what he produces in Pheidippides is a real monster, a “lover of villainous affairs” (1459) with all the intellectual resources at his disposal to win whatever he desires.

It is difficult to know whether Aristophanes was shaping or, alternatively, merely reflecting the attitudes of his audience when he lampooned the sophists in the *Clouds*. Certainly Socrates would later hold him responsible for having *shaped* Athenian attitudes.²⁰ But on the other hand, it is well known that a playwright, especially a comedian, cannot stray too far from the views of his audience on topics of a morally sensitive nature;²¹ thus Athenians may well have viewed the sophists very much the way Aristophanes portrayed them, even without

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 246, cf. 98 and 1147. I am not at all persuaded by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato and Aristophanes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 125, n. 48, that Aristophanes’ Socrates does not take pay. On their reading, it is merely Strepsiades (not Aristophanes himself) who believes Socrates accepts pay; they think Aristophanes reveals to his (careful) readers that Socrates was no paid sophist. But, in fact, Strepsiades not only offers to pay Socrates—an offer which Socrates tacitly accepts when he accepts Strepsiades as his student—he *does* pay Socrates; and Socrates apparently accepts the payment. If Aristophanes is trying to show that Socrates does not take pay, he has a strange way of showing it.

¹⁹ See especially 1145-1153, where Socrates assures Strepsiades that it will now be possible to “be acquitted of any lawsuit.”

²⁰ *Apology* 18b-d.

²¹ See especially Stephen G. Salkever, “Tragedy and the Education of the *Dêmos*: Aristotle’s Response to Plato,” in J. Peter Euben, ed. *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 279.

Aristophanes' input.²² However that may be, Aristophanes' basic critique of the sophists (Socrates among them) would seem to be this: they contribute to the degeneration of Athenian moral culture. As professional intellectuals, they are themselves parasites, people who produce nothing concrete on their own.²³ But what is worse, they are willing to teach young people—either out of carelessness or financial desperation or both—how to argue their way free of moral responsibility. Moreover, their teaching is very powerful: their students become expert speakers and villainous individuals. Thus the sophists are, in the famous phrase brought against Socrates at his trial, genuine “corrupters of youth.”

Plato

Plato's portrait of the sophists is quite different. Plato was five years old when the *Clouds* was first performed in 423 B.C. Twenty-four years later he would see his teacher Socrates executed by the state on charges clearly stemming from Aristophanes' depiction of him as a dangerous sophist.²⁴ But while Socrates may have seemed a sophist to Aristophanes, as perhaps to the average Athenian, he did not seem so to Plato. Thus in Plato's work the term “sophist” is used very carefully and always in such a way as to highlight the important differences between sophistry and Socrates. Plato's sophists are, for example, clearly not philosophers. Thus with very few exceptions, the term is not applied to the “pre-Socratics.”²⁵ It

²² Consider Anytus' view of the sophists, expressed in Plato's *Meno*, 91c; and cf. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 10-11.

²³ See Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes*, pp. 59-60.

²⁴ The official charges brought against Socrates by Anytus and his other accusers (Meletus and Lycon) are (Plato *Apology* 24b-c) that he “does injustice by corrupting the young and by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes but rather in other *daimonia* that are novel.” Cf. 18b, where Socrates complains that, due to a certain “comic poet,” people (wrongly) believe “that there is a certain Socrates, a wise man (*sophos*), a thinker (*phrontistês*) on the things aloft, who has investigated all things under the earth, and who makes the weaker speech stronger.”

²⁵ In the *Clouds*, on the other hand, several of the doctrines ascribed to Socrates are clearly those of the pre-Socratics. See, further, West and West, *Four Texts on Socrates*, p. 119, n. 22 and p. 125, n. 46.

is applied to people who make a profession of teaching *aretê*²⁶ and who engage in teaching for pay.²⁷ Socrates engaged in neither of these activities (as Plato is wont to remind us);²⁸ On the other hand, Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Gorgias (by some accounts), Evanus, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus did.

Plato ridicules the sophists for many things—for being foreigners, for taking pay, and for bragging; for their philosophical naïveté, their pedagogical ineffectiveness, and their sham doctrines; but he never criticizes them for corrupting the youth. Indeed, in a famous passage of the *Republic* (492a-493c), Plato's Socrates makes it quite clear that it is not the sophists but rather Athenians *themselves* who corrupt the youth. For the sophists teach nothing but what the masses already believe; they are like men who have mastered the desires of a great beast, who know precisely what will render it tame or angry. But Athenians themselves, the very people who accuse the sophists of “corrupting the youth,” are in fact the biggest sophists (*megistous sophistas*) and corrupters of all (492a5-b3). Plato's sophists might be blamed for giving

²⁶ Human excellence, particularly expertise in speaking and arguing but also intellectual and practical excellence. A good statement of the meaning of *aretê* is C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. x, n. 2: “If something is a knife (say) or a man, its *aretê* as a knife or a man is that state or property that makes it a good knife or a good man. . . . The *aretê* of a knife might include having a sharp blade; the *aretê* of a man might include being intelligent, well-born, just, or courageous. *Aretê* is thus broader than our notion of moral virtue. It applies to things (such as knives) which are not moral agents. And it applies to aspects of moral agents (such as intelligence or family status) which are not normally considered to be moral aspects of them. For these reasons it is sometimes more appropriate to render *aretê* as ‘excellence’. But ‘virtue’ remains the most favored translation. And once these few facts are borne in mind it should seldom mislead.” Cf. Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 253-4. In this dissertation, *aretê* will be rendered both as “virtue,” and as “excellence,” but both senses should be kept in mind.

²⁷ See C. J. Rowe, “Plato on the Sophists as Teachers of Virtue,” *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983): 409-27.

²⁸ For Socrates' insistence that he does not (and cannot) teach *aretê*, see e.g., *Apology* 19d-20c; *Theaetetus* 149a ff., *Cleitophon* 408c ff; see further, Alexander Nehamas, “What did Socrates Teach and to Whom did he Teach it?” in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 59-82. For Socrates' refusal to accept pay, see *Apology* 19d-e and 31b-c; and, further, David Blank, “Socrates Versus Sophists on Payment for Teaching,” *Classical Antiquity* 4 (1985): 1-49.

philosophy a bad name (496a), but they lack the pedagogical power and independence of thought to be actual corrupters of youth.

The contrast between the views of Plato and Aristophanes on this matter could not be more stark. Aristophanes' sophists are nothing if they are not pedagogically powerful; and his problem with them is precisely that they are philosophers (i.e. intellectuals—Aristophanes makes no distinction). Moreover, Aristophanes' sophists are, by the very fact of their pedagogical power and philosophical disposition, responsible for the decline of Athenian moral culture. Plato, however, would beg to differ. Philosophy, on Plato's account is not the problem, nor are the sophists; yet while philosophy may well be part of the solution, sophistry could never be, for it is too dependent upon the very culture it is supposed to be educating.

Aristotle

Finally, Aristotle's view of the sophists is as far removed from Plato's as the latter's is from Aristophanes', though at first blush they seem quite similar. Certainly two aspects of the view are the same: Aristotle's sophists are motivated by money and they try to appear more clever than they are. Thus in the beginning of the ninth book of the *Topics* (independently titled the *Sophistical Refutations*),²⁹ Aristotle defines the sophists' art as "the semblance of wisdom without the reality," and the sophist as "one who makes money from an apparent but unreal wisdom" (165^a20). Moreover, Aristotle's sophists are masters of "contradiction" (*elenchus*, *antilogos*, *eristikos logos*).³⁰ And with these sorts of descriptions one is reminded of Plato's derogatory presentation of sophistry in the *Gorgias* and the *Sophist*.³¹ But careful attention to

²⁹ A title ascribed to it because of its first line: *peri de tôn sophistikôn elenchôn*.

³⁰ 164^a20, 172^a2-7.

³¹ At *Gorgias* 464b-466a, sophistry is said to represent for the soul what cosmetics represent for the body—a phantom (*eidôlon*) art of deceptive flattery that tricks people by means of imitation; cf. *Sophist* 268c-d: "The art of

Aristotle's use of the term *sophistês* reveals that he has a very restricted group of figures in mind and that he means to make his own critique of them.³²

For example, the figures we most often associate with the term “sophist”—Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.—are nowhere referred to as sophists in Aristotle. In his (now fragmentary) treatise *On Education*, Aristotle describes Protagoras' invention of a shoulder pad for porters, but does not call Protagoras a sophist.³³ Elsewhere Aristotle discusses Protagoras as well as Prodicus, Gorgias, Thrasymachus, Critias and Antiphon in connection with various and sundry matters; but he, again, never calls these figures sophists.³⁴ In fact, the only people Aristotle refers to directly as sophists are Polyidus, Lycophron and Bryson—all of them late, second or third-generation figures. This has led scholars to conclude that when “Aristotle uses the term *sophistês*,” he uses it “almost exclusively for his contemporaries” and not at all for “the first generation.”³⁵ The truth of this insight is, indeed, borne out by what would otherwise be a baffling passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1180^b35-1181^b12), where Aristotle criticizes “the sophists” for professing to teach the art of politics while not practicing it—i.e. the sophists have no political experience to back up their pedagogy. Applied to sophists like Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias and Gorgias, the passage makes no sense at all, since each of them was a celebrated

contradiction making (*enantiopoiologikês*), descended from an insincere kind of conceited mimicry, of the semblance-making breed, derived from image-making (*eidôlopoiikês*), distinguished as a portion, not divine but human, of production, that presents shadow play of words—such is the blood and lineage which can, with perfect truth, be assigned to the authentic sophist.”

³² See C. Joachim Classen, “Aristotle's Picture of the Sophists,” in G. B. Kerferd, ed., *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), pp. 7-24.

³³ Aristotle fr. 63 in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 2418.

³⁴ For references, see Classen, “Aristotle's Picture of the Sophists,” pp. 18-22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

statesman,³⁶ but applied to the sophists of Aristotle's day, particularly Isocrates, the criticism strikes a direct blow.

Aristotle's critique of these later sophists is almost entirely a logical and analytical one.³⁷ Where Aristophanes had criticized them for moral corruption and Plato had criticized them for pedagogical and philosophical impotence, Aristotle criticizes them chiefly for speciousness in argument. And although Aristotle shares with Aristophanes and Plato a certain degree of contempt for the sophists, it is important to note that his treatment of them is, in a certain sense, more charitable; for "his practice [is] not to ridicule or to ignore them, but to refute them" and "to show carefully in what respect they go wrong."³⁸ For this reason, it is difficult to speak in general terms about Aristotle's critique (it is almost always a particular critique of a particular sophistic argument). Perhaps the best way to describe it is in terms of what Aristotle says at *Metaphysics* 1026^a33-1027^a28: there can be no science of incidental being (*to sumbebêkos*); and what the sophists of Aristotle's day seem so often to do is precisely to take advantage of the incidental in their syllogisms.³⁹

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

Thus ridiculed, deflated, and logically refuted by three of the greatest writers of antiquity, the Greek sophists eventually came to be regarded—to the extent that they were regarded at all—

³⁶ Consider, for example, what Socrates has to say about them at *Hippias Major* 282b-d (cf. 281a-b); and, on Protagoras, see note 14 above.

³⁷ An exception is *Metaphysics* 1004^b22-25, where the critique is a somewhat vague moral one relating to the sophists' supposed "purpose of life."

³⁸ Classen, "Aristotle's Picture of the Sophists," p. 18.

³⁹ Aristotle credits Plato for having seen this, but he also goes on to explain the sophists' failings by means of new terminology and within a patently Aristotelian logical system. See Classen, *ibid.*, p. 13.

as mere imposters.⁴⁰ One finds no mention of them, for example, in Machiavelli or in Hobbes, writers whose general hostility to Platonism and devotion to practical politics might have led one to expect otherwise. In the 1570s, they are characterized by Montaigne as men who, while posing as useful teachers, “alone of all men, not only do not improve what is committed to them... but make it worse, and take pay for having made it worse.”⁴¹ And in the eighteenth century, “*sophiste*” appears in Diderot’s celebrated *Encyclopédie* as an “imposteur” or “trompeur,” a “rhéteur ou logicien qui fait son occupation de décevoir & embarrasser le peuple par des distinctions frivoles, de vains raisonnements & des discours captieux.”⁴² But in the nineteenth century, things begin to change, most notably with Hegel’s representation of the sophists in his well-attended (and later published) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.⁴³

Hegel

According to Kerferd, Hegel’s lectures “dramatically restored the sophists to a central place” in philosophy.⁴⁴ This is because within the context of his hallmark, “dialectical” view of history, Hegel cast them as the “antithesis” to the pre-Socratic “thesis” and as the indispensable

⁴⁰ There was, it should be noted, a “second” or “new” sophistic movement, which began in the second century A. D. and encompassed the entire Greek-speaking world. Its similarity to the “older” sophistic movement was, however, little more than nominal; the later movement was centered almost entirely on rhetoric. See further, Graham Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴¹ Montaigne, “Of Pedantry,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Donald M. Frame, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 101-2. The charge is harsher than any leveled against the sophists by Socrates or Plato; cf. Socrates’ incredulity when a similar sentiment is expressed by Anytus in the *Meno* (92c-d).

⁴² “Imposter,” or “deceiver,” “a rhetorician or logician who makes his living by deceiving and confusing people with frivolous distinctions, vain reasoning and insidious language.” *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences des Arts et des Métiers*, Nouvelle impression en facsimilé de la première édition de 1751-1780, vol. 15 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1967).

⁴³ *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. G. B. Kerferd notes that these lectures were delivered over a period of some fifteen years between 1805 and 1830 at Jena, Heidelberg and Berlin. They were published shortly after Hegel’s death in 1831 based on his students’ notes—the first (German) edition in Berlin (1833-36), the first English edition in London (1892). See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 6, n.5; and his “Future Direction of Sophistic Studies,” in *The Sophists and Their Legacy*.

⁴⁴ Kerferd, “Future Direction of Sophistic Studies,” p. 2.

bridge to Plato and Aristotle. If the pre-Socratics (Thales and other Ionians in particular) sought the answers to life's riddles in "objective" experience—that is, in such material substances as water, air, etc.—the sophists sought answers in "subjective" experience. They asserted the "principle of subjectivity," according to which truth resides only in the thoughts and perceptions of the individual subject. They were, in a word, "subjectivists," and their impact upon Greek life was monumental.

Prior to the sophists, democracy at Athens thrived in a manner never before (or since) seen, Hegel thought: it was a strong and beautifully confident regime of custom in which citizens, "still unconscious of particular interests," committed themselves wholeheartedly to the interest of their community.⁴⁵ But then came the sophists with their "new doctrine that each man should act according to his own conviction." As Hegel saw it:

When reflection once comes into play, the inquiry is started whether the Principles of Law (*das Recht*) cannot be improved. Instead of holding by the existing state of things, *internal* conviction is relied upon; and thus begins subjective independent Freedom, in which the individual finds himself in a position to bring everything to the test of his own conscience, even in defiance of the existing constitution. . . . This decay even

Thucydides notices, when he speaks of everyone's thinking that things are going on badly when he has not a hand in the management.⁴⁶

The subjective freedom that the sophists brought to Athens was according to Hegel the very freedom upon which modern democracies would later be built. In the great scheme of things, it

⁴⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans. (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 252. Hegel's account of Athenian democracy (pre-sophists) overflows with affection. Athenian democracy "not only *allows* of the display of powers on the part of individuals, but *summons* them to use those powers for the general weal" (p. 260, italics in the original).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

was a good. But Hegel's attitude toward this freedom, and hence toward the sophists, was characteristically ambivalent; for such subjectivity could only have impacted Athenian culture as a "corrupting element." Indeed, "it plunged the Greek world into ruin, for the polity which that world embodied was not calculated for this side of humanity—did not recognize this phase; since it had not made its appearance when that polity began to exist."⁴⁷ The sophists were, on Hegel's telling, the corrupters of Greek democratic culture, even while they were the harbingers of modern freedom.

Now Hegel's interpretation of the sophists has the virtue of reconciling, to a certain degree, the ancient interpretations of Aristophanes and Plato. This is most evident, for example, in his treatment of Socrates. Hegel viewed Socrates (*à la* Plato) as the "inventor of morality": "The Greeks had a customary morality; but Socrates undertook to teach them what moral virtues, duties, etc. were." He taught them that "The moral man is not he who merely wills and does what is right... but he who has the consciousness of what he is doing."⁴⁸ Yet, at the same time, Hegel recognized (with Aristophanes) that Socrates could only be regarded as a corrupter and a sophist. For "it was in *Socrates*," that the principle of subjectivity reached its climax and "created a rupture with the existing Reality."⁴⁹ Socrates' "morality" necessarily and tragically meant "the ruin of the Athenian state."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* It should be noted, however that in Aristophanes, it was not democracy so much as traditional (manly) virtue that the sophists were supposedly subverting. Aristophanes' views on Athenian democracy are notoriously difficult to pin down, but he is certainly not as enamored with it as Hegel.

There is, however, also a certain incoherence and implausibility in Hegel's account that warrants attention. In the first place, Hegel either ignores or else tacitly rejects much of the Platonic view. For Plato had maintained (1) that Socrates was not a sophist, and (2) that the sophists were not powerful or independent enough to corrupt Greek culture. On Hegel's account, both these claims must be false. But furthermore, Hegel's whole story about the fall of Greek democracy at the hands of the sophists seems rather fantastic. It is hard to believe, for example, (influential though the view may be) that there was ever a phase of Greek democracy when the individual had *no* independent moral conscience. And, even if there were such a phase, it seems equally improbable that the sophists could have destroyed it. For the sophists, after all, had only a small and elite following, and to the extent that they communicated anything to the public at all, it was, by all ancient accounts, conventional morality they were expounding.⁵¹

However that may be, Hegel's new and provocative way of deploying the sophists within his grand historical theory proved tremendously influential. Kerferd and others have pointed to the influence on later historians (Eduard Zeller, Wilhelm Nestle, and even W. K. C. Guthrie) of the idea that the sophists were "subjectivists."⁵² But Hegel's influence can also be detected more broadly (and surprisingly) in other places. When Werner Jaeger treats of the sophists in his magisterial history of Greek education, the Hegelian approach in general is hard to miss: "The sophists stand at the very center of Greek history," Jaeger writes; "They made Greece conscious of her own culture. . . . [And] although it is needless to prove that in the period from the sophists

⁵¹ See for example the famous public lecture by Prodicus entitled "Hercules at the Crossroads," in Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21 ff. See also Hippias' unimpeachable moral lecture discussed at *Hippias Major* 286a ff. And see further chapter 9 below.

⁵² See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, pp. 6-13; and more recently Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 8 and 11.

to Plato and Aristotle, the mind of Greece developed still further and reached still greater heights, it is still true, as Hegel said, that Minerva's owl did not begin her flight until the dusk had fallen."⁵³ And in Eric Voegelin's treatment of the sophists in *The World of the Polis*, the approach is similarly reminiscent of Hegel: the sophists stand for Voegelin as a necessary ordeal that Athens had to endure in order to become the political and cultural capital of Greece. Athens, the "safe backwater of ancestral piety," had to become the sophists' "schoolboy for two generations."⁵⁴ Socrates and Plato stood in opposition to the sophists, Voegelin writes, but "this opposition does not mean that the achievements of the sophistic age were rejected; on the contrary, the achievements were taken over, to an extent that is still not quite recognized because our historiography of ideas pays more attention to Plato's vociferous criticism of sophists than to his quiet acceptance of their work."⁵⁵ Neither Jaeger nor especially Voegelin can be characterized as Hegelian in the overall turn of their thought; and yet the way these two great thinkers approach the sophists—seeking to identify their precise role in the movement of the Greek mind toward Plato and Aristotle—bears all the marks of Hegel's approach.

⁵³ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 304. Jaeger, like Hegel, weaves the sophists into a dialectical account of the history of Greek culture. And, though his analysis is somewhat different than Hegel's in its particulars, it proves to be similarly reductionistic. Jaeger's sophists are forced to occupy one prong of a historical triad: they are the "intellectual" component which, when mixed with the "ethical" component supplied by traditional Greek education, leads to the blossoming of Aristotelian "virtue" in the completely human sense. For other echoes of Hegel in Jaeger's treatment of the sophists, see pp. 287, 292-3 and 304.

⁵⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1957), p. 267.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70. Voegelin's own treatment of the sophists does relatively little to highlight a Socratic-Platonic acceptance of their work, though he goes some way in this direction. What Voegelin is primarily interested in showing is that the sophists were insufficiently attracted to the divine (see esp. pp. 273-4, 295), hence he omits entirely a treatment of Prodicus' *Hercules at the Crossroads*, which would require him to seriously qualify this view. (One might also have expected Voegelin to discuss Hippias' religious theories, however these might be interpreted.)

Grote

But not long after Hegel's seminal treatment of the sophists, there arose a strong and equally seminal reaction in the work of the English historian George Grote.⁵⁶ Grote was convinced that the sophists had been "misconceived as well as misunderstood" by Hegel and his followers, and "indeed by almost all" who had previously written on them.⁵⁷ He complained, in particular, that "recent German historians of philosophy" had created "a fiend called *Die Sophistik*," whom, they imagined, had "poisoned and demoralized, by corrupt teaching, the Athenian moral character, so that it became degenerate at the end of the Peloponnesian War, compared with what it had been in the time of Miltiades and Aristeides."⁵⁸ Against this view, Grote argued three essential points.

First, according to Grote, Athens simply did not undergo a moral or political decline during the period in question. True, Aristophanes had "denounced the Demos of his day as degenerate," but such denunciations were just a matter of stock invective.⁵⁹ (Isocrates would later make the same complaint about the virtue of *his* generation compared with the former.) In truth, Grote thought, the citizens of earlier days could never have compared to the "measure of virtue and judgment pervading the whole people" at the end of the Peloponnesian War.⁶⁰ He

⁵⁶ George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 8 (London: J. Murray, 1850). For what it is worth, Grote has been described as "a utilitarian and a democrat" (Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 11), a "Radical," a "free-thinker" and a "reformer" (Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 8)—attributes which are supposed to have colored his view of the sophists. However, while Grote undeniably exaggerates his case for the sophists in some of its particulars, his sensitivity toward ancient sources as well as his empirical approach in general supply a much needed corrective to Hegel.

⁵⁷ Grote, *History*, pp. 477, 485 n. 1; cf. p. 491.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 507-8. "Modern authors," Grote protests (pp. 475-6), have placed far too much trust in the comic genius of Aristophanes, "thus allowing some of the worst feelings of Grecian antiquity to influence their manner of conceiving the facts." For it is especially in Aristophanes that one finds the "sentiment of antipathy to new ideas and new mental accomplishments."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

shows this by reference to the many political blunders of the pre-war generation, as well as by the exceptional conduct of Athenian citizens after the Four Hundred and the Thirty. If only the evidence would be soberly examined, Grote thought, it would be clear that far from becoming degenerate and corrupt, Athenians “had become both morally and politically better.”⁶¹

Second, Grote argued that the very notion of “Die Sophistik,” as propounded by the Germans, was a fiction and a useless abstraction. It was a fiction because, according to Grote,⁶² the sophists of the mid-fifth century “were not distinguished in any marked or generic way” from earlier men called sophists—men such as Solon and Pythagoras, who were greatly admired.⁶³ And it was an abstraction because the various individuals to whom the term applied were in truth so diverse a lot that one could never “predicate anything concerning doctrines, methods or tendencies” to them all. Indeed, the *only* characteristic, by Grote’s reckoning, that all the sophists had in common was their profession as paid teachers of youth.⁶⁴

And, finally, Grote argued that the sophists would be better understood not as *dangerous* teachers, but rather as beneficial teachers of practical virtue: “Their vocation was to train up youth for the duties, the pursuits, and the successes, of active life, both private and public.” What they offered over the usual education was, in general, “a larger range of knowledge,” combined

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 510. In fact, Grote goes on (p. 511), “it is indisputable that her population had acquired a far larger range of ideas and capacities than they possessed at the time of Marathon. This indeed is the very matter of fact deplored by Aristophanes, and admitted by those writers, who, while denouncing the sophists, connect such enlarged range of ideas with the dissemination of the pretended sophistical poison. In my judgment, not only the charges against the sophists as poisoners, but even the existence of such poison in the Athenian system, deserves nothing less than an emphatic denial.”

⁶² For my disagreement with Grote on this point, see chapter 5.

⁶³ Grote, *History*, p. 486; cf. p. 485. Among the earlier sophists, Grote lists (pp. 479-80) Solon, Pythagoras, and a certain bard named Thamyras. He also points out that Socrates was called a sophist not merely by Aristophanes but also by Aeschines, and that Plato was called a sophist by Isocrates, just as Isocrates was called a sophist by himself and others.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 505-506.

with “more impressive powers of composition and speech,” and a “considerable treasure of accumulated thought on moral and political subjects, calculated to make their conversation very instructive.”⁶⁵ They were in short, thought Grote, not only effective teachers but also tremendously useful people to have around. And while, to be sure, the masses would be suspicious on the point of their intellect, just as Plato would be hostile on the point of their practicality, the truth is that Athenian society would have been far worse without them.⁶⁶

Though in the years following Grote’s work on the sophists, the earlier Hegelian view continued to prevail, Grote’s new interpretation attracted a number of important adherents. Henry Sidgwick, for example, declared it “a historical discovery of the highest order” and, lamenting the fact that it had not “had the slightest influence on German erudition,” proceeded to refine and elaborate it in two lengthy articles.⁶⁷ Later, various aspects of Grote’s interpretation caught on. The idea, for example, that the sophists have no common doctrines to bind them and that, therefore, to use “sophistic” as an unqualified adjective is to speak nonsense, was adopted by Theodor Gomperz.⁶⁸ And the notion that the sophists were not only a healthy force in Athenian democracy but, in some sense, exemplars for our own culture was subsequently

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

⁶⁶ For Grote’s view on mass suspicion, see *ibid.*, p. 481; for his explanation of Plato’s hostility, see p. 487; for his assertion that sophists played a useful role in Athenian society, see also p. 487.

⁶⁷ Henry Sidgwick, “The Sophists,” *Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1872): 288-307; and *Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1873): 66-80, reprinted in Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Kant and Other Philosophical Lectures & Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1905), pp. 323-371.

⁶⁸ *Greek Thinkers*, vol. 1, trans., Laurie Magnus (London: John Murray, 1901), p. 415: “We may be asked, What was the genuine common factor in the several sophists? and to that question we can but reply that it consisted merely of their teaching profession and the conditions of its practice imposed by the age in which they lived.... It is illegitimate, if not absurd, to speak of a sophistic mind, sophistic morality, sophistic scepticism, and so forth.” This view is rejected as an exaggeration by Kerferd, “Sophists,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 495; and by Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 44, who argues (problematically) that the sophists all taught rhetoric and all taught *aretê*.

adopted (and exaggerated) by a line of thinkers running through Eric Havelock, Karl Popper and Cynthia Farrar.⁶⁹

THE PRESENT STUDY

The foregoing survey reveals the problem facing the student of the sophists today: it is not that the sophists have been ignored, but rather that they have been engaged in such a way as to produce incoherent and even flatly contradictory accounts. On the one hand, the sophists are presented as powerful corrupters of youth, transmitters of a new and deleterious moral outlook; on the other hand, they are impotent educators, unoriginal in their thought. To some they are a cohesive intellectual movement; to others they are no movement at all. They are the ruin of Greek democracy; they are responsible for its health. They represent, according to various accounts, subjectivism, positivism, humanism, pragmatism, skepticism, existentialism, phenomenism, empiricism, utilitarianism, relativism and nihilism.⁷⁰ They are good; they are evil. They are few; they are many. The question one must ask, therefore, in the face of so many interpretations is which (if any) might be correct. Or, to pose the question in terms of method: How, in the face of such wide-spread disagreement, might one reach an understanding of the sophists that stands a chance of being correct?

The approach followed below is a radically inductive one. In the face of such confused interpretive accounts one can only return to the original sources for clarification. Thus, at the

⁶⁹ Havelock, *Liberal Temper* [*supra* n. 3]. (See the scathing review of Havelock in Leo Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Philosophy," [*supra* n. 12]). Popper, *Open Society* [*supra* n. 12]; and Farrar, *Origins of Democratic Thinking* [*supra* n. 3]. (See the critical review of Farrar in Josiah Ober, "The Athenians and their Democracy," in *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], pp. 126-132.)

⁷⁰ For references to scholarly generalizations not cited above, see Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, p. 19, n. 63; and G. B. Kerferd, "The Doctrine of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*," *Durham University Journal* 40 (1947): 19-27.

outset of this dissertation, no grand hypothesis is stated which the dissertation is supposed to prove, no overarching historical theory, no effort to show that the sophists represent some particular philosophical stance, and above all no assumption as to the goodness or badness of their ethical-political beliefs. I begin, as an empiricist, with an exploration of the ancient sources, sophist by sophist, in order to seek a clearer understanding of who these elusive figures were.⁷¹ This does, of course, present a problem: for how can one survey the information on individual sophists prior to knowing *who* the individual sophists were? Indeed, this is a problem that confronts all empiricism in its first tentative steps. But the way it will be dealt with here is very much the way Aristotle deals with it in his empirical work: I begin by assuming a commonsense knowledge of the sophists and proceed from there. As it turns out, it is necessary to narrow the field even further than this; for there are too many names associated with the term “sophist” to permit a one-volume, detailed study. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, I begin with a list of first-generation “sophists” who have been commonly considered important to the history of political thought. These include Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Gorgias, Polus, Thrasymachus, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

Though an inductive approach, heavy on ancient sources, is a good way to begin, it still leaves the problem of divergent interpretations at the ancient level. Indeed, to the extent that such writers as Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle are deemed “primary sources,” what is one to

⁷¹ This is precisely the approach that is called for by Kerferd, “Future Direction of Sophistic Studies,” p. 3: “Perhaps too much attention has been given in the past to attempts to arrive at general characterizations of the sophists and the sophistic movement. This is not so because general characterizations are in themselves in any way improper. But they must be based on detailed studies of the actual evidence concerning individual sophists. Such evidence is often deficient, inadequate and difficult to interpret. But the same is true of the pre-Socratics generally, yet in their case detailed scholarly investigations and reconstructions can hardly be said to have been seriously deterred. A similar detailed approach to individual sophists is now demanded, since only in this way will it be possible to go behind traditional receptions.”

do about their vociferous disagreements? Here it is necessary to say something about how ancient sources will be ranked and evaluated in the following work. The truly primary sources on the sophists are, of course, not Aristophanes or Plato but the fragments of the sophists themselves. These are presented (more or less exhaustively) in Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, in the original Greek,⁷² and they are relied upon, here, above all other sources. But these fragments are not always (a) reliable or (b) easy to interpret. Thus one cannot avoid turning to ancient interpreters of the sophists for help. In the following work, Plato is treated as by far the most valuable source of this type—this, in spite of the fact that Plato is not a “reporter” of facts. For, Aristophanes, though contemporary with the sophists is too often reckless with details. Aristophanes, of course, cannot be ignored; but he must be treated with circumspection. On the other hand, Aristotle is too late to be of much help on the first-generation sophists. He does prove useful as a recorder of certain biographical details and specific doctrines, but he is significantly less helpful when it comes to broader interpretive issues. We are left, therefore, with Plato.⁷³

Many commentators have stressed that Plato is a “hostile” reporter of facts about the sophists, others have stressed that he is not, technically speaking, a “reporter” at all. But it is my view that, in spite of these disclaimers, the value of Plato’s descriptions of the sophists is remarkably great. Indeed, one of the reasons that Plato is so informative is that his main character, Socrates, actually asked the sophists what they were about. He questioned them directly and listened to their answers. He was a conversationalist. Thus to the extent that Socrates knew the sophists, and Plato knew his teacher well, Plato cannot help but know a great

⁷² *Supra* n. 4. English translations of the fragments are available in Sprague, *The Older Sophists* [*supra* n. 5].

⁷³ Besides Plato’s dialogues, I consult a number of other ancient sources—none of them quite as important as Plato.

deal more about the sophists than other writers. It is true, of course, that relying on Plato means wrestling with often-thorny issues of literary interpretation: it means being sensitive to irony, to context, and to drama. And in such matters there is no absolute science. But if, by relying upon Plato, one exposes oneself to a heightened risk of error, one also gains invaluable perspective. And, at any rate, in the end, error cannot be entirely avoided. The goal—and I claim no “scientific” approach to this—is to minimize error as much as possible by cross-referencing sources and by learning to detect the improbable.

Ultimately the questions this dissertation seeks to answer are three in number: (1) Who *were* the individual sophists? (2) What, if anything, bound them together as a class? And (3) Why are they important? To anticipate some of the answers that are reached along the way, I shall say here that many of the figures commonly regarded as sophists by modern writers are not, according to primary sources, sophists at all. And, because of this, many of the most commonly made generalizations about the sophists are extremely problematic, to say the least. In the pages that follow, it will come to light that the sophists were, by definition, self-professed, paid teachers of virtue (*aretê*) and that the conflict between them and Socrates was not at all a conflict between good and evil (as some commentators would have it), but something else entirely: it was a conflict between two different approaches to ethical life, one practical and unquestioning, the other theoretical and skeptical. Moreover the approaches in question, so far from being dialectical opposites, overlap with one another to such a significant degree that both Socrates and the sophists partake of the others’ outlook; it is entirely a question of emphasis. This leads to a final point about the value of the sophists: as it turns out, the ethical impulses that are represented by Socrates and the sophists respectively cannot be simply avoided in human life. They represent an eternal tension in the soul, a tension that every individual must balance in order to

act in the ethical-political sphere. Thus a study of the sophists becomes, to a remarkable degree, a study of ourselves. In particular, modern citizens resemble the sophists whenever we set aside our philosophical scruples and act as if we know already what is in the deepest sense “good.” We resemble the sophists when we run for office, when we employ persuasive speech in the courtroom or the town meeting, when we take measures to protect our friends and/or harm our enemies. And yet we do all this without the guidance of that “knowledge” which, Socrates points out, must guide us if we are to be sure that our actions are truly just. At times we do pursue such theoretical wisdom doggedly, but we never fully attain it and few of us devote our lives to it. Thus we are perpetually somewhere between acting without knowledge and seeking knowledge without acting—we are perpetually between the sophists and Socrates.

PART I

WHO WERE THE SOPHISTS?

CHAPTER 2

THE GREAT SOPHISTS: MULTIFACETED *ARETÊ*

Since it is a goal of this work to show that many of the generalizations commonly made about sophists are at odds with the evidence, it is both necessary and desirable to begin in the Aristotelian fashion of examining particulars. For only from an understanding of particular facts about particular sophists can one assess the plausibility of this or that theory. Over the course of the next three chapters each of the major fifth-century sophists will be examined in detail.¹ They are grouped into chapters according to certain traits that they share, but what these traits are and whether or not they are the essential ones for properly differentiating among sophistic types, are questions that can only be answered along the way.

The present chapter focuses on three of the earliest and most famous sophists: Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias. By grouping them together, I do not mean to suggest that they were, in any way, a school or even a coherent movement; in fact they hailed from different parts of Greece, visited Athens at different times and were known for completely different intellectual accomplishments. But there were at least two important similarities among them: all three presented themselves explicitly as teachers of *aretê*; and all three understood *aretê* to entail not only intellectual and practical skills, but also certain moral qualities. The pages that follow support these two claims with concrete evidence while supplying a survey of these sophists' far-ranging accomplishments. Recent studies emerging from various, more or less narrowly circumscribed disciplines in the modern academy have tended to treat these sophists myopically. Protagoras may be examined for his "relativistic" epistemology, Prodicus for his approach to the

¹ Later it will be argued that some of these figures are not really sophists at all, or that they are sophists only in a certain loose sense of the word. But before that argument can be made, it is necessary to examine the particulars.

study of language, and Hippias for his polymathy. But these sophists were much more than such narrow treatments suggest. Here, I hope to reveal just how multifaceted they were.

PROTAGORAS

Protagoras was born around 490 B.C. in the Thracian town of Abdera.² He is perhaps best known today for his “relativistic” dictum: “Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.”³ He is also frequently cited for his agnostic stance in religion: “Concerning the gods, I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not, for there is much to prevent one’s knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man’s life.”⁴ These two fragments are certainly important for reaching an understanding of Protagoras’ outlook. However, they may be less important than their frequent recitation suggests. In Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, the sophist appears not as a relativist or an agnostic *per se*, but as a celebrated teacher of *aretê*. And it is difficult to see how a teacher of *aretê* (a word whose very meaning implies *standards* of conduct) could have been a thoroughgoing relativist. Thus if Protagoras’ relativism is pushed too far, his role as a teacher becomes incomprehensible.⁵ The question, therefore, is not simply how to interpret this or that fragment of Protagoras’ writing, but how to interpret the evidence about him *as a whole*.

² Regarding Protagoras’ origins, Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* IX.53) reports that he began his career as a porter, carrying bundles of wood for the Abderian well-to-do. This may be true since Aristotle (fr. 63) credits him with the invention of a shoulder pad on which porters carry their load. But, then, Diogenes also reports that it was while working as a porter, that Protagoras was “discovered” by the philosopher Democritus (also from Abdera), and this cannot be correct. Democritus was about thirty years Protagoras’ younger and only an infant when the latter became a sophist. On Protagoras’ dates, see J. A. Davison, “Protagoras, Democritus, and Anaxagoras,” *Classical Quarterly* 47 (1953), pp. 33-45.

³ DK 80 B1; see Plato *Theaetetus* 152a and *Cratylus* 385e ff.; Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1062b13; Sextus Empiricus *Against the Schoolmasters* VII.60; and Diogenes Laertius *Lives* IX.51.

⁴ DK 80 B4; see Diogenes Laertius *Lives* IX.51; the fragment is also alluded to in Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* I.10, 1; and in Cicero *On the Nature of the Gods* I.23, 63.

⁵ This is a point that Socrates dwells on at some length in the *Theaetetus*. I think it significant that Plato does not pay much attention to the man-measure dictum until very late in the dialogues. He is clearly familiar with it early

The Man-Measure Fragment

The man-measure fragment is the first and only-surviving line from Protagoras' work *On Truth*.⁶ It is certainly a provocative line, epigrammatic in tone; but what exactly does it mean? Some scholars take the view that the word "man" (*anthropos*) in the fragment refers to mankind as a class and that, therefore, the dictum expresses some sort of "humanist" ontology: man (not nature or the gods) stands at the center of reality, determining by dint of his own experience what does and does not exist.⁷ When this idea is combined with the agnostic perspective of the "concerning-the-gods" fragment⁸ (as these scholars are wont to do), one arrives at the sense that Protagoras was not only a humanist but a "radical materialist" as well, believing (*contra* Parmenides, perhaps) that only sensory experience is scrutable.⁹

The only problem with this interpretation is its lack of ancient support. Indeed, none of the ancient interpreters of Protagoras' dictum take it to refer to mankind as a class; it is rather *man the individual* to which it refers. For example in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates recalls

on: it is alluded to in the *Protagoras*, *Cratylus*, and *Euthydemus*. But he does not seem particularly interested in attacking it. I wonder, therefore, whether the dictum might have become either more popular or else more dogmatically interpreted during Plato's own lifetime (i.e. after Protagoras was dead), thus requiring Plato to formulate a philosophical response to a doctrine that Protagoras himself would have carefully qualified.

⁶ An alternate title of *Refutations* (*kataballontes*) is mentioned by Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Schoolmasters* VII.60. I shall have something more to say about this below. On the prime position of the man-measure fragment within the work as a whole, see Plato *Theaetetus* 161c and Sextus Empiricus (*ibid.*).

⁷ See Theodore Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers: A History of Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. Laurie Magnus (London: John Murray, 1901), pp. 450-1; and Laszlo Versenyi, "Protagoras' Man-Measure Fragment," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 83 (1962), pp. 178-184. This is also the view that Eric Voegelin takes in *Order and History*, vol. 3, *The World of the Polis* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 294-5.

⁸ Also a first and only-surviving line, it commenced a treatise entitled *On the Gods*, which Protagoras is supposed to have recited at Athens sometime near the end of his life. See Diogenes Laertius IX.51-2, who adds that "because he began his book in this way, he was expelled by the Athenians, and they also burned his books in the marketplace, having first collected them by public messenger from all who owned copies." This whole account, however, does not square with Plato's remarks about Protagoras at *Meno* 91e; see my discussion of Protagoras' death below.

⁹ See Voegelin, *ibid.* p. 295, who sees Protagoras only as the beginning of a "line of dogmatic derailment" falling into the "negation of the divine," an "immanentist who has no experience of transcendence."

(152a6-8) that Protagoras expounded his doctrine as follows: “any given thing is to *me* such as it appears to me, and is to *you* such as it appears to you, you and I *each* being a man.”¹⁰ Here, it is clearly not mankind but rather the individual who is a measure. Moreover, the idea appears to be less one of ontological humanism than of epistemological relativism. As Socrates goes on to explain: if two people feel the same breeze gusting across the plain, it may be that to one it is cold while to the other it is not. What is the truth about the breeze? Protagoras would say it is relative. Thus, Sextus Empiricus also says of Protagoras’ dictum: “Truth is something relative (*tôn pros ti einai tēn alêtheian*) because everything that has appeared to, or been believed by, someone is at once real in relation to *him*.”¹¹

Was Protagoras a Complete Relativist?

If this is the right way to take Protagoras’ dictum, then the next question is how far he would have pushed it. For it is one thing to say that feelings and beliefs are true for the person who experiences them at the very moment they occur—this would be a defensible view. But it is something else entirely to say that such immediate experiences are the *only* measure of truth available. Consider, for example, a question of truth that actually has consequences: Lawrence of Arabia believed he was impervious to bodily assaults, and this *really was* true for him while he believed it. But, later, he encountered a Turkish jailer who beat him within inches of his life, at which point Lawrence (unsurprisingly) changed his belief. Were both of his beliefs true at the moment he believed them? Yes. But that is rather to miss the point. The point is that Lawrence’s *first* belief was wrong (“insane,” even) and thus a rude awakening was awaiting him

¹⁰ Italics mine; cf. *Cratylus* 386a; and Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1062b13. W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 171, argues that this line (or something very similar to it) must have been part of Protagoras’ original work.

¹¹ *Against the Schoolmasters* VII.60.

in the “real world.” In other words, in matters where actions and beliefs have consequences, relativism of the man-measure variety only goes so far.¹²

Did Protagoras recognize that his doctrine had limits? There is no indication in the *Theaetetus* that he did; he appears rather to have pushed it as far as he could. But this presents a problem. For Protagoras—by Plato’s own admission—was not only a relativist but also a professional teacher, and one has to wonder what on earth Protagoras could have taught if he regarded all beliefs as equally true for people who believe them. In fact, this precise question arises in the *Theaetetus*, and Socrates’ way of dealing with it will be considered below; but let us first put a finer point on the question by examining Protagoras’ role as a teacher.

Protagoras as a Teacher of *Aretê*

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates inquires of the sophist what a prospective student might expect to learn from him. And Protagoras replies rather confidently: “your gain will be this: the very day you associate with me, you will go home a better man, and the same for the next day. Every day you will make progress toward a better state.”¹³ This is admittedly vague (although Protagoras’ use of the word “better” [*beltion*] will prove significant below). Pressed for more detail, Protagoras replies that what he teaches is *euboulia*, sound deliberation, and this in two areas: first, in household affairs, so that one may manage a household well, and secondly, in political affairs, so that one may manage the affairs of state and become “a most able doer and

¹² In fact, once one gets past the typical examples of chilly breezes and human tastes, one sees just how absurd the man-measure dictum can be. As Aristotle writes in the *Metaphysics* (IV.4, 1007b18 ff.): “If contradictory statements are all true at the same time about the same thing [depending upon who you ask], it is clear that all things will be one. For the same thing will be a trireme and a wall and a man, if it is permissible either to affirm or to deny anything of everything, as those who uphold the argument of Protagoras must admit. For if anyone thinks that a man is not a trireme, it is clear that he is not a trireme. Therefore he *is* one too, if the contradictory statement is true.”

¹³ *Protagoras* 318a6-9.

speaker.”¹⁴ The question one might ask at this point is what exactly Protagoras taught under the banner of *euboulia*.¹⁵

No doubt the art of argumentation was a large part of it, for this was Protagoras’ specialty.¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius reports that Protagoras was the first person to show that on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other.¹⁷ He was also the first to make use of the method of questioning, the first to stage formal debates, and the first to introduce his students to the tricks of argument.¹⁸ Why did he teach these arts? Perhaps Protagoras wanted to enable his students to advance their own interests and exploit everyone else. This is the common answer.¹⁹ But there is very little evidence that Protagoras took this view and, indeed, strong evidence to the contrary.²⁰ What is more likely is that Protagoras understood the art of making arguments and

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 318e5-319a2.

¹⁵ The word *euboulia* had strong historical overtones; see especially, Malcolm Schofield, “*Euboulia* in the *Iliad*,” in *Saving the City: Philosopher-Kings and Other Classical Paradigms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3-30. A detailed examination of this question is, however, reserved for chapter 9.

¹⁶ When Socrates asks the lad Hippocrates what *he* thinks Protagoras teaches, the answer is (*Protagoras* 312d): how to be *deinon legein*, clever at speaking.

¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* IX.51; cf. Seneca *Letters* 88.43: “Protagoras says that one can argue equally well on either side of any question, including the question itself whether both sides of any question can be argued.” On Protagoras’ use of the method of questioning (usually associated with Socrates), cf. *Protagoras* 329b.

¹⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Patrick Coby, “The Education of a Sophist: Aspects of Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Interpretation* 10 (1982), p. 146: “there is every likelihood that when Protagoras identifies virtue with art, he means by art essentially two things: first, the art of rhetoric which enables its practitioners to defend themselves in the law courts and Assembly; . . . second, the art of disguise by which students of sophistry maintain a clever pretense of piety and justice, enjoying a reputation for virtue along with the fruits of self-indulgence.”

²⁰ Consider, for example, *Theaetetus* 167d5-168c2, where Socrates is speaking in Protagoras’ voice: “Now if you can dispute this doctrine in principle, do so by argument stating the case on the other side, or by asking questions, if you prefer that method, which has no terrors for a man of sense; on the contrary it ought to be especially agreeable to him. Only there is this rule to be observed: Do not conduct your questioning unfairly. It is very unreasonable that one who professes a concern for virtue should be constantly guilty of unfairness in argument. Unfairness here consists in not observing the distinction between a debate and a conversation. A debate need not be taken seriously and one may trip up an opponent to the best of one’s power, but a conversation should be taken in earnest; one should help out the other party. . . . If you follow this rule, your associates will lay the blame for their confusions and perplexity on themselves and not on you; they will like you and court your society, and, disgusted with

counter-arguments as a technique either for thinking clearly about personal and political affairs, or else for challenging dogmatism. “He who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that,” writes John Stuart Mill. “His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”²¹ Mastery of argumentation is a prerequisite for sound deliberation (*euboulia*). Without it one is likely to be fooled either by others or by oneself.²²

***Euboulia* as Art of Argument: Protagoras’ Works**

It is interesting to observe at this point just how much light can be shed upon Protagoras’ writings if he is taken to be, first and foremost, a teacher of argument.²³ The works usually attributed to him include sixteen titles on a tremendously wide array of topics: *The Art of Debating*, *Contradictory Arguments in Two Books*, *On Truth* (or perhaps, *Refutations*), *On Being*, *On the Gods*, *On Wrestling*, *On Mathematics*, *On Government*, *On Ambition*, *On the Virtues*, *On the Original State of Things*, *On Those in Hades*, *The Great Speech*, *Direction*, and *Trial over a Fee*.²⁴ For most of these, only the titles themselves survive. But there is some evidence about the nature of their content. According to Cicero (citing Aristotle as his

themselves, will turn to philosophy, hoping to escape from their former selves and become different men.” Plato, it should be remembered, is not known for supplying merciful defenses for unscrupulous sophists. This, and the fact that the traits at the outset of this passage are clearly Protagorean, support an assumption that the overall sentiment is genuinely Protagorean.

²¹ *On Liberty: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. David Spitz (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), p. 36.

²² Hence Socrates’ remarks at *Republic* 454a-b.

²³ The view that Protagoras is primarily a teacher of *logos* (a generalization I would only make with respect to his *writings*) is advanced by Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). The following analysis of Protagoras’ writings is, however, entirely my own.

²⁴ Most of these are listed in Diogenes Laertius *Lives* IX.55.

authority), “Protagoras wrote down and prepared disputations on notable subjects, which are now called general arguments or commonplaces (*loci communes*).”²⁵ Cicero may be referring to *The Art of Debating* or to the *Contradictory Arguments in Two Books*, either of which would naturally concern arguments, but he may be referring to other works as well. Socrates points out in the *Sophist*, for example, that Protagoras’ work *On Wrestling* was not really a book about wrestling at all, but a collection of arguments to be used in controversy with the actual practitioners of the art; and Protagoras is said to have done this for other arts (*tôn allôn technôn*) as well.²⁶

What about Protagoras’ supposedly philosophical works? To what extent might they too have been works not about philosophy *per se* but about *arguing* with philosophers? The surviving evidence invites the possibility. All that is known about Protagoras’ book *On Being*, for example, is that it contained “counter-arguments against those who propose being as one.”²⁷ Protagoras’ book *On Mathematics* evidently held that the subject matter of mathematics is “unknowable” and the terminology “repugnant”—strange positions for a mathematician to take, but not strange at all for someone trying to *refute* mathematicians.²⁸ Indeed, Aristotle may well be referring to this work when he reports that Protagoras “refuted the geometers.”²⁹ How many

²⁵ Cicero *Brutus* 12.46 (DK 80 B6).

²⁶ Plato *Sophist* 232d-e. The whole passage reads as follows: Stranger—“And what about laws and all kinds of political issues? Don’t sophists promise to make people capable of engaging in controversies (*amphisbêtêtikous*) about them?” Theaetetus—“If they didn’t promise that, practically no one would bother to discuss anything with them.” Stranger—“As a matter of fact you can find anything you need to say to contradict any expert himself, both in general and within each particular field, laid out published and written down for anybody who wants to learn it.” Theaetetus—“Apparently you’re talking about Protagoras’ writings on wrestling and other fields of expertise.” Stranger—“And on many other things too my friend.”

²⁷ Porphyry *Lecture on Literature*, quoted in Eusebius *Preparation of the Gospel* X, 3.25.

²⁸ The report comes from Philodemus, a first-century B.C. Epicurean philosopher and poet; for this fragment of his work *On Poetry*, see DK 80 B7a.

²⁹ *Metaphysics* 998a4: *elechôn tous geômetras*.

of Protagoras' other works consisted of arguments for refuting experts on various topics? It is impossible to know, but it seems likely that a good number of his works were of such a nature.

What about the work *On Truth*, with the man-measure dictum as its opening line: could this have been a book about refuting philosophers, rather than a book of philosophy *per se*? The discussion of the man-measure dictum in the *Theaetetus* does not rule out the possibility. For it is one thing to know what the first line of the book *meant*—Plato's *Theaetetus* proves helpful there—but something else entirely to know *why* or towards what end it was asserted. That is a question to which none of our sources speaks. It is, of course, customary (especially among historians of philosophy) to assume that Protagoras was earnestly setting out his philosophical views and that *On Truth* was a “treatise.” But this assumption is called into question by a number of considerations. It is significant, for example, that an alternate title of *Refutations* has come down to us for this work, a title which would make a great deal of sense if the work *were* essentially a book of refutations.³⁰ Moreover, as I have shown above, the man-measure dictum itself is highly dubious from a philosophical perspective, but a strong pedagogical case might be made for it. Perhaps Protagoras used it to show his students how they could gain leverage in arguments.³¹ He might have meant by it something like this: what people take to be truth, and propound dogmatically as if it were unassailable, is always an appearance; and appearances vary not only from person to person, but even from one situation to another; therefore, it is always possible *and prudent* to argue with people by constructing counter-arguments from opposite

³⁰ See n. 6 above.

³¹ This is the view advanced by Heinrich Maier, *Socrates: sein Werk und seine geschichtliche Stellung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913), pp. 207-219; and followed by Joseph P. Maguire “Protagoras—or Plato?” *Phronêsis* 18 (1973): 115-38. On Maguire, however, see n. 50, below.

appearances. Pedagogically speaking, the practice makes a great deal more sense than it does as an unwavering philosophical doctrine.³²

Whatever the overall purpose of Protagoras' writings, many of them seem to have been critical and argumentative in tone. There is a story that Protagoras once angered a poet by subjecting his poems to scrutiny. The poet cast aspersions on him, at which point Protagoras is supposed to have remarked: "My good sir, I am better off enduring your abuse than enduring your poems!"³³

***Euboulia* and Moral Virtues**

While a surprising amount of light can be shed upon Protagoras' work from the perspective of his interest in argument, ample evidence suggests that Protagoras taught more than just argument under the banner of *euboulia*. Indeed, he seems to have recognized that sound deliberation should be built upon and checked by a set of distinctly *moral* virtues.³⁴ If this is true, it separates Protagoras at once from figures like Gorgias, who taught *only* rhetoric and placed no moral restrictions upon its use. Just how much of a teacher of morality Protagoras really was becomes evident not only from the gentleness and respect with which Plato treats

³² Protagoras' intense interest in argumentation may lie behind his important breakthroughs in the study of language as well. He is often said to be the founder of grammar. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1407b6) credits him with the systematic division of nouns into their masculine, feminine and neuter genders. Diogenes (IX.54) says he was the first to distinguish the tenses of the verb, and a number of Greek writers credit him with the division of speech into its modes: entreaty, question, answer, command, etc. (The exact number is a matter of controversy.) Such breakthroughs would have been tremendously useful for analyzing arguments.

³³ The story is told in the *Gnomologium Vaticanum* 743, no. 468 (DK 80 A25).

³⁴ See e.g., *Protagoras* 325a: "If there is one essential art, it is not the art of building or forging or pottery but justice and moderation and holiness of life, or to concentrate it into a single whole, manly virtue (*aretê andros*)—if, I say, it is this in which all must share and which must enter into every man's actions whatever other occupation he chooses to learn and practice."

him,³⁵ but also from the account of his pedagogical goals supplied at *Protagoras* 320c-328c.

There Socrates asks Protagoras to demonstrate that virtue (*aretê*) is something that can be taught, and Protagoras responds with a myth followed by an argument.

The myth (often referred to in the literature as the “Myth of Protagoras”)³⁶ tells of a time when the human race was in a state of utter anarchy and pending destruction for want of an “art of politics.”³⁷ The art in question, mercifully supplied at last by Zeus, consists chiefly of two political virtues: a sense of justice (*dikê*) and a sense of respect for others (*aidôs*). These virtues are made available to all men as a result of Zeus’ dispensation, but they are not innate; they must be acquired through education.³⁸ As Protagoras shifts from myth to argument, he explains that the bulk of moral education is carried out by parents, a good bit more by schoolmasters; and the laws play a part too as characters are molded in accordance with their restrictions. But it remains possible for individuals to acquire an even greater faculty of political virtue, and here is where Protagoras comes in. “Virtue,” Protagoras tells Socrates, is like everything else: “if we can find someone only a little better than others at advancing us on the road to virtue, we must be content. My claim is that I am one of these, rather better than anyone else at helping a man to acquire [*genesthai*] a good and noble character [*to kalon kai agathon*].”³⁹

³⁵ This point is made by Gregory Vlastos, in his introduction to *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), pp. vii-xxiv. Plato and Socrates are much more alike than different, and this governs much of the tone of the *Protagoras*.

³⁶ Most scholars accept the myth presented here as something composed by the real Protagoras. Perhaps it was an excerpt from his famous treatise *On the Original State of Things* (DK 80 A1). For a review of the literature on the question of authenticity, see Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 64. If the myth *was* Protagoras’ own, however, there is no reason to assume he would have used it for the same purposes that Plato uses it in his dialogue.

³⁷ For a detailed discussion, see chapters 8 and 9.

³⁸ See G. B. Kerferd, “Protagoras’ Doctrine of Justice and Virtue in the *Protagoras* of Plato,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953): 42-5, which corrects the earlier interpretations of Zeller and Cornford on this point.

³⁹ *Protagoras* 328b.

If Protagoras' point is that active political virtues such as skill in argument and deliberation must be built upon basic moral virtues such as justice and respect for others, he is on strong political-theoretical ground.⁴⁰ And there is no reason to doubt that Protagoras was a capable teacher of all these virtues. It is sometimes suggested that the sophists were “quacks” and that they taught political virtues but had no political experience. But such a charge cannot be brought against Protagoras. Indeed, renowned for his political and legal wisdom throughout Greece, Protagoras was appointed by Athens in 444-3 to compose the laws for a new Athenian colony at Thurii (an exceedingly high honor for a foreigner and a sophist).⁴¹ Plutarch tells of the time Pericles passed an entire day with Protagoras, turning over questions of legal responsibility in a case where a javelin thrower had accidentally struck and killed a competitor in a match.⁴² Such testimonies suggest that Protagoras had something substantial to teach.⁴³ And while many questions remain about what exactly that was, or how exactly he balanced the tensions between teaching the virtues of a leader, those of a citizen, and those of a philosopher,⁴⁴ one thing is certain: Protagoras regarded himself, and others regarded him too, as a teacher of virtue—and not just of any old virtue, but of a kind of virtue that embraces concrete moral values such as justice and respect.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 135.

⁴¹ The source is Heraclides Ponticus (in Diogenes Laertius *Lives* IX.50), who composed a now-fragmentary study of the laws of various Greek states. For details see Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 263-4; and chapter 1, n. 16 above.

⁴² *Pericles* 36 (DK 80 B10).

⁴³ This is confirmed by his method of assessing fees. Protagoras allowed students to pay either his fixed rate or else whatever the student was willing to declare on oath in a temple that the lessons were worth. Usually students found him “worthy of the fee he charged *and even more*” (*Protagoras* 328b). For more information on the sophists' fees, see chapter 7.

⁴⁴ These are common questions in the literature. I address them at length in chapter 9.

⁴⁵ See S. Moser and G. L. Kustas, “A Comment on the ‘Relativism’ of Protagoras,” *Phoenix* 20 (1966): 111-115.

Reconciling Relativism with Teaching Virtue

The problem, therefore, is how to reconcile Protagoras-the-teacher with Protagoras-the-relativist. And while any answer one gives to this question will be to some extent a matter of speculation, it remains true that Protagoras cannot have been *simply* a relativist. This much is admitted by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* when *he* tries to answer the question just posed.

Socrates' answer has come to be known as the "Apology of Protagoras." It is Socrates' best guess at what Protagoras might have said, and it runs something like this: Man is the measure of all things; what appears to one man *is* true to him at the moment that it appears so, and appearances are relative—"to the sick man, food appears sour and *is* so; to the healthy man it seems good."⁴⁶ But while truth is in this sense relative to the beholder, there are still better (*beltiôn, ameinôn*) and worse conditions to be in.⁴⁷ Therefore, just as the job of a doctor is to bring about a change in the sick man, to make him "better," so the job of an educator is to lead his students from a "worse" to a "better" condition through discourse. Finally, though people like to refer to the worse condition as "false" and to the better one as "true," such labels are really irrelevant when all one means is that one condition is better and the other is worse. Health is *better* than sickness—on this, everyone agrees.

Next comes Protagoras' application of this doctrine to politics: whatever practices *seem* right and laudable to any particular city, *are so* for that city, so long as it holds them. And yet some practices are significantly "better" than others. Justice and respect, for example, are much better moral practices than injustice and antagonism, at least if one wants one's city to flourish;

⁴⁶ *Theaetetus* 166e.

⁴⁷ The word translated here as "condition" is the same word that plays a leading role in Aristotle's *Ethics*, i.e., "*hexis*." Protagoras says (*Theaetetus* 167a4) "In education, what we have to do is to change from a worse *hexis* into a better one." Cf. Aristotle *Ethics* II.3-5.

and so the job of wise and honest rhetoricians (*tous sophous te kai agathous rhêtoras*) is precisely to make useful things (*ta chrêsta*), rather than worthless things (*tôn pônêrôn*), seem right.⁴⁸

The position that Plato's Socrates repairs to here for Protagoras is ingenious. And it shares at least this much with the ethical outlook of Socrates himself: that whatever the "good" and the "true" turn out to be, they will also be beneficial to the person who embraces them. Indeed, this is the very point Plato's Socrates is at pains to make in the *Republic*.⁴⁹ However, the weakness of the position as Protagoras is made to defend it here is that he never says exactly what the "better" really is. Better is a comparative term, and it is only by reference to some standard or set of standards that it acquires a precise meaning. Any number of standards suggest themselves—personal safety, political strength, political stability, and so on. But the point is that Protagoras does not name his standards at all. It was one of the great accomplishments of Aristotle's *Ethics* to address this question of the standards by which ethical conduct might be judged. In the "Apology of Protagoras," however, we know only that there are to be ethical standards, not what they are. Protagoras' reconciliation between relativism and teaching is assured, but vague.

⁴⁸ *Theaetetus* 167c.

⁴⁹ Perhaps the more striking parallel is not to Plato's Socrates but to William James, who writes in his lecture "What Pragmatism Means," that "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons." "If there be any life that it is really better we should lead," James goes on, "and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea." *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 38. The difference between James and Protagoras (one of mere semantics, it seems) is that James retains use of the word "truth" even after he defines it in strict terms of the beneficial.

To what extent, though, would this reconciliation have resembled Protagoras' own? Unfortunately, there is no way to know.⁵⁰ One reason for viewing it as genuinely Protagorean may be the stress the speech places upon the term "better." Recall that the first words out of Protagoras' mouth when asked about his pedagogical goals in the *Protagoras* were that he always makes his students "better." This term takes on a much greater significance in the *Theaetetus*, though this could admittedly be a matter of Platonic art. (For all we know, the use of the term "better" in the *Protagoras* itself is purely Platonic art.) On the other hand, if one is inclined to doubt the authenticity of the "Apology of Protagoras," there is plenty of evidence to lean on here as well: Socrates says quite explicitly that the defense is not to be found in Protagoras' own work, nor is it what the great sophist would necessarily have said were he alive to defend himself.⁵¹ Thus one is ultimately left with a *possible*, though not necessarily Protagorean, way of reconciling Protagoras' role as a teacher with the apparent relativism of his man-measure fragment. What is certain, however is that some such reconciliation had to be made.

The circumstances surrounding Protagoras' death are a matter of long-standing dispute. Philostratus reports in his *Lives of the Sophists* that the Athenians banished him from their territory and that he died shortly thereafter: "Between island and mainland he moved, in his attempt to keep ahead of the Athenian triremes scattered over every sea, until finally a small

⁵⁰ An admirably ambitious attempt is Joseph P. Maguire's, "Protagoras—or Plato?" *Phronêsis* 18 (1973): 115-38, which argues that Plato manipulates the meaning of Protagoras' dictum by exploiting verbal equivalences. But to show that Plato employs verbal equivalences is not yet to prove that he does so illegitimately—Protagoras could have endorsed these equivalences. Thus Maguire's attempt to separate the real Protagoras from the "Apology of Protagoras" is inconclusive.

⁵¹ *Theaetetus* 165e, 168c.

vessel on which he was sailing sank.”⁵² Other writers say he died in a shipwreck while traveling to Sicily.⁵³ There are reports of an official death sentence and of his books being burned by an outraged Athenian public.⁵⁴ But none of this is confirmed by Plato, who has Socrates say in the *Meno* that Protagoras “was nearly seventy when he died, and had been practicing for forty years, and all that time—indeed to this very day—his reputation has been consistently high.”⁵⁵ Plato, of course, stands closer to Protagoras in age than any of the writers above, and so his view is likely to be correct.

PRODICUS

If Prodicus of Ceos was born sometime between 470 and 460 B.C., he would have been a good twenty to thirty years younger than Protagoras and roughly contemporary with Socrates.⁵⁶ Like Protagoras, he was not only a successful sophist but also a respected statesman, and he apparently combined these careers to good effect. For Socrates recalls in the *Hippias Major* that the last time Prodicus came on embassy to Athens, “he was much admired for his eloquence before the Council, and also, as a private person, made an astonishing amount of money by delivering *epideixeis* to the young.”⁵⁷ The most famous of Prodicus’ *epideixeis*, the “Choice of

⁵² *Lives of the Sophists* I.10.1. He was banished, according to Philostratus because of his unorthodox religious views.

⁵³ Diogenes Laertius *Lives* IX.55 cites Philochorus (third-century B.C., Greek historian) as a source for this view.

⁵⁴ On the death sentence, see Sextus Empiricus *Against the Schoolmasters* IX.55, citing Timon of Phlius (Greek skeptic philosopher, c.320-230 B.C.) as his source. On the book burning, see Diogenes Laertius IX.52.

⁵⁵ *Meno* 91e.

⁵⁶ The dates are suggested by Herman Mayer, *Prodikos von Keos und die Anfänge der Synonymik bei den Griechen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1913), p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Hippias Major* 282b-d; cf. *Apology* 19e. Prodicus’ talent at speaking before the assembly is stressed by Philostratus as well.

Hercules,” has been referred to as one of the “most influential pieces of world literature.”⁵⁸ But Prodicus’ influence can be detected in other areas as well.

Art of Differentiating Words

Readers of Plato will know Prodicus as the sophist whose peculiar art it was to draw fine distinctions (*ad nauseam*, if Plato is any guide) between words of basically similar meaning.⁵⁹ For this, he is mentioned in the *Charmides*, *Laches* and *Euthydemus*, and briefly parodied in the *Protagoras*, where his speech runs something like this: “Those who are present at discussions” must listen to the speakers “*impartially*, but not *equally*,” for the wisest speakers deserve an unequal share of attention. Nor should a *discussion* be confused with a *dispute*, since discussions are carried out among friends with good will, while disputes are between rivals and enemies. Nor is the goal to win praise, but esteem, since praise is “often on the lips of men in spite of their true conviction,” while esteem is “a genuine feeling in the heart.” And finally, enjoyment is different than pleasure, since pleasure arises from mere physical indulgence while enjoyment “results from learning and partaking in the intellectual activity of the mind alone.”⁶⁰ Each of these distinctions has something to recommend it, but if Prodicus’ speeches bore any resemblance to this parody, they must have become a bit tedious, to say the least.

That Plato should find the art ridiculous is fairly easy to understand. For unlike the Socratic-Platonic art of definition, which tries to ascend to a unified, essential understanding of

⁵⁸ Wilhelm Schmid and Otto Stählin, eds., *Geschichte der griechischen Literature*, vol. 3, (Munich: C. H. Bocksche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940), p. 41.

⁵⁹ The art is sometimes referred to in the literature as “synonymic” (e.g., Mayer, *Prodikos*, p. 61; followed by Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 224-5), but this is a modern coinage. Prodicus himself referred to his art as that of “differentiating words” (*ta onomata diairein*).

⁶⁰ *Protagoras* 337a-c.

things, Prodicus' art points to the *differences* among things and moves in the direction of plurality.⁶¹ It would have been ultimately unsuitable for the sort of philosophy Socrates and Plato wanted to pursue. Socrates makes this point explicitly in the *Euthydemus*: "if one learned many such things, or even all of them, one would be no nearer to knowing what things really are, but would be able to play with people because of the different senses of words."⁶²

But Plato was not alone in criticizing the art. Aristotle refers in the *Topics* to certain thinkers who insist on making distinctions just because multiple words for a thing exist; he then mentions Prodicus by name: "Prodicus distinguishes three forms of pleasure: joy [*chara*], delight [*terpis*], and good cheer [*euphrosune*], when all of these are just different names for the same thing, pleasure."⁶³ And Alexander of Aphrodisias seems to reflect the view of posterity when he characterizes Prodicus' distinctions as just "the sort of thing said by men who love to lay down trivial laws, but have no care to say anything sensible."⁶⁴

On the other hand, Prodicus' art appears to have been tremendously influential.⁶⁵ Consider, for example, how Socrates *uses* it just prior to criticizing it in the *Euthydemus*. The interlocutor Clinias has been ensnared in a fierce paradox relating to the verb "to learn"

⁶¹ See Carl Joachim Classen, "The Study of Language amongst Socrates' Contemporaries," *Proceedings of the African Classical Association* 2 (1959): 33-49, reprinted in Classen, ed., *Sophistik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), pp. 215-47.

⁶² *Euthydemus* 278b.

⁶³ Aristotle *Topics* II.6, 112b22; see also *Meno* 75e for the same criticism: the words "end" (*teleutên*), "limit" (*peras*) and "finality" (*eschaton*) are perfectly synonymous, though "Prodicus might well disagree."

⁶⁴ *Commentary on Aristotle Topics* II.6 (DK 84 A19). Alexander of Aphrodisias, nicknamed "the commentator" was an early third-century A.D., Greek Peripatetic philosopher whose commentaries on Aristotle were widely read.

⁶⁵ Hence Eric Voegelin, *World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 271: "Under one aspect, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophizing is the arduous process of developing the terms, which in retrospect have become "philosophical vocabulary," out of the meanings which the words had in everyday parlance. Plato's sympathy for Prodicus may well have been rooted in a craftsman's respect for the valuable work of a predecessor."

(*manthanein*), and Socrates frees him by teaching him Prodicus' art: "You must learn first of all, as Prodicus says, the right use of words, . . . that people use the word learn in two senses."⁶⁶ Again, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates takes up the art (acknowledging Prodicus as he does so) in order to untangle an apparent contradiction in one of Simonides' poems. The contradiction is only apparent because, as Socrates points out, it vanishes as soon as one recognizes the distinction between "being" and "becoming" upon which the whole poem in fact turns. One is reminded by both these examples that there is a time and a place for "hairsplitting," and this is exactly why Prodicus' art was useful.⁶⁷ In fact, it proves so useful in this regard that some scholars have viewed it as a deliberate attack upon thinkers like Democritus who regard language as dangerously vague. Others see it as a reaction to the verbal chicanery of Gorgias or of Protagoras.⁶⁸ But whoever Prodicus meant to attack (if he meant to attack anyone at all), he certainly intended his art to clarify, not to confound. This alone places him in completely different company from sophists like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus who aimed precisely at causing confusion.

Moreover, the utility of Prodicus' art must have been readily apparent to many of his contemporaries, to judge from attendance at his lectures. According to Philostratus, Xenophon went so far as to post his own bail while a prisoner in Boeotia in order to attend Prodicus'

⁶⁶ *Euthydemus* 277e.

⁶⁷ The best description of the art's usefulness is Classen, "Study of Language," p. 231: "With Prodicus' new technique, . . . two names could be set against each other and differentiated by bestowing special attention on one particular accident. By thus contrasting pairs of near-equivalents it is possible to abstract from them the basic sense which they share and to ascertain those subtleties of meaning in which they differ."

⁶⁸ Arnaldo D. Momigliano, "Prodicus di Ceo e le Dottrine del Linguaggio da Democrito ai Cinici," *Atti della Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, Classe di Scienza Morali, Storiche e Filologiche*, 65 (1929-30): 95-107; for Gorgias, see Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans., Kathleen Freeman, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), pp. 213-14, 216 and 224, n.52, whose evidence is, however, weak; and for Protagoras, see Classen, "Study of Language," p. 223 n. 29, and pp. 237-8.

lectures; Isocrates and Euripides attended them as well; and one senses the influence of Prodicus' art on Thucydides and a host of other Attic orators.⁶⁹

Most interesting, however, are the many suggestions in Plato's dialogues—often ironic, to be sure, but simply too abundant to pass over—that *Socrates himself* was a student of Prodicus. In the *Cratylus* (384b) we find Socrates making self-deprecatory remarks to the effect that he cannot use words correctly because he could only afford the one-drachma lecture of Prodicus, as opposed to the fifty-drachma lecture that boasted “a complete education in the matter to anyone who heard it.”⁷⁰ Irony? Certainly; but perhaps not entirely. For in the *Charmides* (163d), Socrates says he has “heard Prodicus discourse upon the distinction among words a hundred times.” In the *Protagoras* (341a) he says he has become well acquainted with Prodicus' wisdom by being his pupil. And in the *Meno* (96d-e) he refers to Prodicus explicitly as his former master. Finally, in the *Axiochus* (366c) Socrates makes the same connection: “These things I have been saying are just chance echoes from the words of Prodicus, which I purchased from time to time for a half-drachma, or two drachmas, or even four.”⁷¹ If Socrates himself, as these allusions suggest, paid money to hear Prodicus' lectures, and did so on multiple occasions, one has to suspect there was something in them worth hearing.

The Range of Prodicus' Intellect

Although little is known about Prodicus' works, the testimony that survives gives some sense of the range of his intellectual interests. Galen's *On the Elements* lists Prodicus along with

⁶⁹ Philostratus *Lives of the Sophists* I.12; Isocrates, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Isocrates* I (DK 84 A7); Euripides, see Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* XV 20.4 (DK 84 A8); for his influence on Thucydides, see Marcellinus *Life of Thucydides* 36 (DK 84 A9); cf. Mayer, *Prodikos*, p. 61, and Guthrie, *Sophists* pp. 223-4.

⁷⁰ See J. M. Schram, “Prodicus' Fifty-drachma Show Lecture,” *Antioch Review* 25 (1965): 105-30.

⁷¹ *Axiochus* is generally regarded as pseudo-Platonic, but that does not make much difference for the present point.

Parmenides, Empedocles and others as having written about nature; and both Cicero and Suidas refer to him as a “natural philosopher.”⁷² In one work, *On the Nature of Man*, Prodicus is said to have distinguished between phlegm (“a portion of the humors that has been subject to heat”) and mucus (which is cold and damp and found in the greatest quantity in old people).⁷³ He appears to have also looked into the nature of the cosmos, for Aristophanes implies in the *Birds* (692) that Prodicus produced a cosmogony, and he is referred to in the *Clouds* (360) as a sophist concerned with the heavens (*meteôrosophistês*).⁷⁴

Certainly some of Prodicus’ work related to religious belief. Unfortunately, very little is known about it. According to some sources, Prodicus maintained that religious belief originated with the tendency of primitive peoples to worship things they found beneficial to human life, for example, sun, moon, rivers, bread and wine. Others ascribe to him an additional view: that in later times, when people invented useful things (shelters, foods, and agricultural techniques) they were called names like Demeter, Dionysius, and the like.⁷⁵ The problem is what to make of all this.⁷⁶ Certainly if one presupposes that any sophist must also be an atheist, one can find evidence here to include Prodicus as well: Sextus Empiricus lists him as an atheist; and though Cicero does not do so explicitly, he does express some concern about the effect on religion of

⁷² Galen *On the Elements* I.9 (DK 84 B3); Cicero *On the Orator* III.32.128 (DK 84 B3); Suidas under “Prodicus” (DK 84 A1).

⁷³ Galen *On the Physical Faculties* II.9 (DK 84 B4).

⁷⁴ Aristophanes’ testimony from the *Clouds* should, of course, be discounted by the fact that Socrates is listed there as well; and Socrates—if Plato’s *Apology* can be believed—was *not* a *meteôrosophistês*.

⁷⁵ See Guthrie, *Sophists* pp. 238-242, whose treatment of this topic is unsurpassed. The textual evidence for Prodicus’ religious theory (eight odd references from four different authors) is not as ancient as we would like. The testimony ranges anywhere from 400 to 800 years after Prodicus’ death.

⁷⁶ Controversy revolves around (1) whether Prodicus thinks early *inventors* were deified, or only useful objects; and (2) whether any of this makes him an atheist. On both of these questions, see Guthrie, *ibid.*; and cf. Untersteiner, *Sophists*, pp. 211 and 221, n.9.

Prodicus' observations.⁷⁷ However, as Guthrie points out, a theory like Prodicus' is not all that far removed from orthodox mythological teaching:

In his literature from Homer onwards, [a Greek] would find the name of the appropriate god used for the substance itself, as Hephaestus for fire ('They spitted the entrails and held them over Hephaestus,' *Iliad* 2.426), and the sun, moon and rivers *were* gods. My suitor was a river,' says Deianeira quite naturally (Sophocles *Trachiniae*. 9), and, being a god, he could take any form he wished—a bull, a serpent or a man, as well as water.⁷⁸

Thus nothing about Prodicus' theory requires an atheistic interpretation. Moreover, it strikes me as quite unlikely that the same Prodicus who wrote the "Choice of Hercules" (see below) would have intentionally undermined religion. A more likely possibility is that Prodicus meant for his observations not to undermine but to *bolster* the legitimacy of religious belief. This is what Themistius suggests in his *Orationes* when he points out that by grounding religious belief in something as concrete and indisputably necessary as agriculture, Prodicus "guarantees every act of piety."⁷⁹ It is quite possible that Prodicus was not an atheist at all, but we shall never know for sure from the sources at our disposal.

Prodicus as Teacher of *Aretê*

It remains to consider Prodicus' role as a teacher of *aretê*. In the *Hippias Major* (282c), the two principal methods used by all the sophists to teach virtue—the public lecture (*epideixis*)

⁷⁷ Sextus Empiricus *Against the Schoolmasters* 9.51; Cicero *On the Nature of the Gods* I.37.118.

⁷⁸ Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 240. Cf. Euripides *Bacchae* (cited in Guthrie), where Teiresias says "two things are primary in human life: first, the goddess Demeter—she is Earth, but call her by whichever name you like. She gives men all nourishment that is of a dry nature. To balance this came Semele's son, who *discovered* the flowing liquor of the grape. . . . He, being a god, is poured out to the gods" (Guthrie's italics).

⁷⁹ Themistius *Orationes* 30 (DK 84 B5).

and the method of association (*suneimi*)—are both ascribed to Prodicus as well.⁸⁰ Much more is known, however, about his *epideixeis* than about his approach to association. The *Protagoras* supplies an invaluable (if somewhat caricatured) glimpse of the major sophists associating with their students, but very little is revealed about Prodicus. He is still in bed when Socrates peers into his room (315d); Pausanias and Agathon are seated next to him, along with two brothers named Adeimantus and several others.⁸¹ “But *what* they were talking about,” Socrates complains, “I could not discover from outside, although I was keen to hear Prodicus, whom I regard as a man of inspired genius; you see, he has such a deep voice that there was a kind of booming noise in the room which drowned out the words.”⁸²

However, regarding Prodicus’ *epideixeis*, the evidence is much richer. First of all, as has already been indicated, Prodicus’ lectures on the meaning of terms were among his most popular *epideixeis*. Whether Prodicus would have regarded these as imparting *aretê* is difficult to determine, though certainly expertise in language was often regarded as such. What *was* unmistakably related to *aretê*, however, was Prodicus’ celebrated *epideixis* about Hercules (see Appendix A).⁸³ There, Hercules is depicted at the crossroads of life and in the throes of a choice between virtue (*aretê*) and vice (*kakia*). His choice stands before him as two attractive goddesses, each with unique promises to offer. Vice speaks first and promises a life of comfort, ease, abundant pleasures and the ability to exploit the hard work of others; her demeanor is

⁸⁰ For more detail on these methods, see chapter 10.

⁸¹ Pausanias and Agathon are the same pair who deliver speeches in praise of love in the *Symposium*. All we know of the two Adeimantuses (sons of Cepis and Leucolophides) is that one of them became an Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War.

⁸² *Protagoras* 316a.

⁸³ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21-34; the version presented there claims to be accurate in content but not necessarily in style. For an analysis of the speech, see chapter 9.

flirtatious, but her beauty is a bit cheap. Virtue, on the other hand, is genuinely attractive and promises a difficult but incomparably satisfying life.

For all good things and fair, the gods give nothing to a man without toil and effort. If you want the favor of the gods, you must worship the gods; if you desire the love of friends, you must do good to your friends; if you covet honor from a city, you must aid that city; if you fail to win the admiration of all Hellas for *aretê*, you must strive to do good to Hellas.

Virtue's way is "ordained by the gods," Prodicus writes, and she herself mingles in all the good deeds of gods and men.⁸⁴ Virtue, of course, involves hard work; but the rewards are great: the young will "rejoice to win praise from their elders," and the old "find joy in past deeds and present well-being."⁸⁵

So powerful is the speech Prodicus assigns to Virtue that for centuries one could find it "in every book professing to collect impressive illustrations of elementary morality."⁸⁶ It serves, moreover, to illustrate at least two important points. One is that Prodicus used religious ideas to exhort his listeners to a life of virtue, a fact that must be reckoned with by anyone who would emphasize Prodicus' irreligion. The second is that Prodicus and Socrates share a basically similar moral outlook. One could go into a comparison at length (see chapter 9), but suffice it here to say that while Prodicus' *Choice of Hercules* is obviously less philosophically refined than, say, the defense of virtue put in the mouth of Socrates in the *Republic*, both defend a life of virtue against the temptations of vice, both understand the moral life as divinely ordained, both

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, I.27 and 32.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁶ George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 8 (London: John Murray, 1850), p. 511.

place great emphasis upon the personal choice one must make in the matter of how to live, and both argue that virtue is ultimately *more* satisfying, *more* pleasant, and *more* rewarding than vice. Socrates could only have admired the speech.⁸⁷

HIPPIAS

Most of what is known about the sophist Hippias derives from the *Protagoras*, where he plays only a minor role, and from the two Platonic dialogues *Hippias Major* and *Hippias Minor*, where he appears as Socrates' chief interlocutor.⁸⁸ An extensive passage in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* also conveys some important details. But by-and-large we are reliant upon Plato, who (it cannot be denied) takes a rather hostile view of Hippias. There is good reason to trust Plato, however, at least for biographical sorts of details, since Plato's audience would have certainly remembered Hippias.⁸⁹ Even if Plato intended to lampoon him, therefore, his jibes would probably have had some grounding in truth.

⁸⁷ Indeed, it should be noted that the speech as presented in Xenophon is being *used* by Socrates to exhort one of his own companions to virtue. The possibility that a speech like Prodicus' may be significantly more effective as a vehicle for moral instruction than a philosophical work such as the *Republic* is considered at length in chapter 10.

⁸⁸ The authenticity of the *Hippias Major*, though never doubted in antiquity, has been consistently challenged since the nineteenth century. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am assuming that the work is genuine and that Plato composed it sometime between 395-390 B.C. (i.e., that it is an "early" Platonic dialogue). This view is supported by G. R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 156 ff., who uses computer techniques to show that the dialogue "represents typical scores such as are achieved by the well-established dialogues;" and by Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Hippias Major* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 93-103, who argues for its authenticity on purely literary and philosophical grounds and anticipates Ledger's date of ca.390 B.C. For the negative view, see Charles Kahn's review of Woodruff in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985): 267-73. As for the *Hippias Minor*, there is widespread scholarly agreement that it is among Plato's earliest writings.

⁸⁹ Hippias' dates cannot be precisely fixed, but all indications are that he was roughly contemporary with Socrates, perhaps as much as ten years younger. His life overlapped with Protagoras', but Protagoras describes himself as old enough to have been Hippias' father, a fact that Plato's Hippias echoes elsewhere (*Protagoras* 317c; *Hippias Major* 282e). During the Peloponnesian War, Hippias had to be old enough to have been an accomplished diplomat (*Hippias Major* 281a-b); and just prior to the war (the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*) he had to be old enough to be an established sophist with a sizable following (*Protagoras* 315c). All this suggests a birth date of approximately 460.

Hippias, then, was both a successful sophist and an accomplished statesman⁹⁰—a combination of talents shared by all the sophists examined so far. His native city of Elis was under Spartan control during the Peloponnesian War, and Hippias’ activities as a diplomatic representative evidently kept him away from Athens for at least the first ten years of the war.⁹¹ Asked by Socrates about his absence, Hippias replies that he has been busy as his city’s *number one* ambassador; he then adds that he is widely regarded as the *best* interpreter of the news from other cities.⁹² It will be noted that Plato’s Hippias is a rather unabashed bragger, and the frequency with which Plato stresses this suggests some grounding in truth.⁹³ When Socrates asks Hippias about his success as a sophist, Hippias tells him that he has “made more money than any other two sophists put together,” and has “never found any man who was [his] superior in anything.”⁹⁴

Hippias as Polymath

Hippias will perhaps be most familiar for his polymathy. The list of his specialties usually includes knowledge of the history of ancient tribes, cities and famous personages (topics upon which the Spartans enjoyed hearing him lecture); arithmetic, geometry and astronomy (the latter of which he is seen discussing in the *Protagoras*); the study of words, rhythms, harmonies,

⁹⁰ *Hippias Major* 281b-c.

⁹¹ Athens implemented a strict embargo, which lasted until the peace of Nicias in 421. Both Plato and Xenophon mention a long hiatus in Hippias’ visits to Athens.

⁹² *Hippias Major* 281a-b.

⁹³ E.g., *Hippias Major* 295a: Socrates: “But still, my friend, . . . I have a sort of hope that the nature of beauty will reveal itself.” Hippias: “Yes indeed, it is not hard to discover. I am sure that if I were to retire into solitude for a little while and reflect by myself, I could define it for you with superlative precision.” Socrates: “Hippias, Hippias, don’t boast. You know what trouble it has already given us.”

⁹⁴ *Hippias Major* 282e; *Hippias Minor* 364a.

poetry and prose; and, last but not least, the art of memorization, by which he was able to memorize at least fifty names upon a single hearing.⁹⁵ Such a list of talents, together with Hippias' hallmark conceit, must have simply begged for parody, and this is just what we find in Plato's *Hippias Minor*: "You certainly are the wisest of all men in the greatest number of skills," says Socrates facetiously to Hippias:

You report that you once visited Olympia, with all the clothing you wore on your body made by yourself. First, the ring you wore (you began with that) was your own work, for you knew how to engrave rings; and another seal was also your work, and there was a skin-scraper and an oil-flask that you had made yourself. Then you said that you had yourself made the sandals you had on, and that you had woven your own cloak and tunic. And what struck everyone as the most remarkable thing and proof of the greatest wisdom was your saying that the girdle you wore around your tunic was like the Persian girdles of the costliest kind, and that you had woven this yourself. Besides this, you said that you had brought with you poems, epics, tragedies and dithyrambs, and many prose writings variously composed; and that you had come with a knowledge surpassing others in the arts which I just mentioned in rhythms, harmonies and in the correctness of letters, and a great many other things besides, as I seem to recall. And yet it seems that I forgot your art of memorizing, which you regard as your most brilliant achievement.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Lists of Hippias' talents appear at *Hippias Major* 285b-e and *Hippias Minor* 368b-e.

⁹⁶ *Hippias Minor* 368b-e.

Hippias' talents may well have extended into areas such as these. For if Hippias defined his personal goal as self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) as is reported of him in the Suda,⁹⁷ then it is easy to imagine that he would have sought a high degree of competence in various manual arts. But it is also easy to see how this would have vexed someone like Plato. Paul Woodruff has rightly pointed out that "the rejection of versatility is one of the guiding principles of Plato's political philosophy."⁹⁸ This is evident not only in Book 2 of the *Republic*, where the citizens are only allowed to become masters of one skill,⁹⁹ but also in Book 10, where the poets' display of multifarious knowledge leads Socrates to regard them as "wizards." In fact, Plato's critique of the poets sometimes sounds remarkably similar to a critique of Hippias.¹⁰⁰

But here one must be cautious. For there actually were sophists who claimed to know "all things," and who based their claim upon a wizardly trick. (One may either be "knowing" or "not-knowing," says Euthydemus; and since these are opposite states, one cannot be in both of them at the same time. Therefore, if someone knows one thing, he must know everything!)¹⁰¹ But this sort of chicanery is categorically different from Hippias' claim to knowledge.¹⁰² For in

⁹⁷ Suda, under "Hippias" (DK 86 A1). The sources that Suidas had at his disposal are often chronologically late and sometimes corrupt; thus, items such as Hippias' "*autarchia*" which cannot be confirmed elsewhere should only be conditionally accepted as fact.

⁹⁸ *Hippias Major*, p. 135, n. 11.

⁹⁹ Plato *Republic* 570b-c.

¹⁰⁰ *Republic* 598c-d: "If anyone reports to us about someone, saying that he has encountered a human being who knows all the crafts and everything else that single men severally know, and there is nothing that he does not know more precisely than anyone else, it would have to be replied to such a one that he is an innocent human being and that, as it seems, he has encountered some wizard and imitator and been deceived. Because he himself is unable to put knowledge and lack of knowledge and imitation to the test, that man seemed all-wise to him."

¹⁰¹ Plato *Euthydemus* 294a.

¹⁰² Woodruff, *Plato*, p. 115, suggests that Plato would have regarded Hippias and Euthydemus as fakes of the same sort, but I am not at all convinced. For my understanding of Plato's categorizations of the various sophists, see chapters 5 and 6 below.

the fields of expertise most often attributed to him, Hippias obviously knew what he was talking about. One reads in Xenophon, for example, that Hippias *did* have an art of memorization, which he successfully imparted to others. One reads in Pausanias that an elegy by Hippias was inscribed on a set of bronze statues at Olympia. And Plutarch reports that Hippias compiled a *List of Olympic Victors* (as Aristotle would later do for the Pythian victors), which served as an invaluable chronological resource for later historians.¹⁰³

Moreover, Hippias' vast knowledge of facts in general, as cited by numerous authors well into the Middle Ages, is staggering. Diogenes Laertius consults him for information on the philosopher Thales; Plutarch consults him on Lycurgus; the neo-Platonist Proclus consults him for rather hard to find information about the geometer Mamercus (a follower of Thales); and the Scholia on Pindar's *Pythian 4* consults him for the correct name of Phrixus' stepmother (Pindar evidently had bad information).¹⁰⁴ Then comes Hippias' knowledge of words: the twelfth-century Byzantine scholar Eustathius cites him on how the continents Asia and Europe got their names; the Scholia to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* cites his account of the origin of the word "tyrant"; and the second-century grammarian Phrynichus of Arabius cites his definition of the word "deposit."¹⁰⁵ It is very probable that Hippias was the author of some sort of authoritative encyclopedia that survived well into the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Xenophon *Symposium* IV.62; Pausanias *Description of Greece* V.25.4; Plutarch *Numa* I.

¹⁰⁴ Diogenes Laertius I.24 (cf. Aristotle *De Anima* 405a19); Plutarch *Lycurgus* 23; Proclus *On Euclid* (DK 86 B12); Scholia on Pindar *Pythian 4* (DK 86 B14).

¹⁰⁵ Eustathius *Paraphrase of Dionysius Periegetes* 270 (DK 86 B8); *Hypothesis to Sophocles Oedipus Rex* V (DK 86 B9); Phrynichus *Extract* (DK 86 B10).

¹⁰⁶ Athenaeus (early third century A.D.), who needed biographical information on an obscure woman named Thargelia of Miletus, does us the favor—unlike all the other authors cited above—of naming the title of the work he is consulting: he calls it the *Collection* or *Synagogê* of Hippias (DK 86 B4). It is very likely (as *per* Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 283) that we also have Hippias' own introduction to this work, preserved in Clement of Alexandria (DK 86 B6): "Some of these things may have been said by Orpheus, some by Musaeus briefly in various places, some by

But such encyclopedic knowledge is not all that Hippias was known for. In a medieval text on astronomy, he shows up as an authority on the number of stars in the Hyades group (which he, incidentally, puts at seven), and in Proclus' *On Euclid*, he is listed as a co-discoverer of the curve called the *quadratrix*, which solved the problem of squaring the circle.¹⁰⁷ Thus while Hippias may well have been a boaster, he appears to have had something to boast about.

Hippias as a Teacher of *Aretê*

Hippias was also a teacher of *aretê*.¹⁰⁸ And one can derive from Plato's dialogues quite a bit about what Hippias took *aretê* to mean. Like Protagoras, he apparently claimed to be able to make his students "better" (*beltion, ameinô*).¹⁰⁹ But Hippias and Protagoras disagreed on what exactly betterment entailed. For where Protagoras turned his efforts toward cultivating sound judgment (*euboulia*) straightway, Hippias took time to teach his students advanced arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music.¹¹⁰ This does not mean, of course, that Hippias did not teach his students something like *euboulia* eventually, but he did not get to it immediately. Evidently his intellectual versatility was a quality he sought to cultivate in his own students.

Hesiod and Homer, some by other poets, others in prose works of Greek and non-Greek writers; but by putting together the most significant and kindred material from all these sources, I shall make this piece both new and varied."

¹⁰⁷ For more detail on the mathematical significance of the *quadratrix*, see Thomas Heath, *A History of Greek Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921); and Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, pp. 279-80. Proclus (DK 86 B21) does not write "of Elis" after the word Hippias here; and since it was a fairly common name in antiquity, scholars are divided on whether the discovery should be attributed to Hippias the sophist or not. I am inclined to put some weight on the fact that knowledge of geometry is listed immediately after astronomy in Plato's *Hippias Major* as a subject on which Hippias was a "great authority" (385c).

¹⁰⁸ *Hippias Major* 281d-282e.

¹⁰⁹ The terms are introduced by Socrates in the *Hippias Major* (283c4-6; cf. 281c), and Hippias assents to them. *Ameinô* also appears no fewer than twenty-one times in the brief compass of the *Hippias Minor*, suggesting that it was a commonly used term in Hippias' pedagogical vocabulary.

¹¹⁰ *Protagoras* 318e. His students would have already studied these subjects (no doubt at a lower level) in school. Hence Protagoras' jibe at 318e2 that Hippias treats his students badly by plunging them back into the very specialized studies from which they have just escaped.

Hippias also taught moral virtue, and this of a very conventional sort. In the *Hippias Major*, he tells Socrates about a beautiful *epideixis* he has composed on the education of Neoptolemus by the wise old Nestor after the fall of Troy. Neoptolemus asks Nestor what beautiful practices (*kala epitêdeumata*)¹¹¹ a young man should take up in order to be regarded most highly. And Nestor responds by propounding (*hupotithemenos*) to him “a great many very beautiful customs” (*pampolla nomima kai pagkala*).¹¹² The speech has not been preserved, but the conventionality of its moral content is virtually guaranteed by the fact that Hippias was allowed to deliver it in Sparta, where foreign education in virtue was strictly forbidden by law and where Hippias was usually limited to lecturing on genealogy.

This point about Hippias’ conventionality must be stressed, since it is a common belief that the sophists taught morally subversive views.¹¹³ In fact, no charge could be less appropriately saddled upon Hippias of Elis. In the *Hippias Minor*, to wit, Hippias’ fundamental position is downright moralistic: he disparages the character of Odysseus for his clever deceptiveness, while praising the character of Achilles for his simple honesty.¹¹⁴ However naïve Hippias’ position may be from a purely literary point of view (Socrates thinks Hippias has

¹¹¹ *To Kalon* is the main topic of the *Hippias Major*, and Woodruff provides a lucid discussion of its meaning (which includes not only the physically beautiful but the morally becoming as well); see especially pp. 110-11; see also chapter 11, n. 21, below.

¹¹² Unfortunately this speech, referred to as Hippias’ *Trojan Dialogue* (DK 86 B5), is not extant. All we know of it, derives from *Hippias Major* 286a-287c, where it serves as the set-up for the conversation that follows. It is significant, however, that Hippias teaches moral virtue by means of telling mythical stories. I treat this method at length in chapter 10 below.

¹¹³ See chapter 1.

¹¹⁴ Dishonesty and deception may well have been among Hippias’ pet peeves. A fragment from Plurarch’s *On Slander* (DK 86 B17) supplies the following information: “Hippias says slander is a terrible thing; he calls it this because the law provides no redress against slanderers, as it does against thieves. Yet slanderers are thieves of one’s best possession, namely friendship. Hence violence, wicked as it is, is more just than slander in that it is not concealed.”

Homer all wrong), it is certainly unimpeachable in terms of ethics. Socrates, of course, tries to get Hippias to commit to a genuinely subversive view: he points out that Achilles sometimes lies unintentionally (as when he declares he is leaving Troy), and that someone who lies unintentionally is much *less* capable, much *less* virtuous than someone who lies by design. But Hippias, though he cannot refute Socrates, accepts none of this. Hippias' only problem in this dialogue is that he cannot defend his position logically, and he takes a beating from Socrates in this regard. But from a moral point of view his defeat is far from ignominious.

A final aspect of Hippias' approach to *aretê* is his marked disdain for Socratic dialectic. This, in fact, distinguishes Hippias not only from Socrates, but from other sophists like Protagoras and Prodicus as well. Hippias is a speechmaker. He finds speeches beautiful and more likely to bring honor than the quick give and take of dialectic. In fact, at the end of the *Hippias Major*, when Hippias has had about all he can stomach of Socratic dialectic (which he describes contemptuously as "the scrapings and shavings of argument, cut up into little bits"),¹¹⁵ he lets Socrates know precisely what he considers truly laudable in speaking:

What is both beautiful and most precious is the ability to produce an eloquent and beautiful speech to a law court or a council meeting or any other official body whom you are addressing, to convince your audience, and to depart with the greatest of all prizes, your salvation and that of your friends and property. These then are the things to which a man should hold fast, abandoning these pettifogging arguments of yours, unless he wishes to be accounted a complete fool because he occupies himself, as we are now doing, with trumpery and nonsense.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Hippias Major* 304a.

¹¹⁶ *Hippias Major* 304a-b; on Hippias' colorful and poetic rhetorical mannerisms, see Woodruff, *Hippias*, pp. 125-7.

In terms of Greek ethics, Hippias' speech is perfectly orthodox. Indeed, going all the way back to Homer, the ability to make a beautiful and persuasive speech, and to save one's family, friends and property from harm, was regarded as a chief source of honor.¹¹⁷ Of course persuasion can be put to immoral uses; but there is no suggestion either in Plato or anywhere else that Hippias did this. Indeed, if anyone is directing his speech toward morally questionable ends in the *Hippias Minor*, it is Socrates.

Philosophical Positions

A number of philosophical positions have been attributed to Hippias, but they are based upon fairly scanty evidence. One is that his disdain for dialectic was grounded upon a serious epistemological-ontological theory.¹¹⁸ The evidence for this is a brief remark Hippias makes late in the *Hippias Major* to the effect that Socrates, by posing tiny questions, has failed to "consider the whole of things" (*ta hola tôn pragmatôn*), and therefore failed to realize that things like beauty have a continuous (*dianekê*) body of being.¹¹⁹ If there is a genuine theory here, which has been doubted,¹²⁰ we unfortunately know nothing more about it.

More suggestive is the evidence that Hippias propounded some sort of political theory relating to the difference between nature (*phusis*) and convention or law (*nomos*). He tells the group of international sophists gathered together in the *Protagoras*, for example, that he regards them all as "kinsmen, family and fellow citizens—by nature, not by *nomos*. For by nature, like

¹¹⁷ See most recently the excellent essay by Malcolm Schofield, "Euboulia in the Iliad," in his *Saving the City: Philosopher-Kings and Other Classical Paradigms* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-30.

¹¹⁸ See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 47; and Woodruff, *Hippias*, pp. 125 and 153-6. The boldest (and least persuasive) attempt to attribute a theory of knowledge to Hippias is Untersteiner, *Sophists*, pp. 277-80.

¹¹⁹ *Hippias Major* 301b.

¹²⁰ By H. D. Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics* (London: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), pp. 54-5, who sees here a mere argumentative ploy.

is kin to like, while *nomos*, tyrant of mankind, often constrains us contrary to nature.”¹²¹ Some scholars have packaged up these statements as a full-fledged theory about the natural concord of the entire human race.¹²² But this is extremely dubious. For even if one were to assume that these lines represent Hippias’ own thought,¹²³ a careful reading of the whole passage would reveal that Hippias is trying to *distinguish* between intellectuals like himself and the rest of mankind on the point of concord. His point is that *sophists* are like kin one to another; the rest of mankind is left out in the cold.¹²⁴

The “*nomos*: tyrant of mankind” line is, however provocative, and one is tempted to read it in conjunction with a passage in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, where Hippias argues that lawfulness (*to nomimon*) is something entirely distinct from justice (*to dikaion*).¹²⁵ “Laws,” Hippias explains, are but “covenants (*sunthemenoï*) made by citizens to enact what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided.”¹²⁶ They are sometimes altered or repealed, and thus cannot be regarded as always synonymous with justice. But the unwritten laws (*agraphoi nomoi*) made by the gods for mankind *are* always just.¹²⁷ For they command that we “fear the gods” and

¹²¹ *Protagoras* 337d-337e.

¹²² Untersteiner, *Sophists*, p. 283 ff.; Eric Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 223 ff., and H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 43.

¹²³ It is likely that they do, since they seem to be intended as a caricature.

¹²⁴ Leo Strauss, “The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 59.

¹²⁵ Xenophon *Memorabilia* IV.iv.1-25.

¹²⁶ *Memorabilia* IV.iv.13. I am somewhat uneasy with Guthrie’s description of this as a “social-contract theory of law” (*Sophists*, p. 284), which, it seems to me, would require a great deal more theory than we have from Hippias here.

¹²⁷ *Memorabilia* IV.iv.25.

“honor our parents,” among other things, and these commands are uniformly recognized in every country. This suggests that Hippias may have held a theory of natural law, which allowed him to sometimes call into question the justice of various written laws. Thus written laws would sometimes act as “a tyrant of mankind.” The problem, however, with taking all this for a Hippian political theory is that Socrates is very much in control of the conversation at this point in the dialogue. It is in fact Socrates, not Hippias, who introduces the idea of unwritten law (Hippias merely assents to it). Moreover, by the end of the whole vignette, Hippias appears to abandon his bid to distinguish lawfulness from justice altogether and to join Socrates in regarding them as equal.¹²⁸

Of course, if one *were* to assume that the ideas expressed in these passages were echoes of Hippias’ own political theory, that theory be significant for a number of reasons: first, because Hippias would be using the language of *nomos* and *phusis* not to endorse immorality (as interpreters of the sophists going all the way back to Aristophanes have claimed) but to propound a universal morality; second, because Hippias views the gods as the authors of this universal law. Thus one would be dealing here with a sophist who is neither agnostic nor atheistic and who, in fact, has strong affinities with the natural law tradition running through writers like Augustine, Aquinas and Locke. But all this would, it seems to me, go beyond what can legitimately be ascribed to Hippias.

What *can* be said about Hippias, however, is that he was an impressive polymath, somewhat proud of his own accomplishments (though this was not unusual among the Greeks) and a teacher of both moral and intellectual *aretê*. Plato, of course, ridicules him for his

¹²⁸ Those who want (or need) Hippias to have a political theory are, of course, much more forgiving in such matters of interpretation.

philosophical shortcomings and for his polymathy, but one need not go along with Plato in this. There is, after all, more to life than Platonic philosophy, and Hippias' accomplishments entail much that is enviable.¹²⁹

CONCLUSION

To return to some of the claims made at the outset of this chapter, it should be clear from the evidence that at least three of the sophists—Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias—saw themselves as teachers of *aretê* and understood that to entail a wide array of qualities, including especially *moral* qualities. It cannot be said of these sophists (though it may indeed be said of others) that they had no regard for their students' ethical development. If they taught their students to speak persuasively and powerfully, they also taught them the moral limits of such skills. It should also be clear from the evidence presented in this chapter that several of the interpretations of the sophists set out in chapter 1 of this dissertation apply only awkwardly at best to these figures. Aristophanes' view, for example, that the sophists were people who "made the weaker argument appear stronger" may apply to Protagoras; but it does not seem to apply to Prodicus, and it emphatically does not apply to Hippias (since he could not abide dialectic). Moreover, the view that the sophists were "subjectivists" or "relativists" may, again, have applied to Protagoras (though only with certain qualifications), but it falls flat when it comes to Prodicus and Hippias; for these sophists believed in concrete, traditional moral values such as honesty and hard work, as their *epideixeis* make perfectly clear. Finally, "the sophists" may be characterized as "agnostics" or "atheists," but only if Prodicus and Hippias are ignored. For

¹²⁹ "We must remind ourselves, out of respect for the rest of the world," writes Woodruff, *Plato*, p. 125, "that not caring for philosophy is no sign of stupidity. Socrates seems to count it against Hippias that he is no philosopher. But why should he? Hippias' talents, like those of the other sophists, are of another sort altogether."

examination of their views (especially Prodicus' *Hercules* speech and Hippias' belief in the divine origin of law) would lead one to believe rather that the sophists were deeply religious.

CHAPTER 3

GORGIAS AND HIS FOLLOWERS: THE TEACHERS OF RHETORIC

The sophists discussed in the last chapter were teachers of a “multi-faceted” *aretê*. Human excellence, for them, consisted in a wide array of skills, abilities and personal qualities, which they themselves possessed and could teach others to possess. One of these skills was rhetoric; but it was a rhetoric held firmly in check by other distinctly moral virtues such as justice, respect for others, and honesty. With Gorgias, however, and other sophists like him (Polus, Thrasymachus and Callicles) this was evidently not the case.¹ *These* sophists taught rhetoric in isolation from other virtues; in fact, rhetoric appears to have been the *only* virtue or skill of interest to them. Why was it of interest? The answer seems to vary. Gorgias evidently desired the fame that often attended exceptional displays of oratory and also the wealth that might come from teaching.² But as for the others: they desired power—and they did not desire it for noble ends. Indeed, Thrasymachus, Polus and Callicles all share the desire to use rhetorical power as a means for exploiting others and for attaining everything their hearts desired. They were immoralists; and they have had a tremendously negative impact upon the way historians, particularly historians of political thought, have regarded the sophists.³

¹ I do not include a detailed examination of Callicles in this chapter because (a) he is a fictitious character; or (to put it more cautiously) there is no evidence *except* in Plato that Callicles ever existed; and (b) he is not *sufficiently* different from Polus and Thrasymachus to warrant a full-scale analysis. See, however, W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 101-7. Other figures of the Gorgias type—Antiphon, Critias, Antisthenes, Alcidamas and Lycophron—are not included here simply because of space and because they are (most of them) later figures.

² On the fame and honor associated with rhetorical skill, see Mark Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 23-27.

³ See especially Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 114-117; and Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 71-81, and 31-45.

It will be argued later on that none of these figures is, in the technical sense of the word, a sophist; not because they are entirely fictitious (as is probably the case with Plato's Callicles) but because they do not meet the definitional requirements of sophistry observed by Plato in his dialogues. This, however, is not the place to set these requirements out (see chapter 5). Let us begin, therefore, by examining what each of these figures was like and in what sense (if at all) they might have regarded themselves as teachers of *aretê*.

GORGIAS

Gorgias is well known as the celebrated teacher of rhetoric who appears in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, but he is also a historical figure about whom we have a good bit of information. He was born in or around 483 B.C., and was thus nearly as old as Protagoras, more than ten years older than Prodicus, and more than twenty years older than Hippias. He came from Sicily, where unique political events had led to the blossoming for the first time of an art of rhetoric. The names usually associated with the invention of this art are Tisias and Corax;⁴ and the political changes that made the art necessary—the overthrow of the tyrant in 467 and the creation almost overnight of both democratic institutions and intense litigation—stamped it with a distinctly practical orientation.⁵ Gorgias' career followed closely upon these events; they shaped not only the teaching he received but also the teaching he would offer his own students. His was primarily a practical, rhetorical education, not a moral one. And this, more than

⁴ D. A. G. Hinks, "Tisias and Corax and the Invention of Rhetoric," *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1940):61-69. See however, Thomas Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), who argues that Corax never existed. And see also Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 49-54, who argues that rhetoric was not invented as a discipline until the time of Aristotle.

⁵ See Jacqueline De Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, Janet Lloyd, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 58-59; and George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 20-21.

anything else, accounts for Gorgias' distinctness from sophists like Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias. He, like Tisias and Corax, wrote an *Art of Rhetoric*;⁶ he viewed himself not as sophist but as a rhetorician.⁷

Gorgias' first appearance in Athens was significantly later than that of the other sophists of his generation. Plato does not mention him, for example, among those gathered at the house of Callicles in or around the year 433.⁸ His first trip to Athens was probably eight years later, when his native city of Leontini was in desperate need of his rhetorical skill. Leontini, a colony of Chalcidian Naxos, was in 427 under siege by its neighbor Syracuse and sent ambassadors to Athens "to ask the democracy to come to their aid as quickly as possible and to rescue their city from danger."⁹ Gorgias was at this time already advanced in years (according to Philostratus), and was made chief of the delegation.¹⁰ His appearance left a considerable impression. Diodorus Siculus says that Gorgias amazed the Athenians by the novelty of his style and persuaded them to make the alliance, winning admiration for himself and his rhetorical art.¹¹ Plato writes that "by general consent," Gorgias "spoke most eloquently before the Assembly"

⁶ Diogenes Laertius 8.58 and 59 (DK 82 A3).

⁷ Plato *Gorgias* 449a; for further discussion of this point, see appendix B, below; and E. L. Harrison, "Was Gorgias a Sophist?" *Phoenix* 18 (1964): 183-192.

⁸ *Protagoras* 314e-316a.

⁹ Diodorus Siculus, XII.53 (DK 82 A4).

¹⁰ *Lives of the Sophists* I.9. Thucydides (III.86) mentions the embassy but not Gorgias; Pausanias (VI.17) mentions the embassy and says that Tisias was part of it as well as Gorgias; Plato mentions it at *Hippias Major* 282b and says that Gorgias was picked because he was the ablest statesman of his city.

¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, XII.53; his source is Timaeus (i.e. a contemporary).

and, in addition, made a great deal of money by delivering *epideixeis* to the young and associating with them.¹² He was, by all accounts, an instant success.

As with other sophists, Gorgias is credited by his biographers with several linguistic or rhetorical developments, the first of which is the practice of extemporaneous oratory. “Coming into the theater of the Athenians,” writes Philostratus, Gorgias “had the boldness to say ‘suggest a subject,’ and was the first to proclaim himself willing to take this chance.”¹³ The point was apparently not so much to show that he knew something about everything (as it later would be with Hippias),¹⁴ but rather to demonstrate flexibility in responding to the situation. For Gorgias’ answers were often comical: when Chaerephon asked him with some contempt why beans tend to inflate the belly but not fan the fire,¹⁵ Gorgias is said to have responded that “the earth produces reeds for such ends” (i.e. as blowpipes for fires and rods to beat the bellies of the insolent).¹⁶ The art, apparently, was to answer all questions with great assuredness. See, for example, *Meno* (70a-b), where Socrates remarks that Gorgias taught the Thessalians the custom

¹² *Hippias Major* 282b. Certainly his “association” was aimed at teaching his rhetorical art, not moral virtue, as would have been the case with other sophists. This is confirmed by Plato’s *Gorgias*, where Socrates asks Gorgias specifically what one will get who associates with him (455c ff.), and Gorgias responds with a long speech about the nature of rhetoric.

¹³ *Lives of the Sophists* I.1; cf. Plato *Gorgias* 447c; and *Meno* 70a-b.

¹⁴ Philostratus (*ibid.*) attributes two motives to Gorgias: (1) to show that he knew everything and (2) to show that he would trust the moment to speak on any subject.” But the latter is probably the correct one; for there is no ancient evidence that Gorgias claimed to “know everything,” and some evidence to the contrary: his work *On the Nonexistent* (see below) suggests he was a severe skeptic.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* The occasion of the remark is not known. Chaerephon appears in Plato’s *Gorgias*, where he is said (447b) to be a friend of Gorgias; at Socrates’ prompting, he tries to question Gorgias about what he teaches, but is intercepted by Polus (Gorgias’ impetuous student). In the *Apology*, Chaerephon is described as possessing an impulsive and democratic character; it was he who inquired of the Delphic Oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. In Aristophanes’ *Clouds* he is portrayed as one of Socrates’ close companions.

¹⁶ Similar remarks are reported in Aristotle, but lose even more in translation than this one. Curious readers, see *Politics* 1257b26 (Gorgias on the nature of citizenship); and *Rhetoric* 1406b14 (Gorgias’ famous remark to a swallow that let go its droppings on him).

“of answering fearlessly and haughtily if someone asks something, as is right for those who know.”

Extemporaneous speaking was closely related, though not identical, to another of Gorgias’ inventions: the art of the timely (*kairos*), which amounted to being able to say the right thing, to the right people, at the right time (essentially, prudence in speech). It may be true that Gorgias’ efforts to present this art in the form of a treatise left something to be desired. For Dionysus of Halicarnassus, after crediting him with the art’s invention, dismisses Gorgias’ work as unworthy. But it can certainly be said that Gorgias himself practiced the art of the timely to good effect. The best example of this comes by way of contrasting his famous *Olympic Speech* with his *Funeral Oration*. Both speeches are opposed to wars among Greeks and in favor of war with Persia, but Gorgias presents his position differently each time. In the *Olympic Speech*, finding Greece involved in civil dissention, “he became a counselor of concord to her inhabitants, turning their attention against the barbarians and persuading them to regard as prizes to be won by their arms, not each others’ cities but the territory of the barbarians” (i.e. his message was direct and explicit).¹⁷ But in the *Funeral Oration*, addressing himself to empire-hungry Athenians, “he mentioned nothing about concord with the Greeks . . . but dwelt on praise of the victories over the Medes, showing them that victories over barbarians require hymns of celebration, victories over the Greeks laments.”¹⁸ The political message in both cases is the same; but Gorgias delivers it differently to different audiences: explicitly to those who are prepared to hear it, implicitly to those who are not. As this is a skill that Plato’s Socrates makes

¹⁷ Philostratus *Lives of the Sophists* I.9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The fragment of the *Funeral Oration* that survives (DK 82 B6) demonstrates (besides Gorgias’ intoxicating style, on which more below) Gorgias’ awareness of the gap that often separates what *should* be said from what *can* be said at a particular juncture: “Would that I can speak what I wish and would that I wish to speak what I should, avoiding divine displeasure and escaping human envy.”

frequent use of as well, one should not be too swift to think of it as sycophancy. It is rather the good sense to take account of the dispositions of one's audience before attempting to lead them.

Certainly the most remarkable of Gorgias' inventions was the very style of his speech—highly ornamental, full of rhythms and rhymes, and very dignified. Contemporaries report that it brought a sense of grandeur and importance to every issue Gorgias took up. Pausanias credits him with being “the first to rescue care for speech” from general neglect.¹⁹ Philostratus mentions his “grand style for great subjects . . . by which speech becomes sweeter than it has been and more impressive.”²⁰ Much of the style consisted in rhetorical devices, of which Suidas lists several: tropes, metaphors, figurative language, hypallage, catachresis, hyperbaton, doublings of words, repetitions, apostrophes and clauses of equal length. And the result was very much like hearing poetry, though in prose. It had an almost magical effect upon its hearers.

Over time these stylistic devices, like all forms of Baroque ornament, became tiresome and in bad taste. Thus there are many passages in later writers critiquing Gorgias on points of style.²¹ But there can be little doubt that in his own time the style was not criticized but rather deeply admired. And the best evidence for this is the testimony that survives about Gorgias' influence. When he spoke in Athens in 427, Philostratus reports, “he attracted the attention of the most admired men, Critias and Alcibiades who were young, Thucydides²² and Pericles who

¹⁹ Pausanias *Periegesis* VI.17.7.

²⁰ Philostratus *Lives* I.9.

²¹ Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1405b34) calls Gorgias' style frigid; Diodorus Siculus (XII.53.4) calls it excessively contrived; Cicero (*Orator* 52 =DK 82 32) calls it immoderate; and Timaeus (see DK 82 A4) calls it labored, bombastic and puerile. See also Romilly, *Great Sophists*, p. 63, who writes, “so much artifice makes the reader's head spin and somewhat tends to obscure the meaning.”

²² On Gorgias' influence on Thucydides, see further I. M. Plant, “The Influence of Forensic Oratory on Thucydides' Principles of Method” *Classical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 62-73; and A. W. Gomme, *Essays on Greek History and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 116-24.

were already old, and Agathon the tragic poet, whom Comedy regards as wise and eloquent.”²³ Suidas goes further in calling him the *teacher* of Pericles as well as of Polus and Isocrates.²⁴ But whether he was a teacher of Pericles in any formal capacity is doubtful. Philostratus, in a letter to Julia his daughter, puts the matter thus:

The admirers of Gorgias were noble and numerous: first, the Greeks in Thessaly, among whom ‘to be an orator’ acquired the synonym ‘to Gorganize,’ and secondly, all Greece, in whose presence at the Olympic Games he denounced the barbarians, speaking from the racecourse belonging to the temple. Aspasia of Miletus is said to have sharpened the tongue of Pericles in imitation of Gorgias, and Critias and Thucydides are known to have acquired from him glory and pride, converting it into their own work, the one by careful choice of word and the other by vigor.²⁵

The reference in this passage to Thessaly requires explanation: Near the end of his life, Gorgias was invited to Thessaly to found a school, and was in fact chosen for this position over the Athenian Polycrates, whose school in Athens was already quite famous at the time.²⁶ This suggests as well that esteem for Gorgias’ rhetorical style did not wane substantially in his lifetime.

Although some modern commentators have viewed Gorgias’ rhetoric as *nothing but* style (i.e., completely void of substance),²⁷ this is probably a mistake. Indications are that it was

²³ Philostratus *Lives* I.9.

²⁴ Suda under “Gorgias” (DK 82 A2). On Isocrates as student of Gorgias, see also Aristotle, fr. 139; and Cicero, *Cato* 5.12, who dates the instruction to Isocrates’ time in Thessaly.

²⁵ Philostratus *Epistle* 73 (DK 82 A32).

²⁶ Pausanias VI.17.9.

²⁷ J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 12: “Starting from the initial advantage of having nothing in particular to say, he was able to concentrate all his energies upon saying it.” E. R.

rather pregnant with ethical, political, epistemological and ontological significance. Gorgias' political stance in favor of Greek concord, put forth explicitly in his *Olympic Speech* and implicitly in his *Funeral Oration*, has already been noted.²⁸ It remains to consider his ethical outlook and his statements on epistemology and ontology.

Gorgias is, of course, criticized by Plato for teaching a rhetoric without ethics—for teaching people the art of winning cases without teaching a concern for truth or justice. Plato's Gorgias is not himself an immoral figure, and yet the reader is given the distinct impression that his silence on moral matters has set in motion a train of degeneration which, passing through his student Polus, comes finally to rest in the fully immoral outlook of Callicles.²⁹ Plato's account of Gorgias' pedagogy rather reminds one of the carelessness with which rhetoric is taught to Pheidippides in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and there is legitimate reason for imputing this sort of carelessness to Gorgias.

First of all, in his famous epideictic piece, the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias is seen doing just the sort of thing that Aristophanes and Plato thought dangerous, viz., showing how to write a persuasive defense even of a vicious character (making the weaker argument appear stronger, as Aristophanes would say). It is a whirlwind demonstration of how "reasoned speech" can be used to free a guilty person of blame.³⁰ (That Helen was considered by all of Greece to be guilty

Dodds, Plato: *Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 8: "a man who polished painfully every sentence that he wrote, caring passionately about its form, but very much less about its relation to the truth. (See also Plato *Phaedrus* 267a, which is the source for these views.)

²⁸ This was a major intellectual influence on Isocrates. See Yun Lee Too, *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power and Pedagogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially Appendix 1, "Isocrates and Gorgias."

²⁹ See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, pp. 24-45.

³⁰ Gorgias wrote show pieces like this, according to Cicero (*Brutus* XII =DK 82 A25), "because he believed the most characteristic task of the orator was to be able to amplify a subject by praise and, on the other hand, to deflate it by vituperation." In Plato's *Gorgias*, Polus is shown to be a student of this art. Cf. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1418a32.

merely adds to the challenge.) And several passages of the *Helen* show that Gorgias was familiar with, and willing to employ, arguments of the sort most often associated with “sophistry.” He plays, for example, upon the disjunction between nature and convention: perhaps Helen ran off with Paris because she fell in love with him, but she would still not be to blame, for it is “natural” for the sight to long for certain things; and neither obedience to “law” nor considerations about what is most advantageous for us in the long run are powerful enough to challenge “nature.”³¹ The idea that the weak are powerless in the face of the strong (whether the gods, or fate, or natural impulses) is then used to do away with the freedom of the will, and with it moral responsibility. Thus Gorgias’ arguments, if taken seriously, have quite profound implications from an ethical and political point of view. We might even go so far as to say they stand conventional morality on its head.

Moreover, the epistemological and ontological views set out in his *tour de force* piece *On the Nonexistent* or *On Nature*, are also radical. It is debatable whether the piece should be taken seriously as reflecting Gorgias’ own philosophical beliefs,³² but in any event the basic positions are these: (a) that nothing exists, (b) that even if something does exist, it is inapprehensible to man; and (c) that even if it is apprehensible, it is still without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man. As one reads the arguments adduced to support these theses, one sees immediately the debt of later sophistry to Gorgias: the arguments of Euthydemus are all there, only they are in the form of a speech rather than question and answer. The

³¹ Gorgias uses this argument where it is convenient to his purposes; it is impossible to tell whether he believed it himself. As a point of method, evidence from the *Helen* can no more be taken as proof of Gorgias’ own views than any defense speech can be taken to represent the views of the attorney who delivers it. This is too often ignored by commentators in hot pursuit of Gorgias’ “doctrines”.

³² I tend to agree with Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 192 ff., who views it as a comic attack on Parmenideanism. This is also the view of James I. Porter “The Seductions of Gorgias” *Classical Antiquity* 12 (1993): 267-299.

dangerousness of the arguments is suggested by the fact that Plato devoted an entire dialogue to refuting them (though he associates them more with Euthydemus than with Gorgias); and Aristotle wrote a monograph *In Reply to the Opinions of Gorgias*, of which we have only the title.

In fact, Gorgias may not have *intended* to teach subversive moral and philosophical doctrines. After all, Plato is quite gentle with him in the *Gorgias*. And this dialogue rather suggests that Gorgias recognized common-sense ontological facts and dichotomies; he recognizes, for example, that truth and falsehood should be distinguished, as well as knowledge and opinion (454c-e); and he seems personally committed to basic moral right.³³ But Gorgias uses speech in such a way as to render his real moral outlook impossible to discern. He refers to speech in the *Helen*, for example, as a wizardly vice that led Helen astray; but, of course, it is precisely *his* wizardly vice. And just when he seems to be praising truth, justice, and various other commendable qualities, one remembers that the *success* of his speeches depend precisely upon such notions. It is, indeed, impossible to defend someone without establishing that there *are* such things as right and wrong, and truth and falsehood. Who, otherwise, would listen? This does not necessarily mean that Gorgias himself was committed to truth and right. One should not read too much into the opening lines of the *Helen*: “What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth.”³⁴ Nor should one necessarily believe what Gorgias says in his *Defense of Palamedes*: “It is not right to trust those with an opinion instead of those who know, nor to think opinion more trustworthy than truth, but

³³ 456c-e: The power of rhetoric is great, Gorgias admits, but this does not give one license to use it unjustly. For an alternate view of Gorgias that stresses his deceitfulness, see Christopher Rocco, “Liberating Discourse: The Politics of Truth in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Interpretation* 23 (1996).

³⁴ DK 82 B11.

rather truth more trustworthy than opinion.”³⁵ For were Gorgias explicitly to reject such intuitive epistemological beliefs as these, he would undermine the very arguments he hopes to advance.

On the other hand, if one wants to believe that Gorgias was essentially a good man, one may always refer to what he wrote in his speech on *Palamedes*, namely, that the best defense is always an ethically irreproachable life. Those accused of impropriety must be able to say that “in every respect from beginning to end, my life has been blameless,” that “no one can truthfully speak any imputation of evil about me,” and indeed, that “I am not only blameless but also a great benefactor of the Greeks.”³⁶ Could Gorgias have made such a defense for himself? There is no real evidence to suggest otherwise. He lived to be at least one hundred and five!³⁷ And all reports are that he was highly respected by the Greeks until the day he died. But the same cannot be said of Gorgias’ followers.

POLUS

Readers of the *Gorgias* will be familiar with Polus as the impetuous student of rhetoric who is discomfited by Socrates at mid-dialogue. He was in fact a real figure—a wealthy Sicilian who eventually became a teacher of rhetoric himself. Most of what is known about him is derived from the *Gorgias*, where he is said to have composed an *Art of Rhetoric* (462b); and from the *Phaedrus*, where he is ridiculed for his euphuism³⁸ and overzealous coining of rhetorical terms (267b). That he copied Gorgias’ confidence in speaking is evident not only from

³⁵ DK 82 B11a

³⁶ DK 82 B11a. It should go without saying that this is not always a successful defense strategy. Socrates followed it to a tee, and we know what happened to him.

³⁷ Philostratus (*Lives* I.9) says one hundred and eight; others put his death earlier (cf. DK 82 A7-15). According to Athenaeus (IX, 505d = DK 82 A15a), Gorgias lived long enough to read Plato’s *Gorgias*, and remarked: “How well Plato knows how to satirize!”

³⁸ Euphuism refers to the use of such devices as alliteration, antitheses and similes.

the haughty response he gives to Chaerephon at the beginning of the *Gorgias*—Chaerephon: “Do you think you can give finer answers than Gorgias?” Polus: “What of it, if they are sufficient for you?”—but also from his bold claim to “know what Gorgias knows” (462a). When Polus is asked for a definition of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (448c), he answers in true Gorgian fashion, that is, evasively, and with a highly ornamental piece of praise:

Many arts have been discovered among men experimentally through experiences. For experience causes our life to proceed by art, whereas inexperience causes it to proceed by chance. Of each of these arts, various men variously partake of various ones, and the best men partake of the best; among these is Gorgias here and he has a share in the finest of arts.

It will be noted that Polus does not say what rhetoric is but simply praises it to the hilt; both this and the style of his speech in general reflect Gorgias’ influence.

What distinguishes Polus from Gorgias, however, is not his praise of rhetoric but his praise of power. For it is precisely power that attracts him to rhetoric. Those who master rhetoric seem to Polus to possess the *greatest* power (*megiston dunanesthai*) in the city. They are “just like tyrants” who can “kill whomever they wish, confiscate possessions, and kick whomever they want out of town.”³⁹ Polus longs for such power and, in fact, regards it as the summit of happiness (*eudaimonia*) to be able to commit unjust deeds with impunity. As will become clear momentarily, Polus has much in common with Thrasymachus. But they differ in this respect: Polus freely admits that the tyrant is unjust (*adikoi*, 471a), while Thrasymachus does not. And this, in fact, leads to Polus’ discomfiture. For he has just enough conventional morality left to confess that unjust deeds, however pleasant and alluring they may be, are

³⁹ Plato *Gorgias* 466c (translation mine).

nevertheless dishonorable and blameworthy. Thrasymachus avoids this embarrassment (much as Callicles does in the *Gorgias*) by implementing a complete reversal of conventional moral terms.

Polus is no doubt an immoralist at heart (at least the way Plato presents him), and probably deserves the rough treatment he so often receives.⁴⁰ But it is worth noting that besides being refuted in the *Gorgias*, he also seems to be persuaded. This is, no doubt, a tribute to Socrates, but it may say something about Polus as well. It is impossible to know whether or not Polus the historical figure really held the immoralist views he is made to express in Plato's dialogue, but if he did, Plato at least hints at the possibility of reform.

THRASYMACHUS

Thrasymachus is well known for his appearance in Plato's *Republic*; and it is unfortunate that he has come to represent, for many, the quintessential sophist,⁴¹ since it must be doubted whether he was a sophist at all (see below). He was born in Chalcedon and probably died there as well. We possess a record of his epitaph, which reads: "Name: theta, rho, alpha, sigma, upsilon, mu, alpha, chi, omicron, sigma. Birthplace: Chalcedon. Profession: wisdom."⁴² Though we cannot fix his dates precisely, he was probably born in or around the year 459 and

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, pp. 26-28.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Voegelin, *ibid.*, p. 71 (cf., however, Voegelin's extensive treatment of the sophists in *The World of the Polis* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957], pp. 267-331, where omission of Thrasymachus would suggest that Voegelin knew better.) Several writers invite the association of Thrasymachus with the sophists, even though they do not explicitly call him one: see, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 114-117 (cf. pp. 6, 107 n. 38); and James H. Nichols, Jr., *Plato: Gorgias* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 13. For a recent, and explicit, treatment of Thrasymachus as a "sophist," see Mark Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 79 and 135-6.

⁴² Reported in Athenaeus *Banquet of the Sophists* X, 454F (DK 85 A8), quoting Neoptolemus of Paros, *Epitaphs from Chalcedon*.

was in his prime during the war years.⁴³ This would make him about a generation younger than Gorgias and roughly contemporary with Hippias of Elis.

Thrasymachus was certainly a teacher of rhetoric, as is immediately clear from the titles ascribed to him in the Suda—*Deliberative Speeches*, *Textbook on Rhetoric*, *Trivia*, and *Subjects for Speeches*—as well as from the titles ascribed to him in a host of other sources—*Long Textbook*, *Introductions*, *Plaints*, *Knock-Down Arguments*, and *Exemplary Speeches*.⁴⁴ And he evidently took pay for his teaching as well.⁴⁵ But the word “sophist” is conspicuously absent from Plato’s treatment of him. In the *Republic*, Socrates addresses Thrasymachus as clever (*deinos*), wise (*sophos*), and even most wise (*sophôtate*), but never as *sophistês*.⁴⁶ And as a matter of fact, no ancient sources refer to Thrasymachus as a sophist.⁴⁷ He is mentioned four times by Aristotle, but always in the context of having advanced the art of rhetoric.⁴⁸ He is

⁴³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 6 says that Thrasymachus and Lysias were in their prime at the same time, but he gives slight chronological priority to Lysias, whom he believes to have been born in 459. Aristotle (*On Sophistical Refutations* 183b29) makes Thrasymachus younger than Theodorus, but this is not much help since we do not know Theodorus’ dates. In any event, Thrasymachus had to be famous enough by 427 that the mere mention of his name in Aristophanes’ *Banqueters* (produced that year) could guarantee a laugh (see DK 85 A4). If he were born around 459, he would have been about 32 in 427, which seems reasonable.

⁴⁴ Suda under “Thrasymachus” (DK 85 A1); cf. DK 85A2-B8. It is not known whether the titles on the second list are separate works entirely from the ones listed in the Suda, or if they are alternative titles for the same works, or perhaps even parts of the same works.

⁴⁵ As suggested by his epitaph and by Plato *Republic* 337d (cf. 338b).

⁴⁶ Plato *Republic* 337a1, 337a8, 339e5. It is an odd omission when one compares the way Plato slaps that word on interlocutors who *are* sophists. For the important differences in the connotations of the word *sophos* and *sophistês*, see Guthrie, *The Sophists*, pp. 27-34.

⁴⁷ Philostratus, *Lives* I.14 rejects him expressly on the grounds that he is nothing but a lawyer. Aristotle mentions him several times, but never as a sophist; hence C. Joachim Classen, “Aristotle’s Picture of the Sophists,” in G.B. Kerferd, ed., *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), p.21, observes rightly that in Aristotle, there is absolutely no “indication of a connection between him [Thrasymachus] and the sophists.”

⁴⁸ Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1409a2, 1404a13, 1413a7; and *On Sophistical Refutations* 183b29 (where the immediate context is clearly rhetoric and not sophistry).

mentioned in Aristophanes as an orator.⁴⁹ And he is cited by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, and Plutarch alike for his unique rhetorical style.⁵⁰ In fact, the only sources in which the word *sophistês* appears in connection with Thrasymachus are the *Suda* and the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus, both of which are too late to be given much weight.⁵¹ More light will be shed on the matter of what constitutes a full-fledged sophist below (chapter 5), but suffice it here to note that Thrasymachus' credentials are in question.

His Position in Plato's Republic

Though Thrasymachus was best known to the ancients for his treatises on rhetoric, the ethical stance he is made to defend in Plato's *Republic* is also of great interest, and should not be passed over without comment. Indeed, as G. B Kerferd famously demonstrated in his 1947 article, "The Doctrine of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*," there is remarkably little agreement as to what exactly Thrasymachus' position is.⁵² It has, after all, been variously referred to as legal positivism, nihilism, vulgar conventionalism, immoralism, and a host of other unsavory "isms," without much effort to explain why so many appellations might apply to it. No doubt, part of the problem is that the position is made up of multiple parts. Plato's Thrasymachus believes (a) that justice is the advantage of the stronger, (b) that *pleonexia* (understood here as an obsession for having more than others) is conducive to happiness (c) that injustice is the best way to get more (*pleonektein*), (d) that tyranny is the most desirable kind of life, and (e) that everyday

⁴⁹ Aristophanes *Banqueters* (DK 85 A4).

⁵⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 6, *Isaeus* 20, *Demosthenes* 3; Cicero *Orator* 13, 40; Plutarch *Table-Talk* I.2-3.

⁵¹ The *Suda*, a Greek lexicon-encyclopedia, was compiled by the Egyptian-born scholar Suidas c. 10th century A.D. from mostly late and corrupt sources. Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* was composed c. 200 A.D. Both sources simply refer to Thrasymachus as a "sophist" and say nothing about what this word means. They may well be using the word *sophist* in a very general sense.

⁵² *Durham University Journal* 40 (1947): 19-27.

ethical values and terms should be entirely reversed. But beyond all this, Thrasymachus' position still requires careful attention; for its various parts illuminate and/or conflict with each other in interesting ways. Let us examine his position more closely.

When Thrasymachus asserts that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger (*kraitton*, 338c), he means stronger not in terms of physical strength or of human excellence, but in terms of political power.⁵³ This does not become clear until he elaborates his maxim further (338e-339a):

Some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, and some aristocratically. In each city, its ruling group is master. And each ruling group sets down laws for its own advantage; a democracy sets down democratic laws, etc. And they declare that what they have set down (their own advantage) is "just" for the ruled, and the man who departs from it they punish as a breaker of law and a doer of "unjust" deeds. This is what I mean: in every city the same thing is "just," the advantage of the established ruling body. It surely is master; so the man who reasons rightly concludes that everywhere justice is the same thing, the advantage of the stronger.

Thrasymachus' point is a political-theoretical one as opposed to a moral one (at least at this juncture): justice is what political rulers set down to their own advantage.

The problem is that the notion of justice here has two potentially conflicting elements. The first is that justice is whatever those with authority say it is (i.e. legal positivism).⁵⁴ The second is the idea of "advantageousness"; for Thrasymachus requires that justice not only be

⁵³ The word could carry all three senses, and in fact the ambiguity of the *kraitton* supplies the device by which the conversation slips in *Republic* book 1 from basically political to basically moral questions.

⁵⁴ This in turn can be described from either of two perspectives: (a) from the ruler's perspective, by which justice is understood as "whatever I bid"; or (b) from the citizens' perspective according to which it means "obedience to the laws."

ordained by a ruler, but also *advantageous* for him. What exactly this advantageousness means for Thrasymachus will be considered momentarily, but suffice it to note here that because Thrasymachus' definition contains two components, it may well come into conflict with itself. Indeed, one might ask Thrasymachus, as Socrates in fact does: if something were set down as law, but turned out to be disadvantageous for the ruler, would it be just or not? This is an important question to put to Thrasymachus, as it will reveal whether he is more committed to his legal positivism or to his belief that rulers are out for their own advantage.

As it turns out, it is very difficult to know what Thrasymachus thinks. For when this question is put to him, he at first admits that rulers make mistakes with respect to their own interest; thus he seems prepared to abandon the "advantage" component altogether. But he is uncomfortable with the conclusion this entails—that it would be "just" to do not only what is advantageous for the stronger but also (when mistakes are made by the ruler with respect to his own interest) what is disadvantageous (339d). Thrasymachus will ultimately seek a way to make the two components of his definition work together.⁵⁵

One way he might do this would be to deny that rulers *can* make mistakes by embracing a position of ethical relativism, one that basically throws truth out the window and acknowledges only appearances. This is the course that Cleitophon recommends for Thrasymachus.⁵⁶ If he did this, Thrasymachus could argue that it is impossible to say what is *truly* to the advantage of the stronger, because there is no truth to be found in such matters; whatever *seems* advantageous to the stronger *is* advantageous to him. It would follow from this that the stronger could *never*

⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that these two components frequently appear together in ancient sources; see, e.g. Plato *Laws* IV, 714c ff.; and Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.2, 41-46.

⁵⁶ *Republic* 340a ff. See also Clifford Orwin's illuminating remarks on Cleitophon's suggestion in "On the Cleitophon," in Thomas L. Pangle, ed., *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Dialogues* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 117-131.

make a mistake; for there could be no mistakes. This is without doubt, the position someone like Protagoras would have taken;⁵⁷ but it is interesting, and indicative of the intellectual chasm that separates a Thrasymachus from a sophist like Protagoras that Thrasymachus expressly and adamantly rejects this option (340c).

Thrasymachus escapes the tension between the two elements of his definition in another way—by resorting to a new level of precision in speaking (*ton akribê logon*). His answer runs something like this: When we attribute a name to someone exercising a technical skill, be it a doctor or a pilot or a ruler, we only intend the name to apply to the correct practice of the skill, not to the practice at the moment a mistake is being made. Hence a ruler *qua* ruler never makes mistakes as to his interest, and, not making mistakes, he sets down what is best for him. In the same way, we might say that no craftsman *qua* craftsman ever makes mistakes in his *craft*, but only insofar as he fails to be a craftsman. This allows Thrasymachus to return to his definition and preserve both of its elements. It might be amended now to read: “justice is obedience to those laws that are laid down by the ruler (when he is ruling *competently*) to his own advantage.”⁵⁸

Thus far, Thrasymachus’ position is not necessarily immoral. For one might happily imagine that what is advantageous for the ruler is also advantageous for those he rules; that in looking after his own interest, a ruler necessarily looks after the interest of all. But this is not what Thrasymachus has in mind. And, in fact, it soon becomes apparent that Thrasymachus’ view of justice has a rather distasteful competitiveness built into it. Justice, Thrasymachus

⁵⁷ See Plato *Theaetetus* 167c, 177c ff., 172a-b; *Laws* 889e6-890a2.

⁵⁸ It should be noted that this evocation of an “ideal ruler” prepares the way for Socrates’ subsequent refutation of Thrasymachus’ position. This has led some scholars to see Thrasymachus’ answer as Plato’s brainchild rather than that of the historical Thrasymachus. See E. L. Harrison, “Plato’s Manipulation of Thrasymachus,” *Phoenix* 21 (1967): 27-39; Joseph Patrick Maguire, “Thrasymachus—or Plato?” *Phronesis* 16 (1971): 142-163.

believes, is what is advantageous for the ruler, and it is clear that this will *not* be advantageous for everyone, and especially not for the ruled. This comes out most clearly when Thrasymachus compares the art of ruling to that of shepherding sheep. Shepherding may seem to be the art of caring for sheep, but think again. Night and day the shepherd considers nothing but how he will benefit himself by slaughtering one of his happy sheep. And the art of ruling by “justice” is like this too: “justice and the just are really someone else’s good,⁵⁹ the advantage of the man who is stronger and rules, and a *personal harm* to the man who obeys and serves. Those who are ruled do what is advantageous for him who is stronger, and they make him whom they serve happy (*eudaimona*) but themselves not at all.” (343c). This is a deeply competitive understanding of the relationship of the individual to those around him. Life is a zero-sum game: whatever I gain for myself will always be at the expense of others. And Thrasymachus’ position is essentially, “let the games begin!”

It is clear that what Thrasymachus ultimately desires is happiness (343c8). Thus his ethical outlook must be described as eudaimonistic. (This much he has in common with Socrates.) But the things that Plato’s Thrasymachus regards as constitutive of a happy life are all scarce resources (i.e. external goods),⁶⁰ and this is why he views everything in competitive terms. If one person makes money, another loses it. If one person wins a generalship, others do not. And it is easy to slip from the realization that one desires scarce goods to another view, which

⁵⁹ Kerferd argues that the only way to make Thrasymachus’ position in Book 1 logically consistent is to take this doctrine, that “justice is another’s good,” as primary. See however the reply of C. F. Hourani, “Thrasymachus’ Definition of Justice in Plato’s *Republic*, *Phronesis* 7 (1962): 110-120; and Kerferd’s reply to Hourani, G. B. Kerferd, “Thrasymachus and Justice: A Reply, *Phronesis* 9 (1964): 12-16. Kerferd clearly has the upper hand, as far as the argument goes. But the approach that both Kerferd and Hourani take of trying to make Thrasymachus’ various positions in Book 1 absolutely consistent with each another is, I think, wrongheaded and insensitive to the function of this passage in the *Republic*.

⁶⁰ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 188 ff.

Thrasymachus also holds: the view that happiness is *all about* getting more, as opposed to less. This is what the Greeks called *pleonexia*. And Thrasymachus' basic point here is that injustice is a much better means of "getting more" than justice.

The just man everywhere has less than the unjust man. First in contracts, when the just man is a partner of the unjust man, you will always find that at the dissolution of the partnership the just man does not have more than the unjust man but less. Second, in matters pertaining to the city, when there are taxes, the just man pays more on the basis of equal property, the unjust man less; and when there are distributions, the one makes no profit, the other much. And further, when each holds some ruling office, even if the just man suffers no other penalty, it is his lot to see his domestic affairs deteriorate from neglect, while he gets no advantage from the public store, thanks to his being just; in addition to this he incurs the ill will of his relatives and his acquaintances when he is unwilling to serve them against what is just. The unjust man's situation is the opposite in all these respects—I am speaking of the man who has the ability to get more (*pleonektein*) in a big way. (343d-344a)

Now if happiness comes from the acquisition of scarce, highly competitive goods, and injustice is the best means of acquiring such goods, who would be a better candidate for the model man than the tyrant? As Thrasymachus says, "the most perfect injustice, which makes the one who does injustice most happy, and those who suffer it . . . most wretched . . . is tyranny, which by stealth and force takes away what belongs to others, both what is sacred and profane, private and public, not bit by bit, but all at once" (344a).

Well, if we suppose as Thrasymachus does that the life of injustice is stronger (*kreitton*) and more conducive to happiness than the life of justice, then, (so long as we view virtue as

teleologically related to happiness) we are led to rethink the entire vocabulary of moral terms. Traditionally speaking, what is just is also what is good and virtuous; but why should one continue to think and speak in this way when it is plain that justice leads one further away from happiness? Indeed, why not call injustice “good” and “virtuous?” This is, in fact, precisely what Thrasymachus does (348c-e). Injustice, he argues, deserves the title “good counsel” (*euboulia*); and conversely justice should be thought of as “high-minded innocence” (*gennaia euêtheia*). In short, Thrasymachus wants to “put injustice in the camp of virtue and wisdom, and justice among their opposites” (348e). And he indicates that he would set down for injustice all the qualities that used to be set down for justice (349a). Here, Thrasymachus stands in contrast to someone like Polus. For Polus would agree that injustice is profitable, but he would also hold that it is shameful, thus catching himself in a tension between what is good (useful) and what is good (morally speaking). But Thrasymachus avoids this problem by insisting that moral language reflect up-to-date thinking about what is most useful in life. Whatever turns out to be the most useful must also be called virtuous and good. It is noteworthy that Socrates agrees with Thrasymachus in this; Socrates’ defense of the traditional moral outlook hinges precisely upon the usefulness of virtue; but Socrates takes a rather longer view of the “useful” than Thrasymachus.

Whether the doctrines presented by Plato and considered here were the doctrines of the real Thrasymachus, is very hard to say based on the few non-Platonic fragments that survive.⁶¹ There is no confirmation in the fragments that the historical Thrasymachus was an immoralist. But I do not take this as evidence that he was not; for I find it hard to imagine that Plato would

⁶¹ Maguire, “Thrasymachus—or Plato?” argues that the political doctrines but not the ethical outlook of Plato’s Thrasymachus are reconcilable with the other fragments. He therefore rejects Thrasymachus’ ethical immoralism as Platonic invention.

have ascribed views of such an extreme nature to a living (or very recently living) figure who did not in fact hold them.

CONCLUSION

What Gorgias, Polus and Thrasymachus have in common is their devotion to rhetoric: all three were masters of persuasion, stylistic innovators, and pioneers in the art of *teaching* rhetoric to others. And, in a certain sense, their teaching of rhetoric allows one to view them as “teachers of *aretê*”; for the ability to speak persuasively had, since Homeric times, been represented as a legitimate type of human excellence.⁶² But, at the same time, to regard these three sophists as teachers of *aretê* in the same sense that, say, Protagoras was a teacher of *aretê*, would be to make a categorical mistake. For Protagoras and other sophists like him (Prodicus and Hippias) devoted significant energies to other types of *aretê* besides rhetoric. Most importantly, they taught a set of moral virtues that limited the uses to which rhetoric could be put. Gorgias, on the contrary, held that rhetoric was the master art to which all others must defer.⁶³ And, perhaps because of this, many of Gorgias’ progeny exhibited highly suspect moral views. Gorgias himself does not appear to have been an immoral figure—at least not as Plato presents him—but his students evidently embraced immoral doctrines more or less adamantly. Polus was essentially attracted to the *power* that derives from rhetoric—power to exploit others and to secure whatever one’s heart desires—but he exhibited a degree of shame about this, while figures like Callicles and Thrasymachus did not.

⁶² Hence, Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 44-5: “All [the sophists] save Gorgias would admit to being teachers of *aretê* (of which, as understood by them, the art of persuasive speech was a prerequisite), and one may suspect that Gorgias’ disclaimer was a little disingenuous: his teaching of rhetoric was aimed at securing for his pupils the same kind of success in life that Protagoras promised as a teacher of *politikê aretê*.”

⁶³ *Gorgias* 456c-e.

CHAPTER 4

THE REFUTERS: ERISTIC AS *ARETÊ*

All the sophists examined so far have been practitioners and teachers of rhetoric. Thus rhetoric would seem to be a common feature of sophistry. Some scholars have even taken it to be the *defining* feature of sophistry.¹ But to do so is to ignore a crucial distinction, that between rhetoric and eristic. Rhetoric is the art of making speeches, usually *lengthy* speeches, and it attends particularly to the beautiful, the persuasive and (arguably) the true.² Eristic, by contrast, (derived from the word *eris*: strife, quarrel, debate) is the art of contentious argument and quick repartee; it involves conversation as opposed to big speeches and, as such, resembles Socratic dialogue and elenchus (*dialogesthai*, *elenchos*) much more than it resembles rhetoric.³ As a matter of fact, the similarities between eristic and Socratic method have vexed observers since ancient times.⁴ But they *can* be distinguished. Indeed, the essential difference—the unique feature that distinguishes eristic not only from Socratic method but also from rhetoric—is its complete lack of concern for truth. Eristic seeks neither to educate nor even, necessarily, to persuade, but rather simply to confound. For this reason it attracted the attention of Aristotle, who defined it as “the semblance of wisdom without the reality” and took great pains to

¹ Heinrich Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912), p. 39, ff.; Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991); for an able treatment of some problems with this position, see Edward Schiappa, *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 48 ff., with earlier literature cited.

² See Gorgias *Encomium of Helen* (DK 82 B 11.1): “What is becoming (*kosmos*) . . . to a speech (*logôî*) is truth (*alêtheia*).”

³ On the similarities with Socratic method, see G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chapter 6, “Dialectic, Antilogic and Eristic”; and Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), chapter 5, “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry.”

⁴ See, e.g., Plato *Sophist* 230 ff. for the difficulty.

demonstrate exactly where its practitioners went wrong.⁵ The purpose of this short chapter is simply to examine two of the most notorious practitioners of eristic, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,⁶ and to see more clearly how they practiced and understood their art.

The art of eristic begins, in a sense, with Protagoras. For it was Protagoras (see chapter 1) who taught that “on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other” and who supposedly “invented the method of arguing by questioning.”⁷ The playwright Timon refers to Protagoras as a “master of wrangling” (*eridzemenai*) and someone who “mixes in” (*epimeiktos*), which probably means someone who is “avid in verbal combat.”⁸ Yet Protagoras should not be classified among the eristic sophists—not, at any rate, without serious qualification. For Protagoras taught much more than just eristic. He was also a celebrated teacher of rhetoric and of virtue (*aretê*). As it turns out, the two sophists who really made eristic famous (or infamous, as it were), Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, also presented themselves as teachers of virtue, but it is necessary to consider carefully what they might have meant by this claim.

EUTHYDEMUS AND DIONYSODORUS

Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus do not appear among the sophists compiled by Diels and Kranz, but Plato has written a dialogue about them, in which they are referred to as sophists.⁹ And Aristotle mentions them several times and analyzes a few of their arguments

⁵ Aristotle *Sophistical Refutations* 164^a21-23.

⁶ Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are the only fifth-century figures to study for an understanding of eristic, besides Protagoras and his followers, who would perhaps be better understood (see below) as proto-eristics.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius IX.50.51 (DK 80 B6a). Sometimes Zeno is credited with these developments; see further Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, pp. 59-62; but cf. Plato *Euthydemus* (286), where Socrates recognizes some of Euthydemus’ arguments as those of “Protagoras and his people.”

⁸ Timon fr. 47d, reported in Diogenes Laertius, *ibid.*, 52; “avid in combat,” suggested by Michael J. O’Brian, *The Older Sophists*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), p. 5.

⁹ Plato *Euthydemus*; referred to as sophists, 271c1.

(some of which do not appear in Plato).¹⁰ It is safe to assume, therefore, that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were historical figures, not fictional, and that they should be listed among the sophists.¹¹ Moreover, they should be listed among the *older* sophists since they were elder contemporaries of Socrates.¹² They evidently did not become sophists until late in their careers, and thus the style of their sophistry was recognized by their contemporaries as something “new,” but they are essentially similar in age to all the other sophists considered thus far.¹³

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were brothers. They came originally from Chios, but left their homeland to join the new pan-Greek colony at Thurii.¹⁴ They must have visited Athens at least once prior to the dramatic date of Plato’s *Euthydemus*,¹⁵ for Socrates remembers them. And what he remembers suggests that they probably did not present themselves as “sophists” on their earlier visit(s). They were “experts at everything to do with war,” Socrates says, “as much as is needed for becoming a general—all about tactics and how to lead an army and how to fight in full armor”(Euthydemus 273c; cf. 271d). Xenophon also recalls in his *Memorabilia* (III.I.1) that Dionysodorus was marketing himself (*apangellomenon*) as a teacher of generalship (*stratêgein didaxein*) at this time. While it is true that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus also claimed expertise in “the battles of the law courts”—composing speeches and teaching others how to speak in their

¹⁰ Aristotle *On Sophistical Refutations* IV, 165^b30; XX, 177^b12; and *Rhetoric* II.24, 1401^a26.

¹¹ Sprague, *Older Sophists*, includes them in an appendix. Their omission in Jacqueline De Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), is noteworthy, since their inclusion would have required her to qualify seriously some of her generalizations.

¹² Sprague, *Older Sophists*, p. 295, offers ca. 475 as a possible birth date for Euthydemus.

¹³ For their career change, see *Euthydemus* 271c-272b and cf. 273c-d; for the novelty of their type of sophistry, see *ibid.*, 271b9-c1.

¹⁴ See chapter 1, n. 16.

¹⁵ Probably sometime shortly before 415 B.C.; see A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London: University Paperbacks, 1960), pp. 89 ff.

own defense (*Euthydemus* 272a, 273c)—it seems that they understood this simply as an extension of their basic expertise, which was not sophistry, but battle (*machê*). They were “pancratists,” Socrates says, masters of all sorts of fighting. And law courts were simply another place where one could do battle (*machesthai*) (272a2).¹⁶

However, by the time of the dramatic date of the *Euthydemus*, the brother sophists had changed the way they presented themselves considerably. First of all, in the dialogue they appear as old men—too old to engage in physical combat. But, more importantly, they have acquired a new art, the art of eristic (*tês eristikês*, 272b10). “Now,” Socrates says, “they have become so skillful in wordy warfare [*logois machesthai*] that they can confute [*exelenchein*] with equal success anything that anyone says, whether true or false” (272b1). Even a year prior they could not do this. But now it is *all* they will do. For when Socrates reminds them of their former enterprises, “they turned their noses up, looked at each other and laughed; and Euthydemus said: ‘We don’t trouble about those things now, Socrates, but treat them as mere side shows’” (273d2).

Of course, the art of eristic bears a striking family resemblance to the arts Euthydemus and Dionysodorus had practiced earlier, for it is essentially an art of combat or battle with words. But the way they present this to Socrates is significant. Asked by Socrates what their “main show” is (now that everything else is a sideshow), the brothers respond (273d-274a): “*Aretê*, Socrates! We believe we can impart it—no one in the world so well or so quickly!” This is, no doubt, why Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are referred to as sophists at the beginning of the

¹⁶ For further evidence that this did not qualify them to call themselves sophists, see especially the end of the *Euthydemus* (305a7), where Socrates refers to such masters of courtroom oratory as “rhetors,” and cf. Plato *Sophist*, where the distinction between rhetors and sophists is consistently maintained.

dialogue. For to claim to teach *aretê*, and to demand a fee for this, *is* to present oneself as a sophist.¹⁷

Eristic *Aretê*

But what is this *aretê* that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus claim to teach? This question is answered in the *Euthydemus* by a series of demonstrations. Socrates asks the sophists whether they “can make a man good only if he is already convinced he must learn” or whether they can “also teach someone who is not yet convinced but rather doubts that *aretê* can be learned at all.” And the sophists reply that it is the same art—their art—and that they are the best people in the world to incline a man toward *aretê*. Socrates asks them to prove it, and the brothers proceed to demonstrate (*epideiknunai*) on a specimen, a young acquaintance of Socrates named Clinias.¹⁸ For present purposes, it will suffice to recount one episode of what turn out to be multiple attempts (all failing, by Socrates’ standards) to teach Clinias how to be virtuous.

Euthydemus begins by asking Clinias a (now classic) trick question: “Which of mankind are the learners [*hoi manthanontes*], the wise [*hoi sophoi*] or the ignorant [*hoi amatheis*]?”¹⁹ Clinias responds (reasonably enough) that the wise are the learners. But Euthydemus then asks him the following series of questions: “Are there people you call teachers [*didaskalous*]?”—“Yes,” Clinias says. “Do the teachers teach learners?”—“Yes” again. “But at the time when they are learning, do they *know* [*epistamai*] the things they are learning?”—“No.” “Then,” Euthydemus concludes, “how can they be wise?”²⁰

¹⁷ See chapter 5 for a detailed argument of why this is so.

¹⁸ Clinias is the son of Axiochus and the cousin of Alcibiades; Socrates expresses considerable anxiety about his education (*Euthydemus* 275a-b).

¹⁹ *Euthydemus* 275d3-4; cf. Plato *Theatetus* 199a; and Aristotle *Metaphysics* IX.8, 1049b33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 276a-b.

It would appear—as Euthydemus is eager to show here—that Clinias was mistaken when he said that the wise are the learners. “It is the ignorant, not the wise, who learn” (276b4-5). Clinias accordingly acknowledges his discomfiture and gives his assent to the “correct” answer. But the sophists’ goal is clearly not to reach the *truth* or to teach Clinias what is correct in the matter of teaching and learning. For as Clinias responds to Euthydemus, the brother Dionysodorus leans over to Socrates and tells him that it would not have mattered *how* Clinias had answered Euthydemus’ question: he was about to be refuted (*exelenchthêsetai*) either way. Moreover, immediately after refuting Clinias, Euthydemus proudly motions the crowd for approval. Praise is what these sophists are after, and not praise for seeking truth but rather for cleverly refuting whatever anyone says.

But the ordeal is not yet over. As Euthydemus finishes with Clinias, Dionysodorus jumps in with the following question: “What about when the writing teacher dictates to you? Which of the students learns the dictation, the wise or the ignorant?”—“The *wise*,” Clinias answers again. “Then the wise ones *do* learn and *not* the ignorant,”—“Yes.” “Then,” Dionysodorus concludes, “you just now answered my brother wrong!”²¹

Before Clinias can catch his breath, Euthydemus is back with another question: “Do learners learn what they *know* [*epistantai*], or what they do not know?” Clinias replies that they learn what they do not know. “But don’t you know your letters?” Euthydemus asks. “I do,” says Clinias. “And when a teacher dictates, does he not dictate letters?”—“Yes.” “Then he dictates a bit of what you know?”—“Yes.” “Then you did *not answer right again*,” for the learners learn what they *know*.²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, 276c-d.

²² *Ibid.*, 277a-b.

As Aristotle would later point out (*Sophistical Refutations* IV, 165^b30), “arguments like these are based on equivocation” since “to learn” may mean either (a) “to understand by using knowledge” (i.e. to take a dictation by using one’s knowledge of letters) or (b) “to acquire knowledge” (i.e., to learn letters). Depending upon how one views it, therefore, the wise *and* the ignorant, the knower *and* the non-knower are both learners. But to a fifth-century audience, all this must have seemed very confusing. Indeed, Socrates remarks that when Dionysodorus and Euthydemus had finished with the lad, their entourage “laughed long and hard, applauding their teachers’ wisdom,” but Socrates himself, and everyone else, was simply dumbstruck (*ekpeplêgmenoi*, 276d3).

What is significant for present purposes, however, is that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus take this sort of verbal repartee as an adequate demonstration of their ability to teach *aretê*. What is *aretê* for these sophists? It is evidently not a substantive doctrine or set of doctrines, for every doctrine that is presented can be refuted. *Aretê* must mean, for these sophists, the skill of refutation itself. What they teach is simply eristic, and this is supposed to pass for virtue. Socrates picks up on this immediately, and protests:

All this is just a little game of learning. . . . I call it a game because if one learned many such things or even all of them, one would be no nearer to knowing what things really are, but would be able to play with people because of the different senses of words, tripping them up and turning them upside-down, just as someone pulls a stool away when someone else is going to sit down, and then people roar with joy when they see him lying on his back. (*Euthydemus* 278b-c)

The notion that mere instruction in eristic could pass for a full-fledged teaching in *aretê* is quite novel. None of the earlier sophists made such a claim. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,

however, seem perfectly content with it. The question, then, is how they avoided the obvious objection that they were fakes. Particularly, what would they have said to someone like Socrates who remained unconvinced that they could impart *aretê*? The answer to this question seems to lie in one of these sophists' doctrines in particular: the doctrine of "all-knowing" (my terminology).

The Doctrine of All-Knowing

The doctrine can be stated succinctly as follows: "Everyone who knows one thing, knows everything" (*Euthydemus* 294a10). It comes up in the *Euthydemus* because Socrates grows increasingly anxious for Clinias to learn something that will carry him well through *life*. And so Socrates insists that the sophists equip Clinias with some such knowledge (293a). The "doctrine of all-knowing" is what the sophists produce. They simply inform Socrates that he and Clinias must already possess the knowledge in question since it is plain that they know everything. Socrates is, of course, incredulous. But Euthydemus then asks him: "Is there *anything* that you know?" Socrates replies in the affirmative, and Euthydemus then explains that if he "knows" (*epistasai*), then he must be "knowing" (*epistêmôn*). Socrates rightly protests that he "knows" only a few things, and little things at that (*smikra ge*), but the sophists then invoke the law of non-contradiction: "It is impossible for anything whatever of the things that are, not to be what it is" (293b9-c1). Thus, Socrates cannot claim both to be and not-to-be a man who knows; he cannot be knowing and not knowing at the same time. If he knows one thing he must know everything, including the knowledge that he and Clinias were seeking: knowledge of *aretê* or how to comport oneself well through life.

There is, of course, a fallacy here. It is the fallacy of *secundum quid*: from the proposition that Socrates knows one thing, the sophists conclude that he is "knowing"

simpliciter.²³ But neither the spuriousness of their reasoning nor the absurdities to which it commits them deter these sophists for a moment from maintaining that they, and everyone else, “know everything.” When Socrates asks them if they know carpentry, shoemaking, and the number of stars in the galaxy, they respond confidently that they do (294b).²⁴ When another interlocutor asks if they know the number of teeth in each other’s mouths, they simply insist that they do (294c): “Is it not enough for you to be told that we know everything?” As the questions become more precise, the sophists dodge them, but they never deny their claim of omniscience.

CONCLUSION

It becomes obvious as this dialogue proceeds that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have nothing real to offer in the way of teaching *aretê*. What they teach is an art of refutation. Presumably, they would not have simply refuted their students again and again, as one finds them doing in the *Euthydemus*. What the sophists supply there is simply a demonstration, an *epideixis*, of their skills. Once instruction got underway in earnest (i.e. once the students paid their fees), these sophists would have taught their pupils how they *too* could “confute with equal success anything anyone says, whether true or false” (272b). But is the ability to confute really an education in *aretê*? Certainly it would not have counted as such for the three major sophists: Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias. Indeed, Prodicus was bent upon *undermining* this very sort of thing by defining words in such a way that equivocations became impossible. Protagoras taught

²³ *Secundum quid* is “an argument in which a proposition is used as a premise without attention given to some obvious condition that would affect the proposition’s application,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 5 (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1967), p. 64; for a good discussion of this fallacy in *Euthydemus* 293a-304c, see Rosamond Kent Sprague, *Plato’s Use of Fallacy: A Study of the Euthydemus and Some other Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 23.

²⁴ Hippias also claimed skill in these arts (see chapter 2), but his claim was legitimate. The effort to associate the pseudo-polymathy of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus with the genuine polymathy of Hippias may well be deliberate; see further chapter 6.

moral qualities and other skills as a supplement to skill in debating; and Hippias did not teach skill in debating at all.²⁵

Perhaps the best way to understand the art of eristic as Euthydemus and Dionysodorus practiced it, therefore, is in terms of a certain degeneration in Athenian student culture. What Athenian students desired at first was a broad education in wisdom that might equip them to become prudent rulers of their households and their city. Part of this education included skill in speaking and arguing, but this was only a part, necessarily tempered by other skills and moral qualities. In the curriculum offered by Gorgias, however, one detects the first signs that Athenian students were degenerating. Gorgias met the demand on the part of students to learn *only* rhetoric. His students wanted simply to win their battles in the court or in the Assembly, regardless of whether their causes were wise or good for the city. In Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, finally, one detects a further stage of degeneration. Their students could not have been interested in the courtroom or the Assembly, since these forums required that one master the art of speechmaking. What they were interested in was, rather, refuting anyone (parents, friends and teachers) who might present an obstacle to their degenerate desires and pursuits.²⁶ They were interested in winning private arguments, not public. And thus in the curriculum of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, one senses telltale signs of decline in a culture that had once regarded civic involvement and political wisdom as the height of human *aretê*. On the one hand, these figures can be understood as fake sophists—they fall significantly short of the very qualities that were originally associated with the title *sophistês*. On the other hand, they can be

²⁵ For his abhorrence of eristic, see *Hippias Major* 304a ff.

²⁶ Euthydemus and Dionysodorus meet the demand for students such as Strepsiades and Pheidippides (see Aristophanes *Clouds*), students who want to commit private wrongs and get away with it.

understood as the pseudo-educators of a culture in decline, a culture that was more than willing to pay their fees.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS A SOPHIST?

The previous chapters have investigated the details surrounding the various sophists' careers in the hope of shedding some light on the interpretive problems set out in the introduction to this work. Those problems, as will be recalled, centered around the presence in the secondary literature of widely varying theories about the nature of the sophistic movement and its significance for the history of political thought. Some of these theories have already been shown to be over-simplistic. However, up to this point, I have been relying upon a commonsense understanding of who the sophists were, examining those figures who appear most often in scholarly work on the topic. At this point, it is necessary to be more methodical and to ask: who exactly was and was not considered a "sophist" by the ancients, and why?

This chapter begins by examining the historical origins of the word sophist and goes on to show how, and why, that word came to be applied to a small number of fifth-century teacher/intellectuals. When these questions are pursued systematically, the results are quite startling. I shall argue below that during the middle years of the fifth-century, the word sophist, which had long been used to refer to wise men and teachers generally, was co-opted by a small group of itinerant teachers to refer (now in a more technical sense) to a new business in which they were engaged, namely that of teaching virtue (*aretê*) for pay. Moreover, from this point forward, any teachers or intellectuals who did *not* regard themselves specifically as teachers of *aretê* began to distinguish themselves *from* "sophists" in this new, technical sense. Attention to these historical developments allows one to see very clearly why Socrates was no sophist: he disavowed (rightly or wrongly) the ability to teach virtue. But it also becomes clear—and this runs contrary to tradition—that figures like Gorgias, Polus, and Thrasymachus were not sophists

either; for they too either disavowed the ability to teach *aretê* (Gorgias) or else eschewed the moralistic overtones that the word *aretê* carried (Polus and Thrasymachus). If my observations in this chapter are correct, then there were only five major fifth-century sophists (that we know of): Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

THE WORD “SOPHIST” IN GREEK LITERATURE

The word sophist (*ho sophistês*; plural *hoi sophistai*) is a noun derived from the verb *sophidzo* and means, literally, someone who engages in wisdom (*sophia*).¹ It refers more specifically to someone who *teaches* wisdom.² But just as the concepts of “wisdom” and “teacher” evolve dramatically over the course of Greek history, so too does the use and connotation of the word sophist. The first use of the word in extant literature occurs in an *Isthmian Ode* of Pindar (478 B.C.):

If Aegina turns her steps to the clear road of god-given deeds, then do not grudge to mix for her in song a boast that is fitting recompense for toils. In heroic times, too, fine warriors gained fame, and they have been celebrated with lyres and flutes in full-voiced harmonies for time beyond reckoning. Heroes who are honored by the grace of Zeus provide a theme for *sophistais* (5.24-29).

Here, “sophist” clearly refers to poets or musicians (the two usually went hand in hand); and this sense of the word recurs in several other texts of the period. Cratinus, the father of Old Comedy, refers to the great bards Homer and Hesiod as sophists;³ and a fragment of Aeschylus runs: “The

¹ In this section of the present chapter, I have relied upon G.B. Kerferd, “The First Greek Sophists,” *Classical Review* 64 (1950): 8-10; and W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 27-34.

² Hence in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides (921): “Here is a clever *sophistês*, endowed with the power to force them to be wise who are witless all.”

³ Cratinus fr. 2K in Theodorus Kock, ed., *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, 3 vols., (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880-1888).

sophistês wildly struck his tortoise-shell lyre with notes discordant.”⁴ Why would these writers refer to poets and musicians as *sophistês*? No doubt because both poets and musicians were regarded not only as fountains of ancient wisdom,⁵ but also as teachers.⁶

The seven sages were also called sophists, according to numerous ancient authors including Isocrates.⁷ And though at the time Isocrates was writing (*ca.* 354/3), the word had a distinctly negative connotation, he was at pains to show that this was not always so:

Who of the men of old could have anticipated that things would come to this, in Athens, of all places, where we more than others plume ourselves on our wisdom? Things were not like this in the time of our ancestors; on the contrary, they admired the sophists, as they called them, and envied the good fortune of their disciples while they blamed the sycophants for most of their ills. You will find the strongest proof of this in the fact that they saw fit to put Solon, who was the first of the Athenians to receive the title sophist, at the head of the state.”⁸

⁴ Aeschylus fr. 314, in Augusto Nauck, ed., *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Hildsheim: Olms, 1962).

⁵ Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae*, XIV, 632 b-c), commenting on the fragment of Aeschylus just cited, writes that “the ancient wisdom (*sophia*) of the Greeks was given over especially to *musikê*. And for this reason they . . . called all who followed this art *sophistais*.”

⁶ See especially J. S. Morrison, “An Introductory Chapter in the History of Greek Education,” *Durham University Journal* (1949): 55-63; Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 41; and Justina Gregory, *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), chapter 1. Indeed, it is because they are viewed as wise men and teachers that Socrates interviews the poets (*Apology* 22a ff.) and Plato attacks them (*Republic*, Books 2-3 and 10); see also Aristophanes *Frogs* 1053-5, where the tragic poets are unambiguously referred to as the “teachers” of Athenians.

⁷ See *Antidosis* 235, where Isocrates refers to them explicitly as the *hepta sophistôn*, the seven sophists; see also Herodotus IV.95.2; I.29.1; Aristotle fr. 5, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 2390; and Plutarch *Moralia* 96a. The seven sages were teachers who flourished in the sixth century, including (according to Diogenes Laertius) Bias of Priene, Chilon of Sparta, Cleobulus of Lindus, Periander of Corinth, Pittacus of Mytilene, Thales of Miletus, and Solon of Athens.

⁸ *Antidosis* 312-14.

Again the seven sages were not only wise men, but also teachers, whose practical wisdom was handed down from generation to generation in the form of brief gnomic sayings. They were also poets, so that the word *sophistês* may in fact be used of them as it was of Homer and Hesiod, without much shift in meaning.

But just as prose writing began to replace poetry as the vehicle for learned discourse and education, so too did the term sophist begin gradually to change meaning. There is a title of a work (now lost) by Damastes that reads “Concerning Poets and Sophists,” as though poets and sophists were for him something distinct.⁹ And Xenophon similarly describes a well-known library as containing “many of the written works of the most celebrated poets and sophists.”¹⁰ Moreover, one finds in the letters of Isocrates passages like this one to Demonicus—“reap the lessons not only of the poets but of the other sophists as well”—and this one to Nicocles—“do not imagine that you can afford to be ignorant of any one either of the famous poets or of the sophists; rather you should listen to the poets and learn from the sophists.”¹¹ Passages such as these suggest that, while the word may have still been applicable to poets, it was also used as a way of distinguishing various other kinds of wise men and writers *from* poets. Who would these wise men have been? Perhaps they would have included some of the sophists we regard as sophists today, men like Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus; for they certainly wrote treatises in prose. But the list would also have to include numerous other pre-Socratics. Isocrates refers to

⁹ Damastes of Sigeum was a younger contemporary of Herodotus, whose *On Poets and Sophists* is thought to be the first serious attempt to write a history of Greek literature.

¹⁰ *Memorabilia* IV.ii.1; cf. IV.ii.8.

¹¹ “To Demonicus” 51; “To Nicocles” 13 .

Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Parmenides as sophists; and Herodotus refers to Pythagoras as “the greatest Greek sophist.”¹²

Clearly, notions of wisdom and teaching lie at the core of the word sophist as it is used in all the instances considered so far, though what the Greeks took for wisdom was evidently shifting, or at least growing. Poets were the earliest proponents of culture and education generally in Greece, but that role shifted over time first to sages like Solon, who could bestow practical wisdom upon their students and create political harmony by crafting good laws, and later to prose writers who spent their time investigating the nature not only of man and the *polis*, but also of the cosmos generally. Viewed from this broad historical perspective, it is easy to see why men such as Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus (sophists in the narrow sense of the word) would have been called sophists, for they *were* all these things: poets, statesmen, scientists and teachers. But what is perhaps surprising is that a word which once bestowed praise upon a wide range of wise men and teachers should become, almost overnight as it were, a term of abuse for a small group of fifth-century teachers. What, or who, was responsible for this change?

Perhaps it was Plato. This was the view of George Grote, who proclaimed in his *History of Greece* that “few characters in history” have been so unfairly treated “as these so-called Sophists.” What was novel, Grote thought, was not the appearance of “sophists” in Athens, but rather “the peculiar use of an old word; which Plato took out of its usual meaning, and fastened upon the eminent paid teachers of the Sokratic [*sic*] age.”¹³ This was also the view taken more recently by Karl Popper: “We must not forget that Plato likes to argue against rhetoric and

¹² Isocrates *Antidosis* 268; Herodotus II.95. That the term was applied to pre-Socratics generally is confirmed also by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* I.i.11), who writes of “what is called ‘the cosmos’ by the sophistais”; and the Hippocratic Treatise *On Ancient Medicine* XX, where Empedocles and other (unnamed) sophists are taken to task for approaching medicine as an inquiry into the essential nature of man.

¹³ George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 8 (London: John Murray, 1850), p. 491, 485.

sophistry; and indeed, that he is the man who by his attacks on the ‘Sophists’ created the bad associations connected with that word.”¹⁴ But while Plato *did* in fact use the word sophist in a way that was at once more restrictive and more negative than the instances just examined, he could not have been the author of either of these changes.¹⁵

The truth is that a negative connotation attached to the word “sophist” from very early on. And the reason for this seems to be that wisdom itself had long been recognized as something of a double-edged sword; indeed, to seek wisdom and to teach it to others might well land one in trouble. Thus in Aeschylus, Hermes calls out to Prometheus, who has been chained to a rock for teaching mortals about fire and the arts: “Hey you! *Sophistês*, bitter beyond all bitterness; you who have sinned against the gods in bestowing honors upon creatures of the day; you the thief of fire! I am speaking to you!”¹⁶ A fragment of Sophocles strikes a similar tone: “a well-disposed mind with righteous thought is a better inventor than any *sophistês*.”¹⁷ And in Euripides’ *Children of Hercules* (993-5), Eurystheus describes himself as a scheming *sophistês* of many evils (here “deviser” would be a suitable translation). Such instances remind us that in Athens there was a long tradition of viewing intellectuals with suspicion. Thus when Aristophanes turned to lampoon intellectuals and intellectualism in the *Clouds*, he could simply combine the traits of numerous different thinkers into a conglomerate character, Socrates, and cast him (with

¹⁴ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 263, n. 52.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Plato sometimes uses the word sophist in the old-fashioned, positive sense, as when Socrates describes a teacher named Miccus as “no common man, but a competent *sophistês*” (*Lysis* 204a). Miccus is certainly not a sophist in the technical sense of the word; he is the master of a wrestling school in Athens. Also in the *Meno* (85b), when Socrates and a slave boy tackle a geometrical problem by dividing a cube along its diagonal, Socrates comments that “the name the *sophistais* give this is ‘diagonal’”—evidently referring to the Pythagoreans.

¹⁶ *Prometheus Bound* 944-46, cf. 61-2.

¹⁷ Fr. 101 in A. C. Pearson, ed., *Fragmenta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917).

unmistakable animosity) as a *sophistês*.¹⁸ Again, the use of the term is pejorative; but when the *Clouds* was produced in 423, Plato was only five; thus he cannot be responsible for this development.

Nor was Plato responsible for the sudden and dramatic narrowing of the term sophist that occurred sometime during the fifth century. In fact, the assumption that he *was* obscures an important and fascinating development. It should be noted that in all the instances of the word *sophistês* examined so far, it appears consistently as a title bestowed *by* someone upon someone else; one never applies it to oneself. This is how the word functioned, no matter whether it was intended to bestow praise or blame. But now consider this puzzling, but crucially important, speech that Protagoras makes to Socrates in the *Protagoras* (316c-317c):

Caution is in order for a foreigner who goes into the great cities and tries to persuade the best of the young men in them to abandon their associations with others, relatives and acquaintances, young and old alike, and to associate with him instead on the grounds that they will be improved by this association. Jealousy, hostility, and intrigue on a large scale are aroused by such activity. Now, I maintain that the art of sophistry [*tên sophistikên technên*] is an ancient one, but that the men who practiced it in ancient times, fearing the odium attached to it, disguised it, masking it sometimes as poetry, as Homer and Hesiod and Simonides did, or as mystery religions and prophesy, witness Orpheus and Musaeus, and occasionally, I've noticed, even as athletics, as with Iccus of Tarentum and, in our own time, Herodicus of Selymbria (originally of Megara), as great a sophist as any. Your own Agathocles, a great sophist, used music as a front, as did Pythoclide of

¹⁸ For Aristophanes' use of the word, see *Clouds* lines 331, 1111 and 1307. See further Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 31; and Viktor Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951).

Ceos, and many others. All of them, as I say, used these various arts as screens out of fear of ill will. And this is where I part company with them all, for I do not believe that they accomplished their end; I believe they failed in fact to conceal from the powerful men in the cities the true purpose of the disguises. . . . So I have come down the completely opposite road. I *admit* that I am a sophist and that I educate men, and I consider this admission to be a better precaution than denial.

This speech is a highly sophisticated (so to speak) piece of obfuscation, which, nevertheless, presents the very fact it tries so hard to obscure: Protagoras was the first person to refer to *himself* as a sophist. Why was he the first? Certainly it is not because Protagoras' intellectual predecessors were afraid to admit they were sophists. Indeed, they were called sophists openly by others. The real reason is that there was no such thing as a *sophistikên technên*, an art of sophistry, before Protagoras himself invented it. At this point, to be *called* a sophist and to *be* a sophist became two completely different things. Homer was not a covert sophist; he was simply a poet—perhaps the greatest poet of all time and worthy of the title *sophistês*, albeit, but a poet nonetheless; Agathocles was simply a musician; and Iccus a mere physical trainer. But when Protagoras uses the term sophist, he means by it something entirely new; he means to denote a *technê* all its own.¹⁹ Thus it was Protagoras, not Plato, who gave the word sophist its technical meaning and who, moreover, was the first “sophist” in the new sense. Others were quick to jump on the bandwagon. But before turning to the question of who was and was not a sophist in the new sense of the word, it is necessary to find out what, exactly, this new art of sophistry was supposed to entail.

¹⁹ Protagoras apparently intends to accomplish two things with this speech: (1) to downplay his own innovation and thus avoid suspicion himself, and (2) to associate his new art with a long line of celebrated educators. It works to his advantage that the long list of names he recites includes many figures who had long been referred to as “*sophistês*.”

THE NEW ART OF SOPHISTRY

Scholars who have attempted to define sophistry have gone at this in an odd way. They have simply rounded up all the usual suspects—Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Gorgias, Polus, Callicles, Thrasymachus, Antiphon, Critias, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus—and asked themselves what all these figures have in common.²⁰ This, however, proves problematic not only because the figures just listed have almost nothing in common besides their being Greeks and professional teachers,²¹ but also because this is to *assume* rather than to ask who is and who is not a sophist in the first place. Indeed, the right way to define sophistry is to find a contemporary observer, someone who recognized the new, technical sense of the term and who used it precisely himself (here, Aristophanes is ruled out); someone, preferably, who had conversations with the sophists and asked them to account for themselves. Who is that someone? It is, of course, Socrates; and, while one must rely upon Plato for a record of Socrates' interviews with the sophists, that record, nevertheless, betrays a great deal of precision and consistency.

²⁰ See, e.g., Heinrich Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912), p. 39, ff., who argues that their common feature is an interest in teaching rhetoric (although, this neglects the fact that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus did not teach rhetoric); Gomperz is followed by Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 44-5. See also Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans., Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp. 286-331, who breaks from Gomperz and argues instead that the sophists all taught *politikê aretê*. This is, however, equally problematic, since Gorgias (a principal sophist by Jaeger's account) disavows the ability to teach *aretê* (*Meno* 95c). Guthrie, *Sophists*, p. 45, detects the difficulty and argues (conveniently) that Gorgias' disclaimer was "a little disingenuous." See also G. B. Kerferd, "Sophists," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 7, (New York: Macmillan Co. and the Free Press, 1967), pp. 494-6.

²¹ Hence, Theodor Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, vol. 1, trans., Laurie Magnus (London: John Murray, 1901), p. 415: "We may be asked, What was the genuine common factor in the several sophists? and to that question we can but reply that it consisted merely of their teaching profession and the conditions of its practice imposed by the age in which they lived It is illegitimate, if not absurd, to speak of a sophistic mind, sophistic morality, sophistic scepticism, and so forth."

Two traits are essential to, and definitive of, the new art of sophistry, and both are identified by Plato's Socrates during his conversation with Protagoras: "There is a particular reason why I would rather talk with you than anyone else," Socrates tells Protagoras:

I think you are the best qualified to investigate the sorts of things that decent and respectable individuals ought to examine, and *aretê* especially. Who else but you? Not only do you consider yourself to be noble and good [*kalos k'agathos*] but, unlike others who are themselves decent and respectable individuals yet unable to make others so, you are not only good yourself but able to make others good as well, and you have so much self-confidence that instead of concealing this skill, as others do, you advertise it openly to the whole Greek world, calling yourself a *sophistês*, highlighting yourself as a teacher of *aretê*, the first ever to have deemed it appropriate to charge a fee for this.²²

What does Protagoras mean when he calls himself a sophist? What is his new *sophistikên technên*? It is (1) the attempt (or promise) to teach *aretê*, and (2) the expectation of payment for the service. And the combination of these two traits was very novel indeed. To be sure, many people prior to Protagoras attempted to teach *aretê*: parents, school teachers, poets, and lawmakers,²³ but no one regarded this as a vocation, or viewed it as a *technê* all its own, or demanded fees for it. Again many people prior to Protagoras charged fees for practicing specific crafts and for teaching their crafts to students;²⁴ but no one evidently tried to do this with *aretê*.²⁵

²² *Protagoras* 348d-349a.

²³ As Protagoras acknowledges; see especially *Protagoras* 325a-326e.

²⁴ See, e.g., *Meno* 90b-e.

²⁵ The reason is sometimes said to be that this was viewed as base; one should teach *aretê* for free (see e.g., Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965], p. 115); but I think the real reason was that it had never (perhaps with good reason) been viewed as a craft. See, further, chapter 7.

Thus neither of these traits by themselves is novel; but when they are combined, the result is something novel indeed. And Protagoras marked this innovation by his new, self-referential use of the word *sophistês*.

That these traits are the essential characteristics of sophistry from this point forward becomes evident if one simply surveys the references to the sophists across the Platonic dialogues. In the *Meno*, for example (91a-b), Socrates presents it as indisputable that if someone wanted to purchase “the kind of wisdom and *aretê* that enables men to manage their household and their city well” they would have to study with the *sophistais*. In the *Laches* (186a-c), Socrates laments (ironically, no doubt) that he is too poor to enroll with the sophists, since they are the only people in Athens who claim to be able to make men good (*poiêsai kalon te k’agathon*). In the *Gorgias* (519e, 520c-d), the sophists are again described as paid teachers of *aretê*. And in the *Sophist*, where no fewer than seven different varieties of sophistry are discussed, the traits of teaching *aretê* and taking pay are consistent to almost every one.²⁶ The novelty, in particular, of charging *fees* for teaching virtue is frequently stressed in the dialogues. Socrates points out to Hippias in the *Hippias Major* (282c-283b) that “not one of the great men of the past,” men like Pittacus, Bias, Thales and Anaxagoras, ever saw fit to do this; it sharply differentiates “the present generation from their predecessors.”

Consider now who does, and does not, possess these traits. All the names listed above are teachers who take pay, but they do not all claim to teach *aretê*. Are they sophists nonetheless? Not according to Plato. In fact, Plato exhibits a remarkable degree of consistency on this point. It was noted in chapter 2 that Plato never calls Thrasymachus a sophist. It is now

²⁶ The exception is the sixth type of sophistry, the so-called “sophist of noble lineage” (*Sophist* 230a-232b), which is clearly intended to describe Socrates. See further J. R. Trevaskis, “The Sophist of Noble Lineage,” *Phronesis* (1956): 36-49. On the correlation between pay and *aretê* in the other types, see for the first, 223a; for the second, 224c-d; for the third and fourth, 224d-e; for the fifth, 225c; and for the seventh, 267c (cf. *Euthydemus* 273d).

possible to say why this is so: Thrasymachus is not a teacher of *aretê*. Indeed, that word is far too moralistic for what Thrasymachus does; he is interested precisely in teaching people how to be *unjust* and how to use the art of rhetoric towards that end. The same goes for Polus; he is never referred to as a sophist either. In fact, when Socrates wants to insult him, he makes a vague analogy between the art that Polus actually practices (rhetoric) and the art of sophistry.²⁷ The analogy is not particularly strong,²⁸ but what is important is that Polus takes it as an insult. Again, Callicles (were he a real figure) is not a sophist, because he has no interest in teaching *aretê*. When Socrates asks him about the sophists, drawing attention specifically to their business of teaching *aretê*, Callicles dismisses them as utterly worthless (*oudenos axiôn*).²⁹ And finally, Gorgias is not a sophist—not, at any rate, in the technical sense of teaching *aretê* for pay. The evidence on this is a bit more problematic (see Appendix B), but two facts stand out: (1) when Socrates asks Meno (one of Gorgias’ students) whether the sophists can really teach *aretê* as they claim, Meno replies: “The thing I particularly admire about Gorgias is that you will never hear him make this claim; indeed he laughs at the others when he hears them do so; for in his view his job is simply to make clever speakers.”³⁰ And (2), Plato’s Socrates never calls Gorgias a sophist when he is conversing with him about his own *technê* in the *Gorgias*; indeed, Socrates refers to him deliberately as a rhetorician.³¹ Thus, none of these figures is a sophist in the

²⁷ *Gorgias* 464b-466a, cf. 520b.

²⁸ See chapter 6, below, for further discussion.

²⁹ *Gorgias* 520a.

³⁰ *Meno* 95c.

³¹ See, e.g., *Gorgias* 449a: Socrates—“Gorgias, you tell us yourself what one must call you, as a knower of what *technê*.” Gorgias—“Of *rhêtorikê*, Socrates.” Socrates—“Then it is necessary to call you a rhetorician (*rhêtora*)?” Gorgias—“And a good one, Socrates, if you wish to call me what I boast that I am.”

technical sense of the word, and Plato's Socrates makes that distinction with remarkable consistency.

But then who is a sophist? According to Plato, the sophists are precisely those figures who *do* claim to teach *aretê* and who demand fees for this. In the dialogues, there are only five worth mentioning: Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. There were certainly others as well, but they were either very minor,³² or else simply not written about. But all five of these figures not only claim to teach virtue (or, at least, they allow Plato's Socrates to describe them that way); they are also referred to repeatedly as *sophistês* in the dialogues.³³

WHY SOCRATES WAS NOT A SOPHIST

Once it is realized that the sophists were, technically speaking, paid teachers of *aretê*, it becomes immediately clear why Socrates was no sophist.³⁴ The sophists and Socrates, of course, had many things in common: their general intellectual bent, their fundamental interest in *aretê*, and their use of dialectic. But Socrates stands apart from them precisely on the two points that make them who they are: he disavowed the ability to teach *aretê*, and he did not accept fees. In fact, the Platonic portrait of Socrates goes to great lengths to point these facts out. In the *Apology* (20c), Socrates claims not to be able to teach *aretê* like the sophists (noble though that would be) because he is uncertain of what *aretê* is. He makes the same disavowal in the

³² A minor figure (and there must have been others like him) was Evanus of Paros, but so little is known of him that I have not included him in this work. See Plato *Apology* 20a-c; *Phaedrus* 267a ff.; and *Phaedo* 60c-61c.

³³ For Hippias, see *Hippias Major* 281d-282e. For Prodicus, see *Protagoras* 314c-316a, where he is portrayed as a sophist along side Protagoras, and *Laches* 197d, where he is explicitly called a sophist; see also *Hippias Major* 282c, and *Symposium* 177b, and compare Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21 ff. for the sort of *aretê* Prodicus taught. For Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, see *Euthydemus* 271b, where they are described as "another new kind of sophist;" for their claim to teach *aretê*, see *ibid.*, 27d.

³⁴ For the view that Socrates was a sophist of sorts, see G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 55-7.

Protagoras and the *Meno*.³⁵ Is Socrates being ironic? Perhaps. But Plato gives his readers every reason to believe that his teacher genuinely doubted his own ability to impart virtue.³⁶ Nor did Socrates accept fees. Why not? Probably *because* he was so uncertain of his ability to impart virtue,³⁷ though Plato and Xenophon cite many other reasons as well.³⁸ When Aristophanes casts Socrates as a sophist in the *Clouds*, he must blur these very distinctions; Aristophanes' Socrates is not only a self-professed teacher, he takes fees as well.³⁹ But Plato makes clear what Aristophanes obfuscates, both about the sophists and about Socrates.

It is worth commenting, finally, on the unique position Socrates assumes in terms of personal responsibility by disavowing the ability to teach *aretê*. It is a commonplace mode of invective to disparage teachers for the vices of their students. Socrates himself does this in the *Gorgias* when he ridicules the sophists for complaining about their students' behavior (519c-d). And Plato certainly does this through artful innuendo in the *Euthydemus* when the instruction of the sophists renders their pupil hostile and bitter. But Socrates is, in a sense, exempt from this type of invective, because he does not claim to be capable of making men better. Thus even though Socrates was the teacher, ostensibly at least, of two of the most unprincipled rogues Athens had ever seen—Critias and Alcibiades—he is never blamed by his devotees for their vices. Indeed, in a remarkable passage of Xenophon (who, it should be noted, thinks Socrates greatly underestimated his own abilities as a teacher), it is pointed out that what Critias and

³⁵ *Protagoras* 360e-361c; *Meno* 70c, 100b.

³⁶ See Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* (1985): 1-31.

³⁷ Hence Plato *Apology* 19d-e, 31b-c.

³⁸ See chapter 7, below.

³⁹ Self-professed teacher, see line 1105 (which Dover assigns, contrary to the manuscripts, to the chorus); on receiving pay, see line 98.

Alcibiades needed was a good bit *more* time with Socrates. The sophists, on the other hand, cannot escape blame for their failures. That is the price they must pay for promising to teach something concrete.

CONCLUSION

Scholars who have tried to define sophistry have found their task maddeningly difficult. Almost every generalization one makes about the sophists admits of important exceptions. The sophists cannot be defined as teachers of rhetoric because Euthydemus and Dionysodorus do not practice rhetoric; they cannot be defined as practitioners of eristic because Hippias, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles cannot abide eristic. To understand them as teachers of a strictly political virtue is to ignore the myriad non-political topics that they taught. But in the face of all this difficulty, there is an eyewitness who was contemporary with the first sophists and who understood what they all had in common. This eyewitness was Socrates, and his reflections on the sophists presented in Plato's dialogues betray a consistent (and radically unconventional) understanding of who the sophists were. If the observations presented in this chapter are correct, the sophists were by definition paid teachers of *aretê*, and the principal fifth-century sophists were five in number: Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. This is not to say, of course, that Socrates or Plato really believed that the sophists were *successful* teachers of *aretê*. Indeed, the overarching message of the dialogues is quite the opposite—i.e., that Socrates, who made no claims about teaching *aretê* was actually much better at this than the sophists, who bragged about their abilities *ad nauseum*. But it *is* to say that this is how the sophists understood themselves and distinguished themselves from wise men who had come before them and from other sorts of teachers and intellectuals who were their contemporaries. The question of whether Plato's Socrates was right to doubt their ability to teach *aretê* in the way

that he did is the topic of the next section of this work. The question has serious political implications. And these will be discussed in the final section of this dissertation.

PART II

**PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF THE SOPHISTS:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION**

CHAPTER 6

PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF THE SOPHISTS

The purpose of this part of the dissertation is to examine and evaluate Plato's critique of the sophists. For if the sophists were essentially "teachers of virtue," as I have argued, then one must wonder why Plato was so critical of them. After all, virtue was very much the concern of Socrates and Plato as well, and thus one might expect them to have felt a certain kinship rather than antipathy toward the sophists. But they do not. Why should that be? Two theories are routinely presented. The first is that the sophists were basically democratic educators while Plato was an aristocrat—or on a slightly different telling: the sophists were "liberals" while Plato was an anti-liberal.¹ But this explanation cannot be correct. For setting aside the question of whether or not Plato is fairly characterized as an "aristocrat" and/or "anti-liberal," the sophists were neither liberals nor democrats. They taught a wealthy elite how to rule over the masses and they describe themselves in expressly elitist terms.² The second theory is much more dramatic: the sophists were essentially immoral—if they were not overtly immoral, then they were covertly immoral or they were on a slippery slope to immorality—and Plato, perceiving this, wanted to show his readers how wicked and dangerous they really were. Those who take this view present the conflict between Plato and the sophists as an epochal battle between order and disorder or as an eternal tension between "natural right" and "vulgar conventionalism."³ The theory is very

¹ See Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 15-23; and Eric A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); and Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. I, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

² As correctly noted by Leo Strauss in his extensive review of Havelock entitled "The Liberalism of Classical Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 12 (1959): 390-439, reprinted in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 26-64.

³ See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 62-63; and Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 114-117.

alluring, but, again, I do not think it is correct. For Plato categorically distinguishes immoralism from sophistry and presents the sophists as, by and large, teachers of traditional Greek morality.⁴ Thus to present Plato's critique of the sophists as a stark conflict between order and disorder, moral and immoral outlooks, is not only to do injustice to the evidence about the sophists, it is to misrepresent Plato.

The argument presented in this part of the dissertation is that Plato's critique of the sophists is, in fact, much less stark, but at the same time much more relevant to everyday moral life, than scholars usually realize. His critique is not that the sophists are immoral, but that they approach morality intuitively and traditionally rather than philosophically. As such, it is a critique that applies not only to the sophists but also to every non-philosopher then and now. Moreover, the questions that this critique raises are intensely meaningful—and difficult. Can we be virtuous individuals or citizens if we do not know what virtue is in a philosophical sense? Can we be sure we are benefiting rather than harming our students? Can we be sure that our polity is just?

I do not believe we can be sure of any of these things. Hence Plato's critique of the sophists serves as a useful reminder of the limits of our moral certainty. But I also do not believe that Plato's way of dealing with this problem is the only, or the best, one available. In the three chapters that follow, I examine Plato's critique of the sophists both textually and critically. The present chapter surveys passages pertaining to the sophists over the entire course of the dialogues; chapter seven defends the sophists' practice of taking fees; and chapter eight investigates the possibility of living virtuously without engaging in Socratic-Platonic philosophy.

⁴ On the categorical distinction between immoralism and sophistry, see below; on the traditionalism of sophistic ethics, see chapter 9.

INTRODUCTION

Plato never explains to his readers why he chose to write dialogues about the sophists, nor does he ever explain—except through the characters in his dialogues—what he finds wrong with them. Thus if one wishes to know about “Plato’s critique of the sophists,” one must deduce whatever one can from the various passages of criticism in the dialogues themselves. As soon as one attempts this, however, one realizes that Plato (or his characters at least) do not have *a* critique of the sophists, they have several, and these vary not only in terms of their virulence, but also in terms of their general applicability to the sophists as a class. Plato, however, did very little to emphasize the fact that some of his most caustic criticisms did *not* apply to the sophists as a class. He appears, rather, to have deliberately concealed this fact. As I shall argue below, the single criticism Plato presents as applicable to all sophists applies, in fact, only narrowly to a particular type of sophist—the Euthydemus type. In the pages that follow, I have ordered the major criticisms of the sophists in order from greater to lesser generality. The first criticisms, though leveled against particular sophists such as Protagoras or Hippias, seem to me to apply (at least potentially) to all the sophists, while the later criticisms apply to increasingly narrower groups. As it turns out, the presentation is nearly chronological, but it is not my intention to make a chronological argument about the evolution or development of Plato’s view of the sophists.⁵

DEFINING *ARETÊ*

Socrates, as will be familiar from dialogues such as the *Protagoras*, *Meno*, and *Hippias Major*, considers *aretê* to be some kind of knowledge, or at least he considers knowledge to be a

⁵ Chiefly because I do not believe we can be certain enough about the precise dates of the dialogues.

necessary and sufficient condition for *aretê*.⁶ And it is precisely from this perspective that the sophists are brought under critical scrutiny. For when Socrates questions them about the virtue or virtues they teach, they seem again and again to lack the knowledge in question. When Socrates encounters the sophist Hippias, for example, who was famous in Athens and Sparta alike for his *epideixis* on the beautiful (*kalos*) practices to which a young man should devote himself, he asks the sophist one question: “What is beauty?”⁷ And Hippias cannot answer it (not to Socrates’ satisfaction at least). Hippias can point to myriad objects that possess beauty: gold, women, pottery, etc., but this is not what Socrates wants: “What I am asking you, sir,” Socrates finally exclaims (292d), “is what beauty is *in itself*, and for all my shouting I cannot make you hear me. You might as well be a stone sitting beside me with neither ears nor a brain!” Passages like these are among the funniest in Plato’s dialogues, but there is more to them than just humor. Their purpose is to suggest that sophists like Hippias are dangerously ignorant; for they claim to teach things like “virtue” or “beautiful practices” when they in fact have no idea what these really are. “One should be ashamed,” Socrates tells Hippias, “in talking about a beautiful way of life, when questioning makes it evident that [one] does not even know the meaning of the word beauty.” For, “how can one know whose speech is beautiful or not, and the same goes for any action whatsoever, when one has no knowledge of beauty? So long as one is in that state, one might as well be dead.”⁸

⁶ See Alexander Nehamas, “Socratic Intellectualism,” in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 27-58.

⁷ *Hippias Major* 286c. *Kalos* denotes much more than physical beauty; it has a broad connotation that includes, especially, moral commendation; see chapter 11, n. 21, below.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 304d-e; see chapter 11 for a detailed analysis of this passage.

Socrates does not limit this sort of questioning to sophists. Readers of the *Apology* will recall that he puts his difficult questions to politicians, poets and craftsmen as well.⁹ In fact, he will question anyone he meets who claims to know how human beings ought to live. But when these questions are put to the sophists, the result is particularly embarrassing; for the sophists do not just claim to know about virtue and what is good for a person in general, they also teach these subjects to others for a fee. Thus they make a business out of selling wisdom which, to Socrates' mind at least, they do not possess.

It is important to be clear about the nature of this critique. It is not that the sophists necessarily teach untruths (that would be a much stronger criticism than Plato is in fact making), it is that they do not *know* if what they are teaching is really right and true. The criticism is not that they are liars, but that they are ignorant. This becomes particularly clear in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates subjects Protagoras to difficult questions about the nature of virtue and the sophist proves unable to answer them. The significance of Protagoras' discomfiture is spelled out for the reader in an earlier passage of the dialogue, where the sophists are unforgettably compared to peddlers of exotic foods: peddlers are not at all interested in the nutritional value of their wares nor in their customers' health; what they care about is *selling* their wares and turning a profit. This, Socrates maintains, is precisely what the sophists are like. They carry their intellectual wares from city to city, selling whatever their customers will buy; but they have no idea which of their notions are truly good or bad. Thus to entrust one's soul to the instruction of a sophist is to expose oneself to serious danger, not because the sophist has nothing good to sell but rather because he has neither the knowledge nor the incentive to sort out good from bad wares. This passage reveals the essence of Plato's critique of the sophists when he portrays them

⁹ *Apology* 21b-23b.

as unable to define *aretê*: the critique is not that sophistic teachings are necessarily immoral or bad, but that they *could be* for all that the sophists know. The critique is that they are ignorant.¹⁰ As to the validity of this critique: that will be the topic of chapter 8.

DEMONSTRATING THE TEACHABILITY OF *ARETÊ*

Now the question whether *aretê* could be taught was a hotly debated topic in the age of the sophists. Pindar suggests in a famous verse that *aretê* is simply transmitted through noble blood and that it therefore *cannot* be taught: “A man with inborn glory has great weight,” Pindar writes, “but he who has only learned (*mathontes*) is a man in darkness, breathing changeful purposes, never taking an unwavering step, but trying his hand at countless forms of *aretê* with his ineffectual thought.”¹¹ In the *Hecuba*, by contrast, Euripides has the Trojan Queen take a somewhat more optimistic position: “At the very least, a fair education offers a teaching in the good; and if someone should have learnt this well, then he would at least know what is shameful by having learnt a standard of beauty (*kalou*).”¹² In the opening lines of Plato’s *Meno*, the young Thessalean after whom the dialogue is named presents the question explicitly to Socrates (70a): “Can you tell me, Socrates—is *aretê* something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man, but natural aptitude or something else?” And by the end of the dialogue it is clear that Socrates is not sure, precisely because he is not sure what virtue is.

¹⁰ Hence George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 8 (London: John Murray, 1850), p. 514: “It is one thing to say of a man, that he does not know the theory of what he teaches, or of the way in which he teaches; it is another thing to say, that he actually teaches that which scientific theory would not prescribe as the best; it is a third thing, graver than both, to say that his teaching is not only below the exigencies of science, but even corrupt and demoralizing. Now of these three points, it is the first only which Plato in his dialogue [*Protagoras*] makes out against Protagoras.”

¹¹ *Nemean Ode* 3.41-2.

¹² *Hecuba* 592-602.

The problem then is how the sophists, who also do not seem to know what virtue is, can be so sure of their ability to teach it. And Plato's point would seem to be precisely that they cannot. This point is made most forcefully in the *Protagoras*. After the great sophist himself boasts the ability to teach his pupils *politikê aretê*,¹³ Socrates provides two reasons for his belief that this cannot be taught. First of all (319e-320a), great statesmen like Pericles do not even try to impart their own *aretê* to their children—which would be odd indeed if it could be taught—and secondly, the protocol in the Athenian assembly informs against it. For on matters pertaining to the state, the assembly accepts advice from *anyone* who wishes to stand up and speak; there is no requirement that people take lessons before engaging actively in politics.¹⁴ Thus, Socrates argues, it would appear that *politikê aretê* is not a matter of teaching at all, and he challenges Protagoras to prove otherwise.¹⁵

Protagoras attempts to account for these doubts by telling Socrates a beautiful myth about the origins of political virtue, followed by a number of arguments as to how it can be taught. But in the context of this dialogue the issue is far from resolved.¹⁶ Protagoras makes his case by slowly shifting the meaning of the term *aretê* until he hits upon a connotation (moral goodness) that seems both teachable and completely harmless to the institutions of democratic Athens.¹⁷

¹³ The meaning of the phrase is left purposefully vague at this point in the dialogue, but “political excellence” would be literal translation.

¹⁴ For a more elaborate discussion of these arguments, see chapter 8.

¹⁵ Patrick Coby, “The Education of a Sophist: Aspects of Plato's *Protagoras*,” has rightly pointed out that this is a loaded question. If Protagoras is going to prove that *politikê aretê* can be taught, he will have to do so carefully, lest he suggest that both Pericles and democratic Athens are acting foolishly; the results of *that* could prove harmful to career, to say the least.

¹⁶ See the last paragraph of the dialogue; and for further discussion of the myth see chapter 8, below.

¹⁷ See A. W. H. Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and the Sophists: Protagoras 316b-328d*,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 3-12.

But Socrates does not let such equivocations stand, and in the remainder of the dialogue, he grills Protagoras about the precise meaning of the word. By the end of the dialogue, Protagoras has made no headway in convincing Socrates (or the reader) that *politikê aretê*, the subject he originally claimed to teach, can be taught.

Plato revisits this criticism in the *Gorgias* (520c-d), but in a somewhat different manner. There, Socrates draws attention to the constant anxiety expressed by the sophists over their fees—whether their students will actually pay them after receiving instruction. And he points out how absurd this anxiety would be if the sophists were really teachers of *aretê* (here the word should be translated as “fairness” or “justice”). Indeed, one would think that students who had just learned *aretê* would want to pay their teachers willingly.¹⁸ Once again the effect of Socrates’ questioning is to raise doubts about the teachability of *aretê*.

Now the two criticisms presented thus far—that the sophists cannot define *aretê* and cannot demonstrate its teachability—are obviously closely related. They also suffer from a very similar logical weakness. But this it is not the purpose of this chapter to go into detail about the weaknesses of Plato’s arguments. (See chapter eight). Rather, the purpose here is simply to present Plato’s various criticisms and to note the sophists to whom they apply. Unlike the criticisms we are about to consider, which apply only to certain types of sophists or to individual sophists, these two criticisms (if valid) would have the power to impugn the sophists as a class. For insofar as sophistry is definitionally equivalent to “teaching virtue for pay,” the charges that the sophists do not know what virtue is and cannot demonstrate its teachability cut right to the core of the movement. In what follows, I want to argue that these are in fact the *only* general criticisms Plato has to offer of the sophists. They are not the only criticisms he *presents* as

¹⁸ One must exempt Protagoras from this critique because of his unique pay structure; see chapter 2, n. 43.

general, but they are in fact the only ones that are so. To demonstrate this, I shall have to show why the more familiar criticisms of the sophists do not apply to certain sophists.

MAKING BIG SPEECHES

Many, but not all, sophists practiced the art of rhetoric, which means they were, like the rhetoricians, prone to make big speeches (*makros logos*) instead of engaging in philosophical dialogue (*dialegesthai*).¹⁹ And this is something for which Plato's Socrates has little patience.²⁰ What is so bad about big speeches? The criticism has both a pedagogical and a philosophical dimension. In terms of pedagogy (and the sophists clearly did mean for their speeches to be didactic),²¹ big speeches are like books: one cannot question them beyond what they say.²² And as any sensitive teacher knows well, a lecture in which students are barred from asking questions is not only prone to be misunderstood, it is usually unpersuasive as well. Persuasion requires that the listener have his objections met and that he be led from his own view of things to that of the speaker. But to make big speeches is to ignore this. It is to assume rather than to *ask* what students are thinking and what will best persuade them. This is why Socrates complains to Polus after one of his speeches in the *Gorgias*: "I being one man, do not agree with you. For you do not compel me."²³

¹⁹ For example, the *Hippias Major* is set two days prior to a great speech Hippias is to deliver in Athens; the *Hippias Minor* is set immediately after a big speech (probably the same one); and the *Protagoras*, of course, contains the sophist's "great speech" on the origins of political *aretê*, referred to above.

²⁰ See *Gorgias* 449a, 449b, 461d; *Hippias Minor* 372e; *Protagoras* 334d.

²¹ Consider Prodicus' Hercules at the Crossroads, Hippias' Nestor speech, and Protagoras' speech on the teachability of *aretê* referred to above.

²² *Protagoras* 328d ff.

²³ *Gorgias* 471d-474b.

There is a philosophical shortcoming to speeches as well—at least to the speeches Plato assigns to the sophists and rhetoricians in his dialogues—which is that they are always fundamentally question begging. Immediately after Protagoras’ long speech on the teachability of virtue, for example, Socrates has to ask the obvious question: “what is virtue?”²⁴ And after Hippias previews for Socrates his speech on beautiful actions, Socrates must ask him the obvious question: “what is the beautiful?”²⁵ Of course, speeches need not always beg questions. One can imagine a speech that addresses beauty or virtue in itself and aims at the “truth” in a fully Platonic sense.²⁶ But the point is that speeches never seem to succeed at this in practice. In fact, according to Socrates, the search for truth depends upon conversation in a rather unique way. For in conversation one has the chance not only to refute others, but also to be refuted oneself.²⁷ Conversation is the only real opportunity one has to test one’s beliefs.²⁸ It follows that conversation, not speechmaking, is the best tool for philosophical inquiry.

Plato’s critique of “big speeches” thus has two sides—one pedagogical and the other philosophical. But to which of the sophists does this critique apply? It is an important question to ask, since it is so often presented as if it simply applies to sophistry in general.²⁹ But in fact its

²⁴ *Protagoras* 329c.

²⁵ *Hippias Major* 286d.

²⁶ It is important to remember that Socrates’ critique of big speeches is not an outright rejection of them, but a rejection of the ones he encounters in practice. Indeed, Socrates on occasion delivers speeches himself, e.g. *Gorgias* 464bff. And it becomes clear in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* alike that Socrates can envision a kind of rhetoric that he would condone.

²⁷ *Gorgias* 458a.

²⁸ *Gorgias* 478b; *Protagoras* 348c-d; *Republic* 534c. For an excellent discussion of this Socratic criterion of truth, see Alexander Nehamas, “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,” in *Virtues of Authenticity*, pp. 108-124.

²⁹ See e.g., the introduction to James H. Nichols, Jr., *Plato Gorgias*, where “rhetorician” and “sophist” are used almost interchangeably, and Plato’s treatment of rhetoric is presented as a treatment of sophistry.

application is complicated by several factors. For one thing, it does not apply at all to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who simply do not engage in speechmaking. Furthermore, it applies to Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias only with certain qualifications. (1) Hippias famously invited questions from his audiences after he delivered speeches.³⁰ This is not to say that Hippias practiced the art of Socratic conversation—far from it. But it does suggest that the pedagogical side of the critique should be softened in Hippias’ case, since Hippias’ students could ask him questions and he could answer them back. (2) According to Plato, Protagoras was quite skilled at asking questions and answering briefly; and, in fact, several ancient sources credit him with the invention of dialectic.³¹ This of course does not exempt him from criticism for his big speeches,³² but it does render the criticism significantly less powerful as an overall attack on Protagoras. And finally (3) none of the sophists relied exclusively upon big speeches as their only means of teaching virtue. All of them also employed the method of association, which would have been significantly more effective than speechmaking.³³ Thus the charge that the sophists make “big speeches” while Socrates engages in conversation has a certain degree of truth to it; but it is something of an oversimplification, and it does not apply to all the sophists.

THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND SPEECHMAKING

The next criticism relates not to speeches themselves, but to the motivations behind them.

Why is rhetoric so alluring to its students and its teachers? Why is it viewed as a good? As

³⁰ *Hippias Minor* 363d.

³¹ *Protagoras* 329b. Diogenes Laertius (IX.51) credits Protagoras with having originated the method of arguing by questions and lists among his works an *Art of Debating* (*Technê Eristikôn*); see, further, chapters 2 and 4.

³² Protagoras’ priorities are presented as distinctly unphilosophical when, in order to dodge refutation by Socrates, he deliberately lengthens his speeches (see *Protagoras* 335a); cf., however, *Theaetetus* 167d-168c.

³³ See chapter 10.

readers of Plato know well, various interlocutors confess their true motivations to Socrates over the course of the dialogues, and they are in turn criticized by him, more or less explicitly, more or less politely. What is crucial to realize in this, however, is that their motivations are not all the same. Let us examine them and observe how Socrates treats them.

(1) *Innocuous Competitiveness*: Near the beginning of the *Protagoras*, after Socrates has asked the great sophist an initial question about the substance of his curriculum, Protagoras invites everyone present to come hear his response. He does this, Socrates surmises, in order “to display [*epideixai*] his skill to Prodicus and Hippias and get some glory from the fact that we have come as his professed admirers.”³⁴ This is innocuous competitiveness: Protagoras means no harm either to Socrates or to his audience, but he sees in Socrates’ visit an opportunity to increase his own honor, and he views speechmaking as a vehicle for accomplishing that. The same motivations resurface later in the dialogue when Protagoras objects to Socrates’ method of questioning: “Frankly, Socrates, I have fought many a contest (*agōna*) of words, and if I had done as you bid me, that is, adopted the method chosen by my opponent, I should have proved no better than anyone else, nor would the name Protagoras have been heard of in Greece.”³⁵

This type of speech-as-competitiveness has a long history in Greek culture.³⁶ In the *Iliad*, for example, the council of kings is an *agon* all its own where heroes compete among themselves for the title of best speaker. But Plato’s Socrates criticizes this competitiveness nonetheless, and

³⁴ *Protagoras* 317c.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 335a.

³⁶ See H. A. Shapiro, “*Mousikoi Agones*: Music and Poetry at the Panathenaia,” in Jenifer Neils, ed., *Goddess and Polis: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 52-75; and Mark Griffith, “Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry,” Mark Griffith and Donald J. Mastronarde, eds., *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 185-207.

he usually does so by simply drawing attention to it out and contrasting it (tacitly) with his own search for truth, which is at once cooperative and unconcerned with glory. In the *Hippias Minor*, for example, the reader is told that Hippias used to compete with his speeches at the Olympic games (what could be more competitive than that?) and a little later in the dialogue, Hippias announces his desire to defeat Socrates in a battle of big speeches.³⁷ But Socrates simply wants to find a wise man with whom to converse, so that he can “learn and be improved.”³⁸ The contrast could not be more stark.³⁹ Not only Protagoras and Hippias, but Prodicus as well exhibit this competitive outlook;⁴⁰ thus it is a generic feature of sophistic speechmakers.

(2) *Self-Defense*: These same sophists are apt to see another, more serious need for speeches, however, which involves defending oneself against hostile enemies. As Hippias tells Socrates in the *Hippias Major*: “What is both beautiful and most precious is the ability to produce an eloquent and beautiful speech to a law court or council meeting or any other official body whom you are addressing, to convince you audience, and to depart with the greatest of all prizes, your own salvation and that of your friends or property.”⁴¹ This is a defensive view of rhetoric, which, like the competitive view above, has deep ethical roots. (In the *Iliad*, Achilles defends his honor and his property against Agamemnon by “speaking eloquently” and he disparages Agamemnon’s kingship because he is not a wise speaker.) The view also has quite

³⁷ *Hippias Minor* 363c-364a; 369a-c.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 369e.

³⁹ It bears mentioning that dialogue as well as speeches can be approached competitively. Polus seems won over by Socrates in the *Gorgias* not because he finds Socrates’ arguments persuasive but because he realizes that Socratic question-and-answer is a more effective weapon than Gorgian rhetoric.

⁴⁰ *Protagoras* 337a-337c.

⁴¹ *Hippias Major* 304a-b.

respectable defenders. As Aristotle would later point out, “It is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs, but not of being unable to defend himself with his speech and reason, when the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs.”⁴² But in spite of all this, Plato’s Socrates is highly critical of this defensive approach to speechmaking too. One reason is that it assumes too much about the most important things: it assumes who is right and who is wrong, what is worth defending and what is not.⁴³ Another reason is that the ability to speak persuasively in court requires that one adopt the mindset of one’s jury—imitate their nature, in order to appeal to them, which is a compromise of character Socrates consistently refuses to make.⁴⁴

(3) *Committing Injustice*: The two motivations just considered are the sophists’ motivations for pursuing rhetoric, and the rhetoricians apparently share these as well.⁴⁵ But the rhetoricians have other, more sinister motivations besides, and Socrates is rightly much more critical of these than of the sophists’ motivations. It becomes clear as Socrates questions various students of rhetoric that the reason they find the art so alluring is that they view it as a means of attaining power, which they desire in turn for self-aggrandizement and the ability to do injustice to others. These are the motivations of Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* and of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. Gorgias, who is directly or indirectly the teacher of them all, is also intoxicated

⁴² *Rhetoric* 1355^b.

⁴³ See *Hippias Major* 304c-d; *Gorgias* 488a, 500c-d; *Euthydemus* 289c-e.

⁴⁴ *Gorgias* 512d-513c; *Republic* 603d ff.; cf. *Apology* 35b-d.

⁴⁵ Consider Callicles’ speech to Socrates at *Gorgias* 486a-b: “You are careless, Socrates, of the things that you ought to take care of You would not contribute a speech correctly to the councils of justice, nor cry out something probable or persuasive, nor advise any new proposal on another’s behalf. . . . If someone seized you . . . and carried you off to prison, claiming that you were doing an injustice when you were not, you know that you would not have anything of use to do for yourself, but you would be dizzy and gaping, without anything to say; and when you stood up in the law court, happening to face a very lowly and vicious accuser, you would die, if he wished to demand the death penalty for you.”

by the power of rhetoric; it is so powerful, he tells Socrates, that “you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer as your slave; and the money maker too.”⁴⁶

Socrates’ effort to criticize the immoralist ethical stance—the desire to commit injustice and to live the life of the tyrant—is of course the central purpose of both the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*. And it will be recalled that Socrates’ critique essentially involves showing that the life of philosophy is superior to that of the tyrant—that the philosophical life is more pleasurable, more beneficial, more stable, and happier. It is a very effective critique of figures such as Callicles and Thrasymachus; but none of this should be mistaken for a critique of the sophists. Indeed, nowhere in Plato’s dialogues are the sophists ever equated with characters like Callicles, Polus and Thrasymachus,⁴⁷ and never are they accused of a similarly immoral outlook.

Plato’s critique of speechmaking in general is thus in some respects a critique of rhetoricians and sophists alike; in other respects not. It applies to both insofar as speeches are found to be pedagogically and philosophically deficient compared to dialogue and insofar as they are motivated by a competitive or defensive attitude that reveals, if nothing else, a departure from philosophical priorities. But it applies only to rhetoricians insofar as speeches are approached as an instrument of immorality.

ERISTIC

Not all the sophists, however, were apt to make big speeches; and in fact, it is important to distinguish (as Plato clearly does) between those who practiced rhetoric and those who

⁴⁶ *Gorgias* 452e. Gorgias, however, should not be grouped with the immoral students of rhetoric just mentioned, since he is clearly portrayed by Plato as a basically just man; in fact, Gorgias insists in the *Gorgias* that those who use rhetoric unjustly should be punished (456d-457b).

⁴⁷ In fact, Callicles hates sophists; see *Gorgias* 520a.

practiced eristic.⁴⁸ The brother sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, for example, used to teach rhetoric both for competitive and legal occasions, but once they discovered the art of eristic, they retired their rhetorical gloves and taught nothing but that.⁴⁹ Eristic is described by Socrates as a kind of warring with words (*en tois logois machesthai*).⁵⁰ In fact the name “eristic” itself carries overtones of strife, quarrel and contention. But eristic is distinguished from rhetoric not by its contentiousness, but by its characteristic rapid exchange of question and answer with one or a few interlocutors. The point, as its practitioners themselves will admit, is “to refute (*exelenchein*) everything that is said, whether it be true or false.”⁵¹

Plato’s critique of eristic begins by attacking its pedagogical pretensions. Its practitioners, at least on Plato’s telling, equate their art explicitly with *aretê*, and boast the ability to teach this better and faster than anyone else.⁵² Plato has Socrates ask incredulously: “Would you be the best people to incline [*protrepein*] a man toward philosophy and the practice of *aretê*?” And when the sophists say they would, Socrates challenges them to demonstrate their abilities on a young man named Clinias: “Persuade this young man that he must love wisdom and virtue, and you will oblige me.”⁵³ But the sophists in this dialogue are not able to live up to their claim. What they do instead is simply to refute their pupil again and again by drawing him into well-rehearsed linguistic paradoxes. They ask for example: “What sort of people are

⁴⁸ *Euthydemus* 272a-b, 273c-d, 304d ff.; see further, chapter 4, above.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 272b8-10, 273d3-4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 272a8.

⁵¹ *Euthydemus* 272a8-b1, 275e3-6, 276e5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 273d8-9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 275a.

learners (*hoi manthanontes*), the wise or the unwise?” And when Clinias says, “wise,” they point out that one can only learn what one does not already know, so that learners must be by definition unwise. But, then, they also argue the opposite side as well, for at grammar school, it is only the wise students who learn the intricacies of grammar while the ignorant students learn nothing. Far from igniting in Clinias a desire to seek wisdom, these sophists only render him frustrated and hostile.

Socrates, meanwhile, has much more luck with Clinias. He questions the lad about the things Clinias himself associates with virtue—health, beauty, wealth, power, honor, skill, and so on—and gets the boy to admit that these goods are never virtuous in-and-of-themselves but rather depend for their virtue on being wisely used. Thus wisdom is revealed to be a necessary prerequisite to a virtuous life, and Clinias is convinced that “everyman in every way should try to become as wise as possible.”⁵⁴ It should be noted that Socrates has not told the boy what wisdom or virtue *is*, and thus he has not taught him anything he did not already know,⁵⁵ but he has certainly persuaded the young man to seek wisdom.

Those who practice eristic cannot live up to their pedagogical claims: i.e. they cannot teach virtue. This is certainly a major part of Plato’s critique of eristic. But the critique runs deeper than that. The sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have actually moved Clinias *away* from wisdom. They have done something destructive, and this criticism is expanded elsewhere. Socrates says in the *Phaedo*, for example, that the real danger in experiencing arguments of the eristic sort, where something seems now to be true and now to be false, is that one may lose faith in reason altogether. Indeed, one may become “misologicistic” and give up on the search for truth

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 282a6.

⁵⁵ David Roochnik, “The Serious Play of Plato’s *Euthydemus*,” *Interpretation* 18 (1991): 211-232.

entirely.⁵⁶ In the *Republic*, this is shown to have serious political consequences. One must take great precautions, Socrates counsels Glaucon, not to let just anyone taste of arguments while they are young. For when a question is posed to a lad about the fair or the just, and some argument refutes his childhood convictions and ancestral beliefs, “and refuting him many times and in many ways, reduces him to the opinion that what the law says is no more fair than ugly, and similarly with the just and the good and the things he held most in honor,” he is likely to become infected with lawlessness (*paranomia*).⁵⁷ Plato’s Socrates views eristic as a full-fledged political danger.⁵⁸

That Socrates issues these warnings about eristic in the context of the legitimate teaching of dialectic raises a number of important questions. What is the difference between Socratic dialectic and sophistic eristic? After all, Socrates too leads people to view as untenable their childhood convictions about things like justice, courage and beauty. Sometimes he tries to replace people’s beliefs with better ones; but sometimes he does not. The difference has been a matter of scholarly debate.⁵⁹ But what seems most important is that Socrates practices refutation not for the love of refutation itself or for the love of victory, but always for the pursuit of truth. Thus the difference between Socrates and the practitioners of eristic lies not in their method (this must be stressed), but rather in the ends towards which the method is employed.⁶⁰ Ultimately,

⁵⁶ *Phaedo* 89d-90e.

⁵⁷ *Republic* 537e4, 539a3.

⁵⁸ See, however, *Apology* 23c ff., where Socrates admits to letting young people listen in on his refutations.

⁵⁹ See G.B. Kerferd, “Dialectic, Antilogic and Eristic,” in *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 59-67; and Alexander Nehamas, “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,” in *Virtues of Authenticity*, pp. 108-124.

⁶⁰ Nehamas, *ibid.*, p. 115. One might want to distinguish sophistic refutation and Socratic elenchus on the basis of false versus true arguments, but this is not tenable. Socrates often catches himself employing false arguments—those that depend upon mere semblances (*Theaetetus* 164c2-d8; *Republic* 454a4-5)—and sometimes it is others who

therefore, Plato's criticism of eristic is not a criticism of refutation *per se*, or of shattering conventional beliefs, or even of fallacious logical maneuvers (for Socrates makes these as well); it is rather a critique of the way the eristical sophists *use* their technique. Plato's point is that in the wrong hands eristic becomes a pedagogically dangerous technique that leads to skepticism and lawlessness instead of to truth.

This is as close as Plato's Socrates ever comes to accusing the sophists of corrupting the young. But as a critique of the sophists this also has a fairly narrow application. It obviously applies to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. And it probably could apply to Protagoras as well, for he taught the art of refutation by means of question and answer. But it in no way applies to the other sophists. Hippias is absolutely opposed to dialectical techniques, which he refers to as the "scrapings and shavings of argument cut up into tiny bits."⁶¹ And there is a world of difference between engaging one's students in a moralistic *epideixis* and engaging them in eristic. The worst one can say of Prodicus' or Hippias' teaching is that it is vague about virtue; but it is never charged with being positively harmful.

THE SOPHISTS AS FAKES

The final criticism I will consider is the strongest of the criticisms Plato brings against the sophists, but it is also in my view the least successful. When Plato presents it, he presents it as if it applies to all the sophists as a class. But it in fact does not. And what Plato appears to be doing is attempting to defame the sophists by holding them all responsible for the sort of chicanery that was practiced most notably by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. The criticism is

catch him (*Protagoras* 350c ff.). See further Rosamond Kent Sprague, "Plato's Sophistry," *Supplementary Volume of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 51 (1977): 45-61; which builds upon Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy: A Study of the Euthydemus and Some other Dialogues* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

⁶¹ *Hippias Major* 304a.

basically that the essence of sophistry as such is a deceitful forgery of genuine knowledge—i.e. that the sophists were deliberate fakes. This criticism appears first in the *Gorgias* and again in Plato's late dialogue, the *Sophist*.

In the *Gorgias* (464b-466a), Socrates converses with Polus, trying to get him to define “rhetoric,” but all Polus will do is praise it. In order to shake him up, Socrates proposes an analogy between rhetoric and sophistry that is not very flattering to either. There are certain genuine arts, Socrates explains, that pertain to political life; these include the art of legislation (*nomothetikê*) and the art of judging (*dikastikê*). The purpose of the first is to set down general rules and norms; the purpose of the second is to judge specific cases in accordance with those norms. But each of these arts is routinely forged, and here is where sophistry and rhetoric come in. Sophistry is a false image or phantom (*eidôlon*) of the art of legislation; like legislation, it makes rules, but it does so with an eye not to political well being but to pleasure. Similarly rhetoric is a pseudo art of judging; for where the true art of judging demands sobriety and soundness of mind, rhetoric depends upon flattery (*kolakeutikê*). Thus rhetoric and sophistry are closely related, not because they attend to identical matters, but because they are similarly “evil, deceitful, ignoble and untrue.”⁶²

If the purpose of this provocative passage is simply to ruffle Polus' feathers by suggesting that he is more like a sophist than he realizes (recall the antipathy that rhetoricians feel for sophists), then it certainly succeeds; but if, on the other hand, it is supposed to offer a valid critique of the sophists, it leaves much to be desired. In the first place, the distinction between the arts of lawmaking and judging (the supposed line of demarcation between sophistry and rhetoric) is artificial. Sophists and rhetoricians alike concern themselves with both these

⁶² *Gorgias* 465b; cf. 500e-501b.

areas of political life, as Socrates later admits (465c3-7): “this is the way they differ by nature; but insofar as they are closely related, sophists and rhetoricians get mixed together in the same place and about the same things.”

But the problem runs deeper still. The essence of the critique is to call both of these arts (sophistry and rhetoric) fake. And this depends upon establishing some criterion by reference to which real and fake arts can be distinguished. In this passage, the criterion is the distinction Socrates makes between “well-being” and “pleasure”: true political arts tend toward the well-being of their objects while the fake ones aim merely at pleasure or flattery. But as soon as one reflects upon the breadth of sophistic education, this criterion starts to break down. For the sophists did not limit their teaching to political matters; they also taught natural science, geometry, astronomy and linguistics, and myriad other arts. Where is the flattery and pleasure-seeking to be found in these? What would it mean to say that Hippias was a fake astronomer because he directed his astronomy toward pleasure and flattery? At this point one realizes that Plato is launching a critique of the sophists that is disingenuous. For even if their political teachings were aimed merely at pleasure (which Plato never demonstrates),⁶³ the sophists cannot be dismissed as *complete* fakes until their educational enterprises are considered in their complete form. This dilemma seems to be very much on Plato’s mind when he returns to this criticism again in the *Sophist*.

By far the most extensive treatment of the sophists in the Platonic corpus, one that both refines as well as revises the earlier criticisms of their activities, is Plato’s attempt in the *Sophist* to “define” sophistry. An aged Socrates sits silently by while a stranger from Elea inquires into

⁶³ It is important to realize that this criticism, like so much of Platonic invective against the sophists, supplies no evidence or detail. It amounts to little more than an assertion that the sophists are fakes.

the essential nature of the sophists' art. Socrates' only words serve merely to get the conversation underway. He asks the mathematician Theodorus whether this stranger from Elea might not be a god of some kind, a spirit of refutation (*elenktikos*) come to expose their weakness in argument. Theodorus assures Socrates that the stranger is a real philosopher, and anyway no devotee of verbal wrangling (*tas eridas*); but these distinctions beg questions, which the dialogue then takes up. For the precise meaning of "philosopher" is very much a matter of question, when, as Socrates says, "to some they seem of no account, to others above all worth; now wearing the guise of statesman, now of sophists, and sometimes giving the impression of simply being mad" (216c-d). Thus Socrates asks the Eleatic guest for an account of how *his* countrymen employ such terms as "sophist," "statesman" and "philosopher," and the dialogue is underway.⁶⁴

The overall course of the dialogue can be summarized succinctly. The Eleatic Stranger and one interlocutor, the young Theaetetus, attempt to define the art of sophistry by means of an often-comical method of division (*diairesis*), distinguishing sophistry from everything it is not.⁶⁵ This method, however, turns up not one but at least six different "appearances" of sophistry. The obvious task, then, is to determine once and for all the single form (*eidōs*) under which all the various appearances of sophistry can be classed. And the stranger and Theaetetus proceed to do just that, taking its form to be something quite ignoble: an art of "contradiction-making,

⁶⁴ This dialogue places more than the usual obstacles in the way of identifying "Plato's critique" of the sophists. Plato of course is not speaking, nor is his master Socrates. The question that is posed at the beginning of the dialogue is how the people of *Elea* view sophistry. Nevertheless, there is a critique of the sophists launched in this dialogue, and whether or not it was Plato's, it warrants attention.

⁶⁵ For a good discussion, see Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, vol. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 248-9; and more recently Catherine H. Zuckert, "Who's a Philosopher? Who's a Sophist? The Stranger v. Socrates," *Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2000): 65-97.

descended from an insincere kind of conceited mimicry, of the semblance-making breed, derived from image making, distinguished as a portion, not divine but human, of production, that presents a shadow play of words—such are the blood and lineage which can with perfect truth be assigned to the authentic sophist.”⁶⁶

The problem with this purportedly generic description of sophistry is that it in fact only describes sophistry as Euthydemus and Dionysodorus practiced it. That this is indeed the case is evident even from the short passage just quoted. It refers to sophistry as an art of “contradiction-making” (*enantiopoiologikês*, from *poiein*—to make, and *antilogia*—controversy).⁶⁷ Moreover, the context in which this passage appears leaves no doubt that it is the sophistry of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus that is in question. It is a type of sophistry that uses eristic to confound interlocutors and which creates verbal paradoxes identical to the paradoxes presented by the brother sophists in the *Euthydemus*.⁶⁸ There are five other types of sophistry described in the *Sophist* prior to this type, and none of them has anything to do with eristic.⁶⁹ So why would Plato have the characters in this dialogue conclude that the fake truths reached by eristic are the *essence* of sophistry? Perhaps what Plato is suggesting is that the essence of sophistry resides in its final form, its *telos*, and that its final form is the sort of trickery and deception practiced by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. But if that *is* what Plato is arguing, the reader should not make the mistake (and it would be a mistake) of believing that all the sophists fit the description that is hammered out at the end of this dialogue. That most of the sophists did not fit this description is

⁶⁶ *Sophist* 268c-d.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 268c8 and 225a-226a.

⁶⁸ See *Euthydemus* 284c-d; and cf. *Sophist* 237a-b.

⁶⁹ See *Ibid.*, 231d-e.

clear even from a superficial reading of the *Sophist* itself. Thus the harshest of Plato's criticisms of the sophists is also a very narrowly applicable criticism indeed.

CONCLUSION

Plato does not present his readers with a generic critique of sophistry that can be legitimately applied to each of the individual sophists. He does, in the *Sophist*, present his readers with an ostensibly generic critique, but it is in fact no more legitimate than the charges brought against Socrates at his trial; for it effectively accuses individual sophists of activities and ideas they neither engaged in nor held. (Socrates, I suspect, would never have made such a critique, and this is perhaps why he remains silent in the *Sophist*.) Meanwhile, the more fitting criticisms one finds in Plato's dialogues such as the *Protagoras*, *Hippias Major* and *Hippias Minor* are much more generally applicable than they at first appear. This is not to say that they are entirely valid and fair; but it is to say that *were* these criticisms valid, they would attack the entire sophistic movement at its core. These criticisms are two in number: (1) that the sophists cannot define *aretê* and, therefore, (by implication) do not know what it is; and (2) that they cannot demonstrate the teachability of *aretê* and, therefore, (by implication) cannot teach it. Whether these criticisms are valid is a topic I take up in chapter eight. But first, it will be helpful to discuss the issue of taking fees and to examine how that criticism is made.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TEACHING VIRTUE FOR PAY?

For the most part, the familiar old criticisms one hears of the sophists—that they taught rhetoric without regard for justice, that they were overly eristic, and so on—do not apply to the sophistic movement as a whole. In order to critique the movement as a whole, one must focus on those characteristics that all sophists had in common. This, it seems, is precisely what Plato did in his early and middle dialogues—in dialogues such as the *Apology*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, and *Meno*—where the critique that is presented focuses chiefly on those very traits that define “sophistry” as an art, namely, the claim to teach *aretê* and the demand for fees. The purpose of this chapter and the following one is to examine critically the way Plato and other authors who share Plato’s views present these critiques.

The question raised in this chapter is quite simple: What is wrong with taking pay for teaching *aretê*? This is, after all, a strange criticism, since the imparting of *aretê* would seem to be a praiseworthy enterprise in itself, while the expectation that one receive pay for this service would also seem perfectly reasonable. Happily, I am not the first to pursue this question. In fact, several studies have examined why ancient authors are so hostile to the idea of receiving pay for teaching virtue.¹ Looking particularly at the writings of Plato and Xenophon, at least six different reasons have been offered: (1) no one seems to know what virtue is; (2) it is not clear that virtue can be taught; (3) teachers of virtue should be available to everyone alike, not just to those who can pay; (4) teachers of virtue should *not* be available to everyone who can pay; (5)

¹ See the brief remarks in W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 35-40; and G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 25-8; and the much more extensive study by David Blank, “Socratic Versus Sophists on Payment for Teaching,” *Classical Antiquity* 4 (1985): 1-49, to which the present analysis is particularly indebted. Blank’s study makes no claim to be evaluative; its chief aims are simply to present the reasons given by ancient authors for disparaging the sophistic practice of accepting pay.

taking pay makes one a prostitute (*hê pornê*); and (6) taking pay promotes *philarguria*, the love of money. All six of these concerns invite comparison with Socrates: the sophists taught for pay; Socrates did not; the sophists claimed to know what virtue entailed; Socrates did not—and so on through the list. However, as I shall argue below, such contrasts are much more problematic than they at first appear. For while it is probably true that Socrates did *not* accept pay,² it is by no means clear that his pedagogical practices are exempt from the dangers that fee-taking is supposed to entail. Moreover, while the sophists usually *did* accept pay, it is not clear, once their pedagogical practices are considered in detail, that their taking of pay warranted much alarm. It is certainly the case, I shall argue below, that the six points listed above do not constitute a workable, general critique of the sophistic practice of taking fees.

Let us begin by being clear about what is not at issue here. There was nothing shameful to the Greeks about being a teacher in general. The great poets Homer and Hesiod were regarded as teachers, as were the seven wise and, later, Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle; and if any of these individuals fell into disrepute, it was never for teaching *per se*. Nor is there anything wrong in general with receiving pay for one's teaching, as is clear enough from the *Meno*, where Socrates and the nobleman Anytus (regarding whom, more below) agree that if someone wants to become a doctor, he should seek an established doctor from whom the craft can be learned, and not just any doctor, indeed, but one of those who "charge a fee as professionals" and announce that "they are prepared to teach whoever likes to come and learn." And what is true of medicine is true of all the crafts, Socrates and Anytus agree: "if you want to make someone a performer on the flute

² Plato *Apology* 19d-e, 31b-c. The brief mention of pay in Aristophanes *Clouds* line 876 to which scholars have frequently alluded should be dismissed as irrelevant. See Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 151, n.149. The more concrete suggestion that Socrates accepted pay is *Clouds* line 98. But this too should be dismissed as comic license. It may also be true that Socrates accepted gifts, although the tradition is at odds on this point. See Xenophon *Apology* 16 (n. 21 below), in addition to the references in Blank, "Payment for Teaching," p.7, n. 30.

it would be very foolish to refuse to send him to those who undertake to teach the art and are paid for it, but to go and bother other people instead.”³ Now it is true that to accept a fee from a pupil places certain responsibilities and constraints upon the teacher, and some people may have had good reasons for wishing to avoid these constraints;⁴ but this should not be taken as a rejection of the practice itself. Taking a fee for one’s teaching is perfectly acceptable. The real problems arise only when it comes to taking a fee for teaching virtue (*aretê*) in particular. Let us therefore take this as our point of departure. Why should the case of virtue be any different?

WHAT IS VIRTUE AND CAN IT BE TAUGHT?

What is virtue? What sort of knowledge does it involve? Is it possible to teach virtue if one cannot define it in abstract terms? These are fairly complex epistemological questions, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore them in great depth (see chapter 8). But it *is* the purpose of this chapter to consider how the raising of such questions works as a critique of the sophistic practice of fee taking, and then to evaluate the nature of that critique. The problem with teaching virtue for pay, according to the first of the 6 concerns enumerated above is that no one seems to know what virtue is; thus what passes for virtue may not be *true* virtue at all. This is, of course, a matter that Plato’s Socrates takes up with some of the most famous sophists. And

³ *Meno* 90b-e. For further evidence of the acceptability of teaching for pay, see Wilhelm Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos: Die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates* (Stuttgart: A. Kroner, 1942), p. 259, n. 36; and C. A. Forbes, *Teachers’ Pay in Ancient Greece*, University of Nebraska Studies in the Humanities, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942).

⁴ The charge that teaching for pay was “ungentlemanly” may well have carried weight for the Athenian upper class. In the *Protagoras*, for example, while the noble youth Hippocrates would spare no expense to study with the sophist Protagoras, he blushes for shame at the thought of *becoming* a sophist like Protagoras. As has been well argued by Blank, “Payment for Teaching,” p. 10, the problem here is not that Protagoras is a shameful person (why would Hippocrates want to take up studies with a shameful person?) but that Hippocrates is a gentleman and, *qua* gentleman, would be ashamed to forfeit his life of leisure for a profession of any sort. But the charge that the sophists’ trade was ungentlemanly is not one that Socrates himself, the son of a stonemason, ever takes up. Nor is it a very poignant charge in general. The fact is that not everyone was an Athenian gentleman; the sophists certainly weren’t. In fact, Protagoras was just a porter from Abdera (cf. Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Philosophers* IX.53).

Plato's retelling of these encounters invites one to draw a stark contrast between the sophists and Socrates: The sophists believe they know what virtue is; Socrates claims to have no idea what it is.⁵ This contrast is driven home most forcibly in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, where Socrates inquires into the nature of the virtues that the sophists teach and finds their answers lacking. Both dialogues in fact end with Socrates complaining that he still has no idea what virtue is.⁶ Now many questions have been raised on these points. What exactly does Socrates know about virtue? How can the man whom many take to be the paradigm of the virtuous life not know what virtue is? What, if anything, does Socrates teach? Furthermore, are Socrates' highly philosophical requirements concerning knowledge of virtue really necessary? Doesn't everyone know what virtue is to a certain extent? Don't parents teach it to children? Don't Sunday school teachers impart to their pupils? These are all valuable questions, and reflection upon them may indeed lead one to reject or at least qualify the distinction between Socrates and the sophists on the point of their knowledge of virtue. But the purpose here is simply to observe how the questions Socrates raises about the nature of virtue function as a critique of the sophistic practice of taking fees. Socrates clearly refrains from accepting pay from his associates *because* he claims not to know what virtue is.⁷ And when his conversations with the sophists reveal that

⁵ See, for example, Plato *Meno* 71a: Socrates—"You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue itself is." *Meno*—"Is this true about yourself Socrates, that you don't even know what virtue is? Is this the report that we are to take home about you?" Socrates—"Not only that, you may say also that, to the best of my belief, I have never yet met anyone who did know." But see, further, Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* (1985): 1-31.

⁶ *Protagoras* 361c; *Meno* 100b.

⁷ The causal connection is evident at Plato *Apology* 19d-20c, where Socrates denies that he has made money by educating other human beings, and after a quick survey of the various sophists and the sorts of things they teach, concludes that he would be pluming and priding himself on it if he had knowledge of these things, but he insists that he does not; cf. *Apology* 21d.

they also do not know what virtue is (at least not to Socrates' satisfaction), their practice of accepting pay appears suspect, to say the least.

Now what about concern number (2) above: the claim that virtue is unteachable? This, if true, would also make it shameful to accept pay for promising to teach it. But what are the arguments? The place to look for these is, again, the *Protagoras*, the major thrust of which is to show that the question of whether or not virtue can be taught turns on the prior question of whether virtue is knowledge or something else. The sophist Protagoras commits himself here to the position that virtue is *not* entirely identifiable with knowledge. And yet it seems to Socrates that everything teachable is some sort of knowledge, so that if virtue is not identifiable with knowledge, it must not be teachable (which does not look good for Protagoras). All this is very hypothetically put forth in the *Protagoras*, and Socrates, for what it is worth, leans in the end toward the idea that virtue *is* knowledge and that it *can* be taught. But he claims not to know what this knowledge entails and accordingly disavows all ability to teach it.⁸ A major question that might be raised at this point is why Socrates demands *so much* of our knowledge of virtue. For Socrates insists that any knowledge worthy of the name must be expressible in the form of a generic account. Thus to “know” virtue means, for Socrates, to be able to say *what* virtue is and to express this in the most abstract form. But must one really possess such knowledge in order to be virtuous and to teach virtue to others? Or is it rather the case that for the purposes of action and pedagogy virtue entails a kind of knowledge quite different from the sort of philosophical

⁸ Some of the more prominent passages suggesting that Socrates does not teach virtue include Plato *Apology* 19d-20c (previous note); *Theaetetus* 149a ff. (where he practices “midwifery”); and *Cleitophon* 408c ff. (where he is said to exhort [*protrepein*] people to virtue but not to teach virtue itself). The question of what Socrates taught is however a matter of scholarly debate. See further Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Alexander Nehamas, “What did Socrates Teach and to Whom did he Teach it?” in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 59-82.

knowledge Socrates seeks? (See chapter 8 for a further elaboration of this question.) Certainly the sophists were teaching *something* when they claimed to be teaching *aretê*,⁹ for there was a sizable demand for it. And while it is always possible to cite complaints about the content of sophistic instruction,¹⁰ it is also evident that many who received it were downright grateful.¹¹

But while one may raise all sorts of questions about the validity of Socrates' concerns, the point I want to stress here is that both the first and second criticisms of teaching virtue for pay are conditional criticisms. They attack the practice from the standpoint of unresolved philosophical questions about the nature of virtue. The result of this conditionality vis-à-vis Socrates' own position would seem to be this: there is nothing wrong with teaching virtue for pay *if* one has something genuine and valuable to teach, and *if* it is teachable. And this is in fact exactly the position we see Socrates resort to in Plato's *Apology*.

⁹ Socrates himself seems to recognize this. At *Protagoras* 91c, Anytus (who would later charge Socrates with *being* a sophist, and who clearly has no idea what he is talking about) accuses the sophists of fostering nothing but corruption (*diaphthora*), to which Socrates raises the natural objection: "A man who mends old shoes or restores coats couldn't get away with it for a month if he gave them back in worse condition than he received them; he would soon find himself starving. Surely it is incredible that Protagoras took in the whole of Greece, corrupting his pupils and sending them away worse than when they came to him, for more than forty years. I believe he was nearly seventy when he died, and had been practicing for forty years, and all that time—indeed to this very day—his reputation has been consistently high."

¹⁰ E.g., Aristophanes' *Clouds*; Anytus in the *Meno* 91c ff. Compare Socrates' critique of the sophists in the *Gorgias* 520d-e: If it were actually virtue the sophists were teaching, they would have no grounds to complain about ill will towards them. For how could someone who has just learned virtue be so *unvirtuous* as to have ill will toward his teacher? Either nothing was taught to the student after all, or else what was taught was not virtue. (This, of course, is to reduce all the virtues to that of gratitude—a fine virtue, but not one that was particularly important for a successful career in Athenian politics; and thus the critique has little power besides its comic impact.)

¹¹ Socrates points out to his jury in the *Apology* (19e-20a) that the students of Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias not only pay for their instruction but also "*acknowledge gratitude besides*." As for Protagoras, he says in the dialogue that bears his name (328b) that he is worthy indeed of the fee that he charges "and even more, *as my pupils themselves agree*." This would have been easy for Protagoras to gauge (even before the days of student evaluations!) since his unique system of collecting fees allowed students to pay either his fixed rate or else whatever the student was willing to declare on oath in a temple the lessons were worth (*Protagoras* 328b). Protagoras however may have been a little slippery to deal with. There is an amusing story reported in Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Philosophers* IX.56, of a dispute between Protagoras and one of his pupils over the fee. The pupil objected that he had not won a victory yet, and therefore shouldn't have to pay, to which Protagoras responded: "But if I win this dispute with you now, you must pay me because I've won, and if you win it, you must pay me because you've won."

If you have heard from anyone that I attempt to educate human beings and make money from it, that is not true either. Though this too seems to be noble, if one should be able to educate human beings, like Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. For each of them, men, is able, going into each of the cities, to persuade the young—who can associate with whomever of their own citizens they wish to for free—they persuade these young men to leave off their associations with the latter, and to associate with themselves instead, and to give them money and acknowledge gratitude besides.¹²

While Socrates does not teach for pay himself (presumably because he doubts his own knowledge, or teaching abilities, or both), he does not disparage those who do, assuming they meet certain conditions, which he says (ironically?), Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias fulfill. I take this to be Socrates' genuine position, even though it is fairly directly contradicted by other views ascribed to Socrates on the issue of fees that I shall consider next.¹³

TEACHERS SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE

There are hints here and there in Plato and Xenophon of another line of argument—that what is wrong with teaching virtue for pay is that knowledge of virtue should be available to everyone, not just to those who can pay. And one can easily imagine how an argument like this might go. It would be somewhat analogous to modern debates over the availability of healthcare: some things are simply too valuable to deny to other human beings whether they can

¹² *Apology* 19d8-20a1.

¹³ Blank, "Payment for Teaching," p. 20 tends to discount testimony about Socrates from the *Apology* since, he maintains, Plato has written the *Apology* with the clearly "apologetic" intent of defending Socrates against his accusers' charges and revealing his exceptional civic-mindedness. Blank does not, unfortunately, develop his reservations further, and I would tend instead to accord the *most* credence to Socrates' position in the *Apology*, since, as we shall see below, it is the most logical position to maintain.

pay or not. And to deny an education in virtue to those who cannot pay for it would seem to be an act of gross civic irresponsibility. But whatever this critique has going for it (and I am not persuaded it is a very salient critique of the sophists, since the type of virtue they sell is not, for the most part, a type that everyone needs or desires), it does not appear to have been an ancient critique.¹⁴ Socrates does suggest in the *Gorgias*, while conversing with Callicles (520c-e), that the business of teaching virtue in particular is something for which it is conventionally held to be shameful to request a fee. And Callicles agrees that this is so. But the explanation Socrates furnishes for this prejudice has nothing at all to do with the need for a commonly available education in virtue. It is rather that a teacher of virtue should not *have* to ask for a fee since his students, if they have really been rendered virtuous, should be grateful and forthcoming on their own. This is not the civic-responsibility argument we were looking for,¹⁵ nor is it a very convincing argument (see note 12, above).

The other passage commonly cited on this point is Xenophon's admonition in his work *On Hunting* against associating with the sophists: "Avoid the behests of the sophists, and despise not the conclusions of the philosophers; for the sophists hunt the rich and young, but the philosophers are friends *to all alike* [*pasi koinoi*]: but as for men's fortunes, they neither honor

¹⁴ Blank, "Payment for Teaching," p. 8, suggests that it *might* have been a view held by Xenophon, though he rightly doubts its presence in Plato.

¹⁵ I imagine there *was* a civic argument of sorts against teaching virtue for a fee, though instead of explaining this further, Socrates merely uses it as an occasion for a jibe. The grounds for the prejudice would seem to be this (as Anytus suggests in the *Meno* 92d-e): virtue is something that gets taught all the time for free as a matter of familial or civic upbringing. Who, therefore, could have the effrontery to charge a fee for it? This is of course not the same as the objection that virtue should be available to all alike. Anytus is an Athenian gentleman, and he has in mind the education of gentlemen by gentlemen (*tôn kalôn k'agathôn*, 92e4). But his point still needs to be addressed. In the *Protagoras*, Protagoras himself acknowledges that virtue is taught for free by parents, friends and citizens, and he also acknowledges the suspicions this raises about sophists (316c-d). But Protagoras' answer to this concern is simply (*pace* Anytus) that he has something more and better to teach than that which is routinely imparted (see *Protagoras* 328a-c). And given his fee structure (see n. 13 above), his students must have agreed.

nor despise them.”¹⁶ This passage too seems to suggest that teaching only those who can pay is shameful and that Socrates and the sophists should be distinguished in this regard. But there are some problems. It is not clear, first of all, that Xenophon means to criticize *all* the sophists. For he says in two places just prior to this passage that he is only referring to the sophists “of the present generation” (*hoi nun sophistai*, 13.1, 13.6), which would exempt Protagoras, Prodicus, Gorgias and Hippias from the charge. But even if he is speaking generally, it is unlikely that Xenophon means to suggest on the other side that true philosophers should be teachers of “all alike,” for if this is what he means, he would certainly be attacking Socrates along with the sophists. That Socrates was very particular about the nature of his associates, and thought others should be as well, is in fact cited by both Xenophon and Plato as itself a reason for not taking fees (see below).

TEACHERS SHOULD NOT BE AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE

Socrates had very strict criteria when it came to deciding who his close associates would be. Nobility of birth and a certain “pregnancy of soul” are among the most frequently cited.¹⁷ And the problem with teaching virtue for pay, it would seem—at least for anyone with standards as high as Socrates’—is that one becomes committed to associating with students whom one may

¹⁶ Xenophon *On Hunting* 13.9.

¹⁷ See Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.6.13 where Socrates seeks only the *kalos te k’agathon* and those who are known to have natural talent (*euphua*); cf. *Theaetetus* 151b; and *Charmides* 154e. It is crucially important in this matter to distinguish among the several kinds of people with whom Socrates conversed. There were, first of all, certain people who followed Socrates on their own accord (*automatoi*) because they greatly enjoyed hearing him refute others (Plato *Apology* 23c-e, 33a-c). These were not companions of Socrates but mere listeners. Then there were all the reputedly wise people whom Socrates, in order to put the Delphic oracle to the test, examined; Plato has Socrates list them in the *Apology* as politicians, poets and craftsmen. (The great sophists could have fallen, incidentally, into any of the three categories.) But these were still not Socrates’ so-called associates. Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.4.1 is instructive on this point, since he distinguishes sharply between Socrates’ cross-examinations of those who thought themselves omniscient (*tous pant’ hoiomenous edenai*) and his daily talks with his close associates (*sunêmereue tois sundiatribousi*). It is only the latter group in whom Socrates sought specific qualities of character.

not (or no longer) wish to see. In other words taking pay places constraints upon the free discretion that any conscientious teacher will want to exercise. This is a concern that is unmistakably attributed to Socrates by Xenophon in a number of places. In his *Memorabilia*, for example, Xenophon says that Socrates did not accept pay from his companions because “he held that this self-denying ordinance insured his liberty [*eleutherias*]. Those who charged a fee for their society he denounced for selling themselves into bondage; since they were bound [*anangkaion*] to converse with all from whom they took the fee.”¹⁸ Later in the same work, Socrates tells Antiphon something very similar, that “those who take money are bound [*anangkaion*] to carry out the work for which they get a fee, while I, because I refuse to take it, am not obliged [*ouk anangkê*] to talk with anyone against my will.”¹⁹

It will be noted that this is not only an explanation on Socrates’ part of why *he* does not accept fees, but also a general denunciation of those who do. And with the repeated evocation of words relating to freedom and slavery, it is a very morally compelling attack. Who, after all, could be against freedom and for slavery? But in spite of such evocative language, it is difficult to take this very seriously as a critique of the sophists. It is perfectly acceptable for Socrates to refrain from teaching for pay if he feels bound and enslaved by it.²⁰ But to denounce the practice for everyone else is to assume that they also feel bound and enslaved by it as well. And there is

¹⁸ Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.2.5-6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* I.6.5; cf. Xenophon *Apology* 16, where Socrates says to his jury: “Who is there in your knowledge that is less a slave to his bodily appetites than I am? Who in the world more free—for I accept neither gifts nor pay from any one?”

²⁰ Although the above passages suggest that Socrates would be adverse to contracts of all kinds. One could raise questions at this point about the morality of impoverishing his wife and children because of such extreme ideals. See *Apology* 23b-c for Socrates’ “ten-thousand fold poverty.”

in fact *no* indication that this was ever a concern of the sophists.²¹ Nor is it, incidentally, a concern for teachers today; and it is in fact hard to imagine how, for example, children would ever learn to play the piano if, at the first indication that a child is obnoxious and has no desire to learn, the piano teacher could break off all relations.

But this does not yet dispose entirely of the idea that teachers should not be available to everyone who can pay. And in fact, Plato has a way of putting this matter that makes it seem far more serious. The problem with teaching just anyone who will pay is, first of all, that some students do not know how to sort through the knowledge that is offered. This is the point of Socrates' admonition to Hippocrates at the beginning of the *Protagoras*:

We must see that the sophist in commending his wares does not deceive us, like the wholesaler and the retailer who deal in food for the body. These people do not know themselves which of the wares they offer is good or bad for the body, but in selling them praise all alike, and those who buy from them don't know either, unless one of them happens to be a trainer or a doctor. So too those who take the various subjects of knowledge from city to city, and offer them for retail sale *to whoever wants them*, commend everything that they have for sale, but it may be, my dear Hippocrates, that some of these men also are ignorant of the beneficial or harmful effects on the soul of what they have for sale, and so too are those who buy from them, unless one of them happens to be a physician of the soul.²²

²¹ This has led Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, pp. 25-6, to view this objection as disingenuous and to postulate a hidden political concern: "The real reason for the objection was not concern to protect the sophists from having to associate with all kinds of people, it was objections to all kinds of people being able to secure, simply by paying for it, what the sophists had to offer" i.e. a political *savoir-faire*. See, however, Blank, "Payment for Teaching," pp. 13-16, who challenges Kerferd's interpretation on several grounds, some of them more convincing than others.

²² *Protagoras* 313c-e (my italics).

Teachers of virtue sell something analogous to food for the soul. And the problem with introducing money into this exchange is that teachers suddenly have an incentive to sell their ideas indiscriminately, whether they are good for the student or not.²³ In fact the introduction of money into the fragile relationship between teacher and student has the potential to pervert not only teachers but students as well.²⁴ Teachers may begin to tailor their ideas to what is fashionable and marketable while students may begin to see knowledge as something that can be simply purchased as a matter of course. But it is the students in particular, especially the inexperienced ones, who suffer most since they do not know how to discriminate, and hence to guard against, knowledge that is inappropriate for their ears.

Now this is chiefly a pedagogical concern as it is presented in the *Protagoras*,²⁵ but in the *Republic* Plato shows that there is a political problem here as well. The problem arises when *just anyone* can acquire an education in dialectic.²⁶ Dialectic is the crown jewel of the philosophical education set out in *Republic* VII. It is the skill that allows the student at last “to release himself from the eyes and the rest of sense and go to that which *is* in itself and accompanies truth.”²⁷

²³ Cf. Plato *Sophist* 223e-224c.

²⁴ Plato certainly intends to make both points here, as Blank has argued.

²⁵ It seems to me to be an important concern and especially relevant to the business of undergraduate teaching today. I am thinking especially of the tendency of college professors to assume that their undergraduates are all aspiring academics, and thus to immerse them in a great deal of the irrelevant and trivial material that professional scholars spend their time worrying about, rather than tending to their liberal education. For an eloquent and provocative articulation of this problem see Michael Oakeshott, “The Study of Politics in a University: an Essay in Appropriateness,” in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 184-218.

²⁶ Dialectic is a technique which, when practiced by sophists like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, is called “eristic”, but it is also the technique Socrates employs to rid his pupils of false beliefs (see above, chapter 4). Important differences, however, should be borne in mind between sophistic and Socratic uses, chief of which is the end towards which the technique is directed; see, further, Alexander Nehamas, “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,” in *Virtues of Authenticity*, pp. 108-122.

²⁷ *Republic* 537d.

And yet it is also a dangerous skill requiring a great deal of guarding (*pollês phulakês*). For it enables one to refute what people say concerning what is right and wrong in life, and it can especially render one skeptical with regard to conventional moral ideas. Now there is nothing wrong with a little skepticism toward conventional morality, and presumably the philosophy students who receive a dialectical education in the *Republic* will come to realize the shortcomings of conventional teachings as well. But these students are prepared for this wisdom. They have been educated slowly and incrementally and have been repeatedly tested along the way.²⁸ But when any chance and unsuitable applicant can be admitted to an education in dialectic, when it is learned carelessly and when refutation is approached as a game, then students will be seen falling into “violent disbelief” and “habitual lawlessness” (*paranomia*).²⁹ This is the problem, and it of course has consequences not only for the student but for all those around him as well. And therefore it is imperative that educators not teach dialectic to just anyone.

This all seems very reasonable. But if one intends to conclude from these passages (the one from the *Republic* and the earlier one from the *Protagoras*) that the sophists are blameworthy and Socrates is blameless, there are some serious obstacles. Let us begin with the passage from the *Protagoras*. First, it is not at all clear which of the several types of sophistic practices Socrates regards as analogous to selling various foods indiscriminately. For when it comes to questions surrounding the substance of sophistic teaching one must distinguish sharply between the practice of *epideixis* on the one hand and that of association (*sunousia*) on the other.

²⁸ See especially *Republic* 537b-c. Dialectical education does not begin until the age of thirty, at which point the souls are carefully tested to determine who has a dialectical nature and who does not (*peira dialektikês phuseôs kai mê*).

²⁹ *Republic* 539d5-6, 539c1-2, 537e4.

An *epideixis* is a display lecture, which all the major sophists routinely delivered in publicly accessible places. The sophist often, although not always, charged fees for admission.³⁰ And the substance of the lectures was usually mythical and highly moral in nature. Protagoras had his famous *epideixis* about the mythical origins of the human race stressing the importance of shame (*aidôs*) and justice (*dikê*) for peaceful civic life.³¹ Prodicus captivated audiences with his *epideixis* on Hercules, the legendary hero who at the brink of manhood was confronted by a choice between a life of arduous virtue and one of immediately gratifying vice.³² And Hippias was known in Athens and Sparta alike for his *epideixis* in which Nestor, after the fall of Troy, converses with Neoptolemus about the “honorable and beautiful practices to which a young man ought to devote himself.”³³ Such speeches may well have been accessible to just anyone who could pay, but they were probably also morally innocuous. In fact they were clearly meant to exhort their hearers to virtue rather than vice, and while they may have been more or less successful in this regard, they were certainly not the sort of thing to cause grave harm.³⁴ It is

³⁰ The exception is Hippias, who, in the *Hippias Major* (283c, 285d-286b), claims to have repeatedly delivered *epideixeis* in Sparta on two subjects free of cost: on the genealogies of heroes, and on the honorable and beautiful practices to which a young man ought to devote himself.

³¹ Plato *Protagoras* 320d-322d.

³² Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21-34. Hercules of course chooses the life of virtue, and Xenophon’s Socrates has nothing but praise for the piece. Wilhelm Schmid, *Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur*, Teil 1, *Die Classische Periode*, (Munich: C. H. Bocksche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940), p. 41 refers to this *epideixis* as “one of the most influential pieces of world-literature.” George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 8 (London: Murray, 1850), p. 512, was struck by it as well, and imagined that if its power “to kindle the imaginations of youth in favour of a life of labor for noble objects and against a life of indulgence . . . be of striking simplicity and effect even to a modern reader, how much more powerfully must it have worked upon the audience for whose belief it was specially adapted, when set off by the oral expansions of its author.” Guthrie, *Sophists*, pp. 277-8, is, by contrast, cold to its moral content for the odd reason that it is not innovative enough.

³³ See *Hippias Major* 286a-b.

³⁴ Cf. *Republic* 493a ff., where Plato’s Socrates shifts the blame of corruption away from the sophists and lays it upon society itself. There were, of course, other *epideixeis* that had nothing directly to do with ethics, such as Prodicus’ lectures on the nature of language. Others still appear to have been composed for private pedagogical use rather than to be delivered in public; Gorgias’ encomium of Helen and his defense of Palamedes would seem to be among these.

probable, therefore, that Socrates was not complaining about sophistic *epideixeis* when he expressed concern over the easy availability of sophists.

What Plato's Socrates may have found objectionable was the sophistic practice of association (*sunousia*), which involved parents entrusting (*paradidômi*) their children, or else young men entrusting themselves, to the long-term care of a sophist, who was supposed to tend to his pupil's betterment.³⁵ This was a much more expensive affair than attending an *epideixis*, and there was much greater opportunity for the sophist to communicate to his pupil certain ideas and techniques of a morally sensitive nature. We think especially of the technique of "making the weaker argument appear stronger," which is caricatured in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and which Hegel once described as opening wide the door to "all human passions."³⁶ Of course, sophists did not always teach their pupils such skills right away. Hippias is said to have subjected his students first to a number of specialized studies, "teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music," before saying anything about the arts of political success.³⁷ And the same sorts of prerequisite courses are a running joke in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, where Strepsiades, much to his chagrin, is made to endure a lot of talk about geometry, the nature of the cosmos, and etymology before being introduced, at last, to the weaker and stronger *logoi*. But certainly some sophists

³⁵ The difference between the practices of *epideixis* and association is very clearly marked at *Hippias Major* 282b-d, where each of the great sophists is reported to have done both. On "association" see also, *Protagoras* 312c1, 316c; *Hippias Major* 283e5. Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 30, notes that association would have been a very effective pedagogical method, since "the students gained not only from their close contact with the mind and personality of the sophist, but also from the intellectual stimulus of associating with each other in a group of young men all concerned with the same studies." The model for this type of teaching reached back to the mythical figure of Cheiron, to whom Achilles, Jason, Medius (Jason's son) and Asclepius were sent to be educated; it had a strongly aristocratic appeal. See, further, Frederick Beck, *Greek Education: 450-350 B.C.* (New York: Teacher's Press, 1964), pp. 73-5.

³⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 269.

³⁷ Plato *Protagoras* 318e.

got to the good stuff right away. For this is what Protagoras claims to do in Plato's dialogue about him: "from me he [the pupil] will learn only what he has come to learn. . . . The proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the state's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as a speaker and man of action."³⁸

We have it from Diogenes Laertius that Protagoras taught his students many skills pertaining to debate: he was the first to practice the technique of attacking any thesis, the first to make use of the art of questioning, and the first to say that on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other.³⁹ Thus the sophistic practice of association may well constitute the main target for Socrates' various criticisms (the one from the *Protagoras* as well as from the *Republic*); for association appears to entail both a lack of discrimination on the part of the teacher, as well as a ready imparting of dialectic to just anybody.

But there is still a problem. For the fact is that the practice of charging a fee did not *in any way* prevent the sophists from also carefully selecting their students based on other criteria. And, indeed, it comes out in the *Protagoras* itself that Protagoras had a number of criteria, some of them used by Socrates as well—age, family, natural talent (as well as being able to pay the fee). This is precisely why Hippocrates is afraid in this dialogue that Protagoras will "keep his wisdom to himself" instead of sharing it. Socrates of course tries to assure Hippocrates that when it comes to sophists, money talks, but Hippocrates will have nothing of it:⁴⁰ "If it were only a question of that!" says Hippocrates, "I shouldn't keep back a penny of my own money, or my

³⁸ *Protagoras* 318e-319a.

³⁹ *Lives of the Philosophers* IX.51-53.

⁴⁰ *Pace* Leo Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 54-5: "For Protagoras it is sufficient to know that his potential customer can pay for his services...."

friends' money either. But this is just the reason why I have come to you, to persuade you to speak to him on my behalf. For one thing I am too young."⁴¹ A bit later, when Socrates does introduce the two, he stresses the very criteria one would expect: "Hippocrates here is one of our native citizens [*tôn epichôriôn*], . . . from a great and prosperous family [*oikias megalês te kai eudaimonos*], and is considered the equal of any of his contemporaries in natural gifts [*tên phusin*]." Birth, wealth, and natural ability: this is hardly an indiscriminate interview process.⁴² Moreover, the sophists' insistence upon certain criteria must have been common enough, and familiar enough to Athenians at large, that Aristophanes could poke fun at this in a chorus of the *Clouds*:

O human being, desiring great wisdom from us, how happy you will become among Athenians and the Greeks! —if you have a good memory, and are a thinker, and have hard labor in your soul, and aren't wearied either by standing or walking, and aren't too much annoyed when you shiver with cold, and have no desire to dine, and keep away from wine and gymnastics and the other mindless things, and believe that it is best (which is likely for a shrewd man) to win by being active and taking counsel and warring with your tongue.⁴³

We can conclude from this that when it came to the practice of association, the sophists may have taught morally questionable material, but it was not common for them to do so either without preparation or without carefully discriminating between suitable and unsuitable

⁴¹ *Protagoras* 310d.

⁴² *Protagoras* 316c8-10. For further evidence of Protagoras' concern for natural talent, cf. *Protagoras* 327c; also extant are a few odd fragments of Protagoras' work which, while admittedly cryptic, attest to his sensitivity to pedagogy; see, e.g., DK 80 B10, 11 and 12.

⁴³ *Clouds* 413-20.

applicants. Thus the concerns that Socrates expresses in the *Protagoras* and *Republic* about sophistic education in general and the practice of fee-taking in particular, do not turn out to constitute a workable critique of the sophists, once we are willing to look in detail at the sophistic practices themselves.

There was, of course, one sophist in particular, or rather two sophists nearly indistinguishable from each other, in whom Socrates' concerns both from the *Protagoras* and the *Republic* strike home. These are the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. In Plato's dialogue *Euthydemus*, Socrates describes the brother sophists as "so skillful in wordy warfare that they can confute with equal success anything that anyone says, whether false or true! ... and they say that in quite a short time they would make *anyone else* as skillful as they." And, again, Socrates says of the brothers: "They declared that they were able to teach *anyone who would pay the fee*, no age and no brains barred—all welcome, all would easily learn their clever system."⁴⁴ If the things Socrates says about them are true, these sophists would absolutely fit the bill. Moreover, the moral concerns that Socrates expresses about their indiscriminate teaching of dangerous intellectual skills should be taken very seriously. These sophists seem to me to warrant our censure. However their case does not warrant our blaming the pedagogical practices of "the sophists" in general, and much less our praising of Socrates. Why not? Because while the brothers were probably an exception among the sophists in teaching dangerous skills to *just anyone*, Socrates appears to have done this as well—in spite of the fact that he refused to take fees. This comes out clearly in Plato's *Apology*, where Socrates admits:

The young who follow me of their own accord—those who have the most leisure, the sons of the wealthiest—enjoy hearing human beings examined. And they themselves

⁴⁴ *Euthydemus* 272a-b, 304b.

often imitate me, and in turn they attempt to examine others. And then, I suppose, they discover a great abundance of human beings who suppose they know something, but know little or nothing. Thereupon, those examined by them are angry at me, not at themselves, and they say that Socrates is someone most disgusting and that he corrupts the young.⁴⁵

The fact is that the problem identified in the *Republic* concerning the dangers of dialectic is a problem that Socrates encountered himself, and thus the problem has *nothing* to do with the acceptance or non-acceptance of fees, but everything to do with revealing one's intellectualism in public.⁴⁶ Indeed, the irony in all this is that the practice of taking fees would probably have *reduced*, not increased, this danger.⁴⁷

TAKING PAY MAKES ONE A PROSTITUTE

Now comes one of the more caustic criticisms in the repertoire, the occasion for which was a conversation between Socrates and the sophist Antiphon recorded in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Antiphon here attacks Socrates' practice of not taking fees for the following reason: Surely, says Antiphon, Socrates would not part with his cloak or his house or any other of his possessions for free if he thought them to have value, and thus his practice of parting with his wisdom for free reveals that it is not worth anything. Now one might expect Socrates to

⁴⁵ *Apology* 23c-d.

⁴⁶ This has led Alexander Nehamas, "What Does Socrates Teach and to Whom Does he Teach it?" in *Virtues of Authenticity*, pp. 60-61, to regard the passage from *Republic* Book VII (537d-539d) as a Platonic critique of Socrates' public conversations described in *Apology* 23c-d.

⁴⁷ Hence Socrates' final comment to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (*Euthydemus* 304a): "One thing about your system—it is excellent for putting over quickly, but it is not suitable to exhibit in public. If I dare advise you take care not to speak before a crowd, or they may learn it quickly and forget to thank you. The best thing would be for you two to argue against each other in private; or if there must be another then *let it be one who will give you a fee*" (my italics).

admit that his wisdom is not worth anything, or else to deny that he possesses wisdom altogether, but this is not the response he makes. Instead, he offers an analogy between wisdom and beauty:

Antiphon, it is common opinion among us in regard to beauty and wisdom that there is an honorable and a shameful way of bestowing them. For to offer one's beauty for money to those who want it [*tô boulomenô*] is called prostitution [*pornon*]; but we think it sound-minded to become friendly with a lover who is known to be noble [*kalon te k'agathon*]. So is it with wisdom. Those who offer it to anyone who wants it [*tô boulomenô*] for money are known as sophists, [just like prostitutes], but we think that he who makes a friend of one whom he knows to be gifted by nature [*euphua*], and teaches him all the good he can, fulfils the duty of a citizen and a gentleman. That is my own view Antiphon.⁴⁸

This is a strange tack for Socrates to take since he does not usually respond defensively when his knowledge is attacked. But Xenophon's Socrates is somewhat more openly a teacher of something concrete than Plato's Socrates.⁴⁹ At any rate, let us begin by simply setting aside the allegations here that (1) the sophists offer their knowledge to all comers, and (2) they do not discriminate between students with good natures and bad, since we have already seen that these were by no means universal traits. And let us focus directly on the analogy between sophistry and prostitution. This, it seems, is a very effective way of criticizing the practice of taking fees. But its effect lies not so much in any rational argument as in the evocation, and novel extension,

⁴⁸ *Memorabilia* I.6.11-14.

⁴⁹ The last four chapters of Book 1 of the *Memorabilia* are specifically intended to refute those who believe (falsely according to Xenophon) that Socrates was incapable of improving his companions. Cf. Xenophon *Apology* 26: "Far from ever doing any man a wrong or rendering him more wicked, [I] have rather profited those who conversed with me by teaching them, without reward, every good thing that lay in my power." Cf. the passages from Plato in note 10.

of a basic moral prejudice. Selling one's body is bad; therefore so is selling one's mind. But does the analogy here taken for granted really hold up? We share our minds with numerous people every day, moving from one person to another, sometimes even discoursing in groups; and Socrates himself was certainly not intellectually monogamous.⁵⁰ Thus before one even comes to the question of accepting fees, there are important differences between sharing beauty and sharing knowledge that render the analogy suspect.

But when it comes to taking pay, the differences are even greater. There is no moral taboo against the receiving of pay for knowledge in ancient Greece.⁵¹ This has already been demonstrated in the passage examined from the *Meno* at the beginning of this chapter. Music teachers, doctors and shoemakers all train their students by bestowing upon them the knowledge necessary for practicing their trade, and it was absolutely commonplace to accept a fee for this service. Of course selling knowledge of virtue in particular may be different, since virtue can be viewed as a beautiful thing, something desirable in and of itself. This is perhaps why Socrates thinks virtue should be imparted not for profit, but out of a desire for love and friendship. Indeed, Socrates even remarks (immediately following the passage cited) that while "others have a fancy for a good horse or dog or bird: my fancy, stronger even than theirs, is for good friends."⁵² But virtue meant many things in fifth century Athens, and among the most common connotations of the word was "the ability to manage one's household or one's city effectively," or "the ability to produce an eloquent and beautiful speech . . . and to depart with the greatest of

⁵⁰ Even though the passage above, for good reason, uses the singular for the object of Socrates' intellectual love, the lines immediately following speak of his *philo*i in the plural.

⁵¹ J. S. Morrison, "Socrates and Antiphon," *Classical Review*, New Series 5 (1955): 8-12, argues persuasively that the view Socrates expresses here is one held only by him and his associates and *not* by Athenians at large.

⁵² *Memorabilia* I.6.14

all prizes, your own salvation and that of your friends and property.”⁵³ This is precisely the type of virtue that the great sophists were marketing. And virtue in this sense can rightly be compared to technical knowledge; for as with technical knowledge, virtue here stands as the knowledge necessary for achieving certain specified ends that are extrinsic to the virtue itself and are supposed to be profitable. As with the technical knowledge involved in medicine or shoemaking, virtue is viewed as a means. Of course, the sophistic type of virtue is certainly not the only kind of virtue worth cultivating; but it was without doubt an important and desirable kind of virtue for anyone active in public life. Therefore Socrates’ moral condemnation of taking pay depends, here, upon a highly questionable analogy between beauty and virtue, an analogy which seems reductionistic not only because it reduces all the virtues to those whose value is intrinsic, but also because it reduces all human relationships to those whose value lies in *philia*. It is worth noting, finally, that the sophistic sale of practical virtue in no way prevents the passing on of other kinds of virtue through love and friendship. It is hard to see why these should be mutually exclusive.

TAKING PAY PROMOTES LOVE OF MONEY

Mention of *philia* brings us to a final criticism of the sophistic practice of fee-taking. This is the criticism that the practice in itself promotes the vice called *philarguria* or love of money. In the *Memorabilia* Xenophon makes clear that *philarguria* was something that Socrates consciously set out to avoid not only in himself but in his associates: “Nor indeed did [Socrates] render his companions *lovers of money*. For while he checked their other desires, he would not

⁵³ *Protagoras* 318e-319a (cf. *Meno* 91a); *Hippias Major* 304a-b; see further C. J. Rowe, “Plato on the Sophists as Teachers of Virtue,” *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983): 409-427.

make money himself out of their desire for his companionship.”⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the sophists were frequently held to be *philarguroi*. The comic poet Plato, for instance, refers to their *philarguria* directly.⁵⁵ And Xenophon has Socrates remark in the *Symposium* that Prodicus—whose income was substantial (see below)—was always “in need of cash.”⁵⁶

It is hard to gauge the extent to which *philarguria* was generally regarded as a vice by the Greeks. Clearly, in the Christian era it was singled out and attacked as a vicious perversion of the love owed to God.⁵⁷ But in the Greek world, the story is not so simple. In Homer—whose works still carried major ethical weight in the fifth century—love of money is never mentioned as a vice and, on the contrary, something similar appears as a virtue. Menelaos is praised heartily in the *Odyssey* for his opulent possessions, of which he is clearly proud, and when in the *Iliad* “Sarpedon remembers his orchards and his cornfields back in Lycia during the agonies of battle by the ships, he reflects that it is because he and Glaucus are foremost among the warriors that they are held to deserve such good things.”⁵⁸ But as early as the sixth century B.C., *philarguria* had been identified as a political problem. Solon mentions it explicitly as the cause

⁵⁴ *Memorabilia* I.2.5. The word Xenophon uses, *erasichrêmatoi*, formed by combining *eraô* (to love) and *chrêmata* (money), is extremely rare and in fact this is the only instance of which I am aware in the corpus; *philarguros* and its cognates were much more common.

⁵⁵ Plato Comicus *Peisander* fr. 103, Theodoros Kock, ed., *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, 3 vols., (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880-1888).

⁵⁶ Xenophon *Symposium* 4.62. Cf. Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists* (I.12), where Prodicus is said to have had a “weakness for money.” Philostratus, however, appears to be simply extrapolating from the remark found in Xenophon, whom he mentions by name a line later.

⁵⁷ See *II Timothy* 3.1-5; and *Luke* 16.14, where the Pharisees are said to be *philarguroi*.

⁵⁸ Homer *Odyssey* IV.40 ff., cf. XI.355-361. Both passages suggest that wealth (if not money) was held in high esteem by Homer’s characters. It is also evident, however, that the value of one’s possessions should be ranked below certain other goods: in the case of Menelaos, his lost companions, in the case of Odysseus, his homecoming. The quote is from Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 127, who lists prosperity among other virtues in heroic societies.

of the class conflicts that he was appointed in the year 594 to allay.⁵⁹ Whether Solon understood *philarguria* as a moral failing as well as a political problem is difficult to determine. But by the fifth century at least, the word denoted a personal vice. Creon accuses the wise prophet Teiresias of being *philarguros* in Sophocles' *Antigone*, along with "the entire clan of seers."⁶⁰ And Plato's Socrates fastens upon this vice repeatedly. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates reproaches his own jury for caring more about money than the state of their souls, and instructs them that "Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money and all the other good things for human beings both privately and publicly."⁶¹ In the *Gorgias*, Socrates calls the leadership of Pericles into question, especially the institution of pay for jurors in the year 462-1, and alleges that Pericles has rendered Athenians more *philargurous*.⁶² And in the *Republic*, Socrates tells Glaucon that *philarguria* is both said to be and *is* a reproach.⁶³

But the very fact that Socrates must go around saying such things suggests that *philarguria* was *not* in fact widely regarded as a vice. And one finds other indications that this was so. In the conversation between Socrates and Cephalus in *Republic* book one, "the many" are said to be money loving to a degree that makes Cephalus appear moderate, and Cephalus—it should be recalled—views money as absolutely necessary (though not sufficient) for a virtuous life, and thinks it morally incumbent upon a man to multiply the inheritance he receives. The common acceptance of *philarguria* is also revealed when Socrates remarks to Hippias in the

⁵⁹ See the fragments of Solon's poetry in Aristotle *Constitution of Athens* 5.

⁶⁰ *Antigone* 1055.

⁶¹ *Apology* 29e, 30b.

⁶² *Gorgias* 515e.

⁶³ *Republic* 347b.

Hippias Major that “it is a popular sentiment that the wise man must above all be wise for himself; of such wisdom the criterion in the end is the ability to make the most money.”⁶⁴

Socrates is no doubt speaking ironically as far as his own view goes; but that this was indeed the common view is betrayed by a similar statement by Isocrates, who claims to hold the view himself without the slightest hint of irony.⁶⁵ It is always risky to make analogies across cultures and times, but it would seem that the Greeks were basically similar to us in holding conflicting and sometimes self-contradictory views about money.

This is an important fact to establish, since it is clear that the sophists were not only unashamed of making money but were also, to judge from some sources, extremely good at it. The average skilled laborer in fifth-century Athens earned 1 drachma per day.⁶⁶ Protagoras and Gorgias, by contrast, as well as the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea, are each said to have charged 100 minae per student, per course (1 minae = 100 drachma).⁶⁷ Prodicus appears to have charged every person attending any given *epideixis* fees ranging from one to fifty drachma.⁶⁸ This was an extremely profitable business, to say the least. In fact, when Socrates remarks to

⁶⁴ *Hippias Major* 283b.

⁶⁵ *Antidosis* 157-8.

⁶⁶ 1 dr./day was the salary, for example, of the architect who worked on the Erechtheum (a temple on the Acropolis), and this enabled him to maintain a small family. See, further, N. Himmelmann, “Zur Belohnung künstlerischer Tätigkeit in Klassischen Bauinschriften,” *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 94 (1979): 127-42. Hoplites in the Athenian army were allowed two drachma per day (one for rations and another for an orderly).

⁶⁷ Actually, the sources do not specify what the 100 minae was for; they only say it was the sophists’ fee. But it could not have been the cost of attending an *epideixis*, or no one would have come. It is probably the cost per student of a fixed period of association with the sophist, something like a prolonged course, which Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, p. 27, notes may have lasted as long as three or four years. On this fixed fee, see [Plato] *Alcibiades I* 119a; Diogenes Laertius IX.52; Suidas, “Gorgias” (DK 82 A2); Diodorus Siculus XII.53.2 (DK 82 A4).

⁶⁸ Socrates complains humorously in the *Cratylus* (384b) that he cannot use words correctly because he has only heard the one-drachma *epideixis* of Prodicus but not the fifty-drama one, which promised a complete education in the matter. Aristotle writes in the *Rhetoric* (1415b12 ff.) that Prodicus would try to keep his listeners from dozing by “throwing in some of his “fifty-drachma” material.”

Hippias that Gorgias, Prodicus and Protagoras have each “earned more from his wisdom than any other craftsman from his art, whatever that may be,”⁶⁹ Hippias tells Socrates that he “doesn’t know the half of it!” and continues:

If you were told how much I have earned, you would be astounded. To take one case only—I went to Sicily once while Protagoras was living there. He had a great reputation and was far older than I, and yet in a short time I made more than one hundred and fifty minae. Why, in one place alone, Inycus, a very small place, I took more than twenty minae. When I returned home with the money I gave it to my father, reducing him and his fellow citizens to a condition of stupefied amazement. And I feel pretty sure that I have made more money than any other two sophists you like to mention, put together.⁷⁰

His father should have been surprised, since one hundred and fifty minae is the equivalent of fifteen thousand days (more than 42 years) of work. Not bad for a short trip.⁷¹

Socrates, of course, stood in stark contrast to the sophists on the point of wealth. If we can believe the things Antiphon says of him, his coat was threadbare, he never wore shoes or a tunic, and he sustained himself on the worst nourishment available.⁷² And in spite of all this, he refused to accept a fee from his students.

⁶⁹ *Hippias Major* 282d. Compare *Meno* 91d, where Socrates claims that Protagoras “earned more money from being a sophist than an outstandingly fine craftsman like Phidias and ten other sculptors put together.”

⁷⁰ *Hippias Major* 282d-e.

⁷¹ Similar calculations are presented by Blank, “Payment for Teaching,” p. 3. All these figures, especially the fixed rate of 100 minae, have been thought to be exaggerations. See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, pp. 26-7; and Gregory Vlastos, “Plato’s Testimony Concerning Zeno of Elea,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 95 (1975): 159-60. It is also worth noting that while the sophists were criticized for making too much money, they could also be criticized for making too little, since this implied that what they were selling lacked value. In Plato’s *Apology* (20a-b), Socrates ridicules Callias for finding his sons a cheap sophist—Evenus of Paros, who charged a mere five minae—instead of the expensive ones whom Callias had engaged for himself. Isocrates (*Against the Sophists* 3-4) similarly denounces the fourth century sophists on the grounds that they charged only three or four minae; the price is too low if they can teach what they claim (Isocrates himself charged a fee of ten minae.)

⁷² See Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.6.2-3.

But the crucial thing to realize in all this is that one need not make the choice between Socrates' extreme poverty on the one hand and the sophists' extreme wealth on the other. Nor need our ultimate judgment on the practice of taking fees hang in the balance of such a falsely dichotomous choice. It is possible to accept pay for one's teaching without setting one's rate at one hundred minae per student, and it is even possible to charge that amount and yet not be viciously attached to the wealth. Indeed, if there is a problem with the sophists here, it is *not* that they took fees, in spite of all that has been said to this effect, but that they were excessively covetous of wealth. Whether they were in fact excessively covetous or not is, of course, very difficult to tell from the handful of *ad hominem* remarks we possess. (Isocrates, in contrast to Plato and Xenophon, defends the sophists ardently against this charge, pointing out that some of them were quite poor, others only moderately wealthy.) And, even more difficult to tell is whether (assuming certain sophists were excessively covetous of wealth) this vice would have been passed on to their students *because of* the fee. I find this very unlikely, as did Philostratus, who, after mentioning that Protagoras invented the practice of taking fees, cautions his readers that "He merits no reproach on this account, since we are more enthusiastic about pursuits that cost us money than about those that cost us nothing."⁷³ Thus the concern attributed to Socrates by Xenophon that taking fees will lead to *philarguria* in one's students seems to be a matter of sloppy causal reasoning. Certain sophists may have possessed the quality in question, as perhaps did many of their students, but there is no reason to suppose that the very act of charging a fee will, in and of itself, produce *philarguria* in one's students.

⁷³ *Lives of the Sophists* I.10.4

CONCLUSION

Six different arguments purporting to show why it is wrong to take fees for teaching virtue have now been examined. By way of concluding, it will be useful to revisit briefly the first set of arguments, which led to the position that Socrates expressed in Plato's *Apology*: that nothing is wrong with teaching virtue for pay so long as it can actually be done—i.e., so long as it is indeed virtue that is being taught, and so long as it is indeed possible to teach it. This is the only position that seems to me to make sense. For the other arguments, which attempt to dismiss fee-taking either by pointing to certain pedagogical shortcomings of particular sophists or by pointing to certain pedagogical virtues of Socrates, all fail in terms of generalizability. This leads me to suspect that Socrates did not actually put forth all the arguments ascribed to him on this topic by Plato and Xenophon, or, what is more likely, that he did not put them forth as a general critique of the sophistic practice of fee-taking. I suspect this not because Socrates is incapable of error—that is, of mistaking the practice of taking fees for the cause of whatever other features of sophistic pedagogy he did not admire—but rather because Socrates knew all the major sophists and their pedagogical practices first hand, while his disciples Plato and Xenophon did not.⁷⁴ Moreover Plato and Xenophon had a vested interest in distinguishing their teacher (who seemed to Aristophanes, Anytus, and many other Athenians as well, to *be* a sophist) from the sophists and in vindicating his pedagogical practices. It seems likely that they would seize upon the matter of taking fees as a potentially generalizable as well as significantly moral point of difference. However that may be, the statement that Socrates makes in Plato's *Apology*—the only statement that makes sense as a sustainable general position on the matter of taking fees—is

⁷⁴ Plato and Xenophon, both born in the year 428, would not have been alive for the conversation that supposedly took place at the house of Callias in the *Protagoras*. They would have been only one year old when Gorgias made his famous mission to Athens and about ten when Protagoras died.

also a notably conditional statement. It makes the practice of fee-taking hinge upon such questions as what virtue is and whether or not it is teachable, questions we know to have been deeply troubling to Socrates. As mentioned earlier, these turn out to be complicated epistemological and sometimes metaphysical questions. But while such questions can and must be engaged before one can adequately evaluate the sophists themselves, they need not be resolved in order to speak to the issue of fee-taking *per se*. It is the conclusion of this chapter that nothing said by Socrates or his followers warrants rejecting the practice on either moral or political grounds. With respect to politics in particular, there is no evidence to support the view that the sophistic practice of fee-taking had a deleterious political effect. In fact, to the extent that sophistic “wisdom” bordered on skeptical teaching—as it did, especially with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus—the practice of taking fees probably limited the negative political consequences of the art, since only a small group of relatively wealthy students could have afforded the instruction. However, in general, sophistic teaching was not politically dangerous. I shall return to the question of the political implications of sophistic teachings in chapters nine and eleven.

CHAPTER 8

SOCRATES' DEMAND FOR AN ACCOUNT OF *ARETÊ*

Besides the practice of taking fees, the major trait that all the sophists have in common is their bold claim to be teachers of *aretê*. Human excellence, as the first part of this dissertation has shown, meant different things to different sophists. For Hippias, it meant the cultivation not only of political skills such as the art of rhetoric, but also of diverse intellectual subjects ranging from geometry and astronomy to poetry and music. For Protagoras it entailed, among other things, the cultivation of sound practical judgement (*euboulia*) within the strict parameters of moral virtues such as justice and respect for others. For Prodicus it involved the ability to distinguish carefully between the meanings of words, especially ethical words, so as to avoid being confused or confounded by the perilous similarities among objects of human experience. And for Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, it evidently entailed (in contrast to Prodicus) the *ability* to confuse and confound, to prove someone wrong under any and all circumstances.

But whatever the various sophists took *aretê* to entail, they all claimed to be capable of teaching it. And this accounts for one of the most challenging criticisms brought against them in Plato's dialogues, the criticism that the sophists cannot possibly teach *aretê* because they cannot even define it. This criticism is usually made indirectly,¹ but that does not mean it is made ineffectively. Indeed, it is probably the most influential of all Plato's critiques. One finds it, for example, in the *Protagoras*, where the greatest of all sophists, Protagoras, proves unable to meet Socrates' simple request for an account of *aretê*. Two conclusions would seem to follow: (a) that Protagoras is ignorant about *aretê* and (b) that he is unable to teach it. But do these conclusions really follow from Protagoras' inability to supply a Socratic-style account of *aretê*?

¹ Although, see *Hippias Major* 304e; and *Protagoras* 313c-314b for rather explicit versions.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that they do not. If the arguments of this chapter are sound, it will follow that this long-standing prejudice against the sophists—viz., that they cannot teach *aretê* because they cannot meet Socrates' demand for an account—should be dropped,² unless it can be supplemented by some more convincing evidence that the sophists were incapable teachers. It should be noted that Socrates' demand for an account has serious political implications. If he is right that virtue or political excellence cannot be taught unless one possesses a Socratic-style account of *what* it is, then it must follow that political excellence has never been taught. The purpose of this chapter, however, is to argue that virtue *can* be taught, and *is* taught, without recourse to an “account.” The political implications of the view that I defend here will be explored in greater depth in chapter 11.

THE CRITIQUE

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates asks the great sophist after whom the dialogue is named what one might expect to learn from his instruction. And he replies rather vaguely (318a6-9), “your gain will be this: the very day you associate with me, you will go home a better man, and the same for the next day; every day you will make progress toward a better state.” Pressed for more detail, Protagoras explains (318e5-319a2) that what he teaches is *euboulia*—sound judgment—and this in two areas: in the affairs of the household, so that one might best manage his estate, and also in the area of politics, so that one might best manage the affairs of the *polis* by

² While it has been common among modern scholars to take issue with Socrates' “demand for an account,” it has not to my knowledge been recognized that to do so is, at the same time, to exonerate the sophists from the charge that they do not know what *aretê* is. In my thinking about Socrates' demand for an account, I have benefited especially from P. T. Geach, “Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary,” *The Monist* 50 (1966): 369-382; Hugh H. Benson, “The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990): 19-65; Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. chs. 6-8; and Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 2, “Socratic Intellectualism.”

becoming most powerful (*dunatôtatos*) in both words and deeds.³ Socrates then asks Protagoras if what he teaches is the art of politics (*politikên technên*), how to make men good citizens (*agathous politas*) (319a3-5), and Protagoras responds (319a6-7): “That is exactly what I announce [*epangellomai*] I can do.”⁴

But Socrates is skeptical of Protagoras’ claim and offers two reasons why it would seem that *aretê* of this sort cannot be taught. In the first place, if it could, the Athenian Assembly would probably not proceed the way it does, allowing just anyone to stand up and speak on matters of great political moment. Indeed, they would seek experts to speak, people who have been instructed in the supposed art of politics, just as they do when the issue is a technical one of architecture or military strategy; but, in fact, the Assembly *does* allow just anyone to get up and speak, because, Socrates reasons, it assumes that political excellence cannot be taught. Moreover, Socrates notes, the best statesmen in Athens do not even try to impart their *aretê* to their own children, which would be odd indeed if *aretê* could be taught. In fact, (surely a bit of humor here) Pericles’ two sons Paralus and Xanthippus are in attendance with Protagoras rather than with their father, arguably the most politically virtuous man in Athens, during the entirety of the dialogue. It would seem, again, that the sort of *aretê* that makes one good at politics cannot be taught. Thus, Socrates asks Protagoras for a display, an *epideixis*, showing that *aretê* can be taught.

A careful reading of the dialogue, however, will reveal that Socrates is not really interested in the question of whether Protagoras can teach his brand of *aretê*. Indeed, Socrates

³ On the ethical overtones of the word *euboulia*, particularly going back to Homer, see Malcolm Schofield, “*Euboulia* in the *Iliad*,” in Schofield, *Saving the City: Philosopher-Kings and Other Classical Paradigms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3-30.

⁴ Protagoras initially claims to teach *euboulia* in both public *and* household affairs; thus he teaches more than just a political art. But Socrates fastens upon the political component and thereby establishes the topic for the dialogue.

fully assumes that he can. For, at the beginning of the dialogue (314b), Socrates had warned the lad Hippocrates that the teachings (*mathêmata*) of the sophists are not like food for the body, which can be examined carefully before consumption, but are rather learnt (*mathonta*) in the soul straightway, for better or for worse.⁵ The real question that interests Socrates is whether Protagoras actually knows what *aretê* is—i.e., knows what is, and is not, good for the soul—or whether, alternatively, he peddles his ethical-political wares in a state of complete ignorance of their psychic, nutritional value.⁶ Socrates’ actual questions are but a set-up to reveal Protagoras’ knowledge, or lack of it, about *aretê*.⁷

Protagoras responds with an elaborate myth followed by a lengthy exegesis and argument.⁸ The myth describes a time before mankind and other animals were alive on the earth. The task of bringing them forth and outfitting them with suitable qualities for survival is assigned by Zeus to Prometheus, whose name means forethought. However in a moment of less than Promethean intelligence, Prometheus allows his brother Epimetheus (“afterthought”) to do his work for him. Doling out all the resources at his disposal—things like warm fur, claws, sharp teeth, swiftness of foot, etc.—and not thinking at all about the humans, Epimetheus leaves

⁵ That Socrates assumes virtue can be taught is also suggested by his confession at the end of the dialogue (361a-b): “It seems to me that the present outcome of our talk is pointing at us, like a human adversary, the finger of accusation and scorn. If it had a voice it would say, “What an absurd pair you are, Socrates and Protagoras. One of you, having said at the beginning that *aretê* is not teachable, is now bent upon contradicting himself by trying to demonstrate that all of it is knowledge [*epistêmê*]—justice, temperance, and courage alike—which is the best way to prove that *aretê* is teachable.”

⁶ See *Protagoras* 313c-314b.

⁷ They are a set-up in more ways than one, see chapter 6, n. 14, above.

⁸ Since *epideixis* was a typical mode of sophistic instruction, most scholars accept the myth presented here as something composed by the real Protagoras. It may have been part of Protagoras’ treatise *On the Original State of Things* (DK 80 A1). For a review of the literature on the question of authenticity, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 64. However, if the myth was Protagoras’ own, there is no reason to assume that he would have used it for the same purposes that Plato uses it in this dialogue.

mankind completely “naked, unshod, unbedded and unarmed.”⁹ This in turn leads Prometheus, in a state of desperation, to steal fire and skill in the arts (*tên entechnon sophian*) from the gods to bequeath upon the mortal race. Even with these arts, however, mortals arrive on the Earth insufficiently prepared for survival. They are able to build houses, make clothes, and grow food; they even invent language and worship the gods, whose nature they partially share. But they prove completely unable to band together and to protect themselves from the attacks of other animals because, says Protagoras (322b5), “they had not the art of politics [*politikên technên*], of which the art of war is a part.” Indeed, every time humans would try to band together into cities (*poleis*) for their own protection, they would end up injuring one another for want of this *politikên technên*. At this point, the destruction of the human race was immanent. But Zeus, fearing this outcome, “sent Hermes to bestow upon humanity a sense of shame or respect for others [*aidôs*] and a sense of justice [*dikê*], so as to bring order [*kosmoi*] and bonds of friendship [*philia*] into cities.”¹⁰ The only question was whether these qualities should be bestowed, as with other arts, upon some men but not others, or rather to everyone. And Zeus decides (322d2-5): “To all, and let all have a share;¹¹ for cities would never come to be if only a few possessed these, as with the other arts. And with this rule [*nomos*] coming from me, anyone who is

⁹ Protagoras 321c5.

¹⁰ Protagoras 322c2-3 (translation mine).

¹¹ Protagoras does not say these skills are assigned to all men *equally* (pace Patrick Coby, “The Education of a Sophist: Aspects of Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Interpretation* 10 (1982): 139-158, esp. p. 144. Coby relies on this misconception to bolster his argument that Protagoras is trying to placate the devotees of democracy while wooing an ambitious elite. For a stronger analysis along similar lines, see A. W. H. Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê*, Democracy and the Sophists: *Protagoras* 316b-328d,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 3-12.

incapable [*mê dunamenon*] of partaking in justice and respect for others is to be killed as a pestilence to the city.”¹²

The myth, according to an exegesis Protagoras supplies immediately after, explains quite clearly why the Athenian Assembly might accept advice from all and sundry on matters requiring political excellence (*politikê aretê*), but not on matters relating to other forms of technical expertise: it is because (323a1-3) “with political excellence, which must always proceed from justice and moderation [*sôphrosunês*] . . . they think that everyone must share in this particular virtue, or else cities would not exist.” Protagoras is probably right.¹³ But it is noted by Socrates (329b-c), as by numerous students of the *Protagoras* to this day, that Protagoras has left matters rather vague as to what exactly political *aretê* is. At first, when he describes it in terms of *euboulia* and becoming most powerful in words and deeds, he seems to have in mind the skills of a political leader. Socrates certainly assumes this, since he cites the example of Pericles and his children as evidence that it cannot be taught. But in the myth, political *aretê* is equated with *aidôs* and *dikê*, virtues which seem more typical of citizens (i.e., of followers) than of leaders. As Adkins puts it, Protagoras comes out of the gates boasting the ability to teach “competitive” skills such as rhetoric; but when he is challenged, he takes refuge

¹² For an analysis of the relationship of Prometheus’ myth to earlier and later versions of the Prometheus legend, see Alfredo Ferranin, “Homo Faber, Homo Sapiens, or Homo Politicus? Protagoras and the Myth of Prometheus,” *Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2000): 289-319. For a provocative discussion of the differences between Protagoras’ myth and more modern, naturalistic accounts of the origins of political society (Hobbes and Hume), see Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 94-98; Farrar, however, sees a celebration of political equality in Protagoras’ myth (bottom of p. 97), which seems to me a bit overdrawn.

¹³ So argues G. B. Kerferd, “Protagoras’ Doctrine of Justice and Virtue in the *Protagoras* of Plato,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953): 42-5. The rest of Protagoras’ speech goes on to prove that virtue can be taught (citing the civic practice of corrective punishment as evidence), and to explain why parents sometimes fail to impart their own virtues to their children. For a full analysis, see Kerferd, *ibid.*, and Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and the Sophists.*”

in “co-operative” virtues such as justice and respect.¹⁴ These virtues may, in fact, all turn out to be reconcilable in some way; but the point is that Protagoras does not explain *how* they are to be reconciled or, even, which of them he actually teaches. Indeed, by the end of his speech (328a8-b4), he has entirely dropped the business about becoming “most powerful,” and claims instead that he is just someone a little more talented than others at rendering men *kalon kai agathon*, noble and good.

This vagueness in Protagoras’ speech becomes the focus of the remainder of the dialogue, as Socrates probes the sophist for a clearer articulation of what all the virtues have in common. And as it comes to light that Protagoras cannot answer Socrates’ questions about *aretê*—not, at least, without contradicting himself—the reader is left to draw two conclusions, which I want to examine here in turn: (a) that Protagoras does not know what *aretê* is, and (b) that whatever he does in fact teach, it is probably not genuine *aretê* after all. As I have argued earlier, these two inferences constitute a serious critique of Protagoras and any other sophists like him, who claim to teach *aretê* and yet cannot define it. Thus, after examining more closely how Plato invites his readers to make these inferences in the *Protagoras* and in other early dialogues, especially the *Meno*, I want to raise the question of their validity.

The Sophists Do Not Know What Virtue Is

A basic, methodological assumption of the early and middle Platonic dialogues is that in order to “know” something such as virtue, one must be able to give a consistent account of what

¹⁴ Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and the Sophists*,” pp. 6-10; for a more detailed discussion of competitive and co-operative excellences, see his *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 6 ff. Adkins thinks Protagoras is deliberately equivocating and faults him for pretending to teach citizen-virtues when he in fact teaches leadership-skills. Adkins neglects to notice, however, that in healthy democratic societies these various types of virtues interrelate. Indeed, leadership-skills should be built upon and constantly held in check by virtues such as justice and respect for others. While Protagoras leaves this matter rather vague, the text allows for and even hints at this interpretation; see particularly 323a1-3 and 325a1-5.

it is.¹⁵ As an assumption, this is neither examined nor defended, but it is the driving force behind many of Socrates' pressing conversations.¹⁶ In these conversations, Socrates himself claims to be ignorant and asks his interlocutors for help in defining particular virtues or virtue as a whole.¹⁷ But what sort of definition is Socrates looking for? At the very least he wants a definition that is consistent or, in other words, one that holds true for all instances of the virtue in question.¹⁸ Thus Cephalus' definition of justice in *Republic* 1—justice is paying back one's debts—falls short, as Socrates points out, because in the case of a deranged lunatic who loans someone his knife, the just thing is to keep it, not to hand it back. In the *Protagoras*, the sophist's definitions exhibit a similar inconsistency: Protagoras initially defines *politikê aretê* as a kind of rare excellence; but then, under pressure to prove that this can be taught, he appears to shift to another notion of *aretê*.

But how does one reach such a consistent definition, and what would it look like? The answer, to judge from the early and middle dialogues, is clear: one must abstract from particular cases some single element that inheres in them all. In the early dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*, Socrates describes this procedure as one of finding the unitary characteristic of particular virtues.

¹⁵ See, especially, Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV.vi.1: "Socrates held that those who know what any given thing is can also expound it to others; on the other hand, those who do not know are misled themselves and mislead others. For this reason he never gave up considering with his companions what any given thing is." Consider also Plato *Meno* 71b.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion both of the assumption and its being undefended, see Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983): 27-58.

¹⁷ Witness Socrates' search for a consistent account of piety in the *Euthyphro* 4e ff., of courage in the *Laches* 186c ff., of justice in *Republic* book 1, and of virtue entire in the *Protagoras* and *Meno*.

¹⁸ See Richard Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 254-5, who argues that for Socrates a definition must meet the following four criteria: (a) it must not be too broad or too narrow; (b) it must explain *what* about virtuous acts or persons makes them virtuous; (c) the property with which a virtue is identified must be as valuable as the virtue in question; and, finally, (d) the definition must be usable as a standard for deciding which acts are virtuous.

Thus piety *qua* piety must “always be the same with itself in every practice;” and impiety must always be the same with itself and “possess some one characteristic quality.”¹⁹ As early as the *Meno*, Plato’s Socrates describes this as the search for the Form (*eidos*) of particular virtues or of virtue as a whole.²⁰ And though the theory of Forms may be distinctly Platonic in its ontological aspect,²¹ it is in some ways closely related to Socrates’ definitional method of searching for abstract knowledge. Of course, in neither the early dialogues nor in the *Meno* are any final definitions ever reached; indeed, this accounts in large measure for Socrates’ continued professions of ignorance. But what is made clear is not so much a substantive knowledge of any particular virtue, but rather a method and criterion for pursuing knowledge in general. To “know” something in the Socratic sense is, minimally, to know it in the form of a consistent, unitary, and hence abstract, verbal account. “Knowing” justice in *Republic* 1 means (again, minimally) being able to put one’s finger on that unitary characteristic of justice; the same goes for piety in the *Euthyphro*, as well as for virtue entire in the *Meno*.

So where does this leave the sophists? When Socrates asks Protagoras to tell him whether virtue is in essence many things or one, Protagoras insists that it is many.²² He says that virtue is made up of autonomous parts such as courage, justice, temperance, piety and wisdom, and that people can possess some of these parts without necessarily possessing them all. But there is a problem with this view, which Socrates is quick to point out. For if a person can be virtuous by possessing some virtues but not others, then a virtuous person could, at least in

¹⁹ *Euthyphro* 5d.

²⁰ *Meno* 72c ff.

²¹ The forms are ontological for Plato because they describe not only a type of knowledge but a type of knowable as well; see *Republic*. However, for Socrates

²² *Protagoras* 329b-d, 349a-b.

theory, be “stupidly courageous” or “cleverly impious”—neither of which seems particularly virtuous. But if these should not count as virtue, then the virtues must not be autonomous after all; they must depend for their being virtue upon some unifying element. So Socrates reasons. And this is, of course, what leads him to postulate in both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* that all virtue is knowledge (*epistēmē*). I want to come back to this Socratic hypothesis in a moment, but all I want to note here is how Socrates’ search for an account of *aretē* makes Protagoras appear: if Protagoras cannot answer these seemingly simple questions about virtue, if he is not prepared to articulate the unifying *eidos* of all the virtues he teaches, then he must be far indeed from knowing what virtue is.

The Sophists Cannot Teach Political Virtue

A second inference that might be drawn from Socrates’ conversation with Protagoras is that the sophist cannot teach virtue either; after all, how can someone teach something of which he is obviously ignorant? This inference is promoted in both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* by Socrates’ identification of virtue with knowledge (*epistēmē*). As Socrates says at the end of the *Protagoras* (361a-c): “if virtue were anything other than knowledge, as Protagoras has tried to prove, obviously it could not be taught. But if it turns out to be, as a single whole, knowledge—as Socrates argues—then it will be most surprising if it cannot be taught.” Virtue may or may not turn out to be teachable—this depends upon whether it is knowledge or something else (Socrates maintains), and in neither the *Protagoras* nor the *Meno* is any certainty reached on that question. But one thing is clear. Even if virtue does turn out to be knowledge and therefore teachable, Protagoras and the other sophists are unlikely to be true teachers of it; for they do not take it to be knowledge in the first place and, moreover, seem incapable of showing that it is something else.

Now there is an obvious weakness in Socrates' hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, which is repaired to some extent, though not entirely, in the *Meno*. The problem is that there are always a few great statesmen who appear to possess political virtue, but can neither give an account of what this is nor teach it to anyone else. Yet if virtue is knowledge of the sort Socrates thinks it is, these statesmen should be able to supply an account. It would seem, therefore, that Socrates must either loosen up on his contention that virtue is knowledge, or else drop his belief that some statesmen possess it. And in the *Meno*, he opts for the former.²³ Virtue, he argues there, may stem not only from knowledge but from right opinion as well (*orthên doxan*).²⁴ Right opinion and knowledge are both a good guide, Socrates now argues, but right opinion falls short of knowledge in two important respects: it is less constant as a guide, and it cannot be taught.²⁵ This account is certainly more nuanced than that of the *Protagoras*; however, the conclusions to be drawn about the sophists are much the same: neither the sophists nor anyone else for that matter can be true teachers of political virtue because they do not possess knowledge of what virtue is. Perhaps someday, Socrates muses at the end of the *Meno*, there will exist a "kind of statesman who can create another like himself," but he would be so different from teachers and statesmen today that he would stand as "a solid reality among shadows."²⁶ The Socrates of the *Meno* does not claim to be such a figure, and yet it is clear that the sophists are not either.

²³ It is interesting to note that in the *Gorgias*, he opts for the latter (see e.g., 515d ff.).

²⁴ *Meno* 96d ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97e-98a, 98d, 99b.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99e-100a.

COMMENTARY

Whether the real Protagoras would have performed better under fire than the Protagoras of Plato's dialogue, one will never know. Only three short fragments of Protagoras' work survive; all else that is known of him, is known from the testimony—sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly—of other ancient writers. These writers, of course, report only what they want to report, and only in the way they want to report it. Thus any attempt to reach a “true” understanding of Protagoras is necessarily blocked by both bias and lacunae. Unfortunately, this situation has led, all too often, to one of two outcomes: either scholars have accepted naïvely the prejudices of ancient writers built into the sources or else, even worse, they have found in sophists like Protagoras whatever they have wanted to find.²⁷

But with respect to the question of whether or not Protagoras and other sophists could teach *aretê*, the situation seems somewhat easier to manage. First of all, the sources all agree that the sophists themselves *claimed* to be teachers of *aretê*,²⁸ and the major (if not the only) reason to doubt their claim is the critique just presented from Plato's early and middle dialogues. Thus if this critique were shown to be unconvincing, either because other evidence calls it into question or else on the basis of its own logical assumptions, then there would be strong reason to give the sophists the benefit of the doubt. Let us consider each of these inferences again.

Do the Sophists Know What Political Virtue Is?

The strength of the first inference examined above—viz., if the sophists cannot articulate a consistent account of virtue, then they must not know what it is—depends entirely upon

²⁷ On the latter tendency, see e.g. the critique of Eric Havelock's *Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 26-63; and the critique of Cynthia Farrar's *Origins of Democratic Thinking* in Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 107-139.

²⁸ E.g. Plato *Protagoras* 318e ff.; *Meno* 91a ff; and for other sources, see chapter 5, n. 33.

whether something such as virtue can be “known” in a meaningful sense of the word without a formal, definitional account. And customary usage both ancient and modern would suggest that it can. None of the ancients would have doubted, for example, that Pericles or Themistocles were politically virtuous men (i.e. that they knew what virtue was), and yet neither of them, to judge from certain remarks Socrates makes in the *Meno*, could articulate an adequate account of *aretê*. Moreover, when one speaks of “knowing what is virtuous” in the modern world, one uses the word “know” in a similar way: virtue is known like a language—it can be confidently taken up and used, even without a philosophically rigorous account of *what* it is.²⁹ It follows that there must be more than one meaningful way to “know” virtue, especially when it comes to matters of practice.³⁰

This much, however, Plato’s Socrates seems willing to grant, when, in the *Meno*, he acknowledges that some statesmen possess a kind of virtue which is, for practical purposes, as good a guide as knowledge.³¹ And yet, if Socrates is willing to attribute this sort of “knowing virtue” to Pericles and other statesmen, then why does he not attribute it to the sophists as well?

²⁹ Note that in Plato’s *Republic* Book 1, Cephalus knows better than to return borrowed goods to a lunatic, even though his definition of justice would tell him otherwise (331e-332a). This shows very well that there is knowledge of virtue even without good definitions. And, as a matter of fact, it is only by reference to such prior knowledge that one can determine whether a definition is more or less adequate.

³⁰ This is, of course, a view that finds a strong philosophical defense in Aristotle. While Aristotle undoubtedly takes a philosopher’s approach to the question of *aretê*—seeking to explain it and illuminate it in terms of an intellectual account—he breaks definitively from Socrates. For it is not a “formal” account that Aristotle seeks; see especially *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096^b35-1097^a8; and cf. David D. Corey, “Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*,” *Review of Politics* 64 (2002): 57-80. In general, Aristotle’s approach to teaching *aretê* seems to take what is best from both Socrates and the sophists. Like the sophists, he relies upon a basically common-sense notion of what *aretê* is and recognizes the importance of *practice* (or habituation) as a means of making a person good. Like Socrates, however, he sees conventional *aretê* as problematic and puzzling, and he seeks to clarify and purify it by recourse to philosophical investigation.

³¹ *Meno* 97b: “As long as one has a correct opinion on the points about which the other has knowledge, he will be as good a guide, believing the truth but not knowing it . . . therefore true opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly.”

The *Meno* supplies no answer to this question; but the implicit answer would seem to be that, unlike great statesmen, the sophists do not actually *exhibit* political virtue. A generation later, Aristotle would say as much explicitly.³² But Aristotle is almost certainly thinking of fourth-century sophists, particularly Isocrates, who was by no accounts a good statesman.³³ The case with the fifth-century sophists, however, is quite different. In fact, there are numerous accounts of their *exceptional* talents at statecraft. Hippias probably arrived in Athens sometime after 423, at which point he was evidently the leading diplomatic representative of his native Elis.³⁴ Thus Plato has Hippias say in the *Hippias Major* that he rarely has time to visit Athens because “whenever Elis needs to conduct some affairs with one of the cities, she always comes to me first among her citizens and chooses me as ambassador [*presbeutên*], since she regards me as the most qualified judge and messenger of the pronouncements of each city.”³⁵ Prodicus too was a frequent ambassador to Athens from his native city of Ceos and, according to Plato’s Socrates, was very much admired (*panu hêudokimêsen*) for his eloquence before the Council.³⁶ As for Protagoras, his abilities were at least impressive enough that Pericles chose him above all other candidates (citizens and foreigners alike) to compose laws for the Athenian colony of Thurii in 443.³⁷ Such testimonies reveal quite clearly that the major fifth-century sophists actually

³² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1180b35-1181a.

³³ See Martin Ostwald’s helpful note on this passage in *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 300, n. 36, where he highlights the “verbal reminiscences” between Aristotle’s criticism of the sophists and Isocrates’ *Antidosis*, its probable target. See, further, C. Joachim Classen, “Aristotle’s Picture of the Sophists,” in G. B. Kerferd, ed., *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), pp. 7-24.

³⁴ See *Hippias Major* 281a-b.

³⁵ *Hippias Major* 281a-b (trans. mine).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 282c.

³⁷ DK 80 A1.

practiced the forms of statecraft they boasted the ability to teach, indeed that they were exceptional statesmen. And if this is true, then they should be treated, like the statesmen Socrates mentions in the *Meno*, as figures who “know” *aretê* in some practical but not philosophical way. This leaves the question of whether or not they could teach it.

Can the Sophists Teach Political Virtue?

So far I have only argued that the sophists possessed political *aretê* themselves and thus “knew” it in that special sense in which one can understand a thing and practice it while lacking a formal account. But this is not yet to show that they could teach their *aretê* to others. Indeed, Socrates insists in the *Meno*, as he had hinted in the *Protagoras*, that those who possess virtue in this way are not capable of teaching it.³⁸ But what is Socrates’ evidence for this claim?

Socrates’ evidence is of two sorts. First, there is his belief that only knowledge (*epistêmê*) is teachable and that no one has yet displayed knowledge of virtue.³⁹ Of course, the truth of this claim depends entirely upon how one understands knowledge. Readers of the *Meno* are presented with a tentative epistemological theory according to which merely practical knowledge is not really knowledge at all.⁴⁰ But practical knowledge of the sort the sophists clearly possessed may well be teachable in some practical way. After all, human beings are taught all sorts of practical things without a complete account of them; one thinks of skills in

³⁸ *Meno* 99b; cf. *Protagoras* 319e-320b.

³⁹ *Meno* 97a ff.

⁴⁰ The theory that only knowledge-with-account (and not “right opinion”) is teachable is odd on the face of it, and Socrates accordingly couches his whole discussion in rather cautious language. Consider, e.g., 98b: “Well of course, I have only been using an analogy myself, not knowledge;” and 100b: “On our present reasoning then, whoever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation. But we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what virtue is in and by itself.”

music, language or cooking, for example.⁴¹ So there is no reason simply to dismiss the possibility that practical knowledge of *aretê* can be taught. Socrates' second piece of evidence is that several great statesmen including Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles and Thucydides proved unable to impart their own *aretê* to their sons.⁴² But what does this really prove? The sophists do not claim that everyone is equally suited for instruction; nor do they claim that everyone can teach equally well.⁴³ In fact, all that Socrates' examples prove is that those particular statesmen whose names he lists did not succeed in imparting their political virtue to their sons. The reasons for this could be myriad; therefore it is rash indeed to conclude that political virtue cannot be taught.⁴⁴

At any rate, what about the sophists? In the *Meno*, they are simply dismissed out of hand as “the manifest ruin and corruption of anyone who comes into contact with them.”⁴⁵ But the line belongs to the Athenian aristocrat, Anytus, about whom two facts should be borne in mind. First, Anytus was part of the traditional ruling elite of Athens; he even held the office of *Strategos* in 409. And given that the sophists were educating a *new* elite, one not only of family

⁴¹ For Protagoras' own comparison of virtue to music and language, see *Protagoras* 326e-327c and 328a. For a lucid modern discussion of the question of practical education (whence the reference to cooking) see Michael Oakshott, “Political Education,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 43-69.

⁴² *Meno* 93a-94e; cf. *Protagoras* 319e-320a.

⁴³ According to the sophists, successful education depends, in some measure, on the natural aptitude of the student. The precise amount of importance ascribed to “nature” (*phusis*) as opposed to “instruction” (*didaskalia*) or “practice” (*askêsis*) varied from sophist to sophist, but Protagoras evidently considered the student's nature to be chiefly important. Consider e.g. *Protagoras* 327 b-c, and cf. DK 80 B3: “Teaching requires natural endowment and practice,” and “They must learn starting young.” Compare Critias (DK 88 B9), Lycophron (DK 83 A4) and Antiphon (DK 87 B60). See also Euripides *Hecuba* lines 592 ff.

⁴⁴ Cf. Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and Sophists*,” p. 4: “He [Socrates] has, of course, demonstrated at most that it [*politikê aretê*] is not taught, not that it is not teachable.”

⁴⁵ *Meno* 91c. The sentiment belongs to Anytus, not to Socrates (see below), but Socrates does little to counter it.

but also of wealth,⁴⁶ it is no surprise that the mere mention of the word sophist sends Anytus through the roof.⁴⁷ But secondly, and more importantly, Anytus is the aristocrat who would eventually bring charges against Socrates for “corrupting the youth of Athens.”⁴⁸ As far as Anytus is concerned, Socrates is *himself* a sophist.⁴⁹ Perhaps to combat this misconception, Plato places great emphasis in the *Meno* upon Anytus’ ignorance. Socrates asks him (92b): “Has one of the sophists done you a personal injury, or why are you so hard on them?” And Anytus replies: “Heavens no! I’ve never in my life had anything to do with a single one of them, nor would I hear of my family doing so.” Thus Anytus’ testimony on the question of what or how the sophists teach *aretê* is completely inadmissible.

What is admissible, however, is the testimony of the *Dissoi Logoi*, an anonymous sophistic treatise composed, evidently, by a student of Protagoras in the late-fifth century.⁵⁰ The author of this treatise explicitly addresses the presumption made by Socrates—viz., that *aretê* is not teachable because there are no acknowledged teachers of it—and raises what would seem the obvious question: “Whatever else do the sophists teach except wisdom and *aretê*?”⁵¹ And in response to the argument that if virtue could be taught, the wise men of Greece would have taught it to their sons, the author points out that “Polycleitus taught his son to be a sculptor; and

⁴⁶ See Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement*, pp. 15-23; and Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and Sophists*,” p. 10.

⁴⁷ See, further, Jacqueline De Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans., Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 28.

⁴⁸ Plato *Apology* 18b, 24b ff.

⁴⁹ Anytus’ angry departure from the conversation in the *Meno* is, no doubt, an ominous foreshadowing of his later attack upon Socrates.

⁵⁰ For more information on the *Dissoi Logoi* (DK 90), see the introduction to T. M. Robinson, *Contrasting Arguments: An Edition of the Dissoi Logoi* (Salem: Ayer Company Publishers, 1984), pp. 1-97.

⁵¹ DK 90.VI.

even if a particular man did *not* teach, this would prove nothing; but if a single man *did* teach, it would be evidence that teaching is possible.”⁵² As the author makes clear, the familiar arguments used to demonstrate that virtue cannot be taught prove absolutely nothing. Since it is not clear whether the *Dissoi Logoi* predates or postdates the *Protagoras* and *Meno*, it is also unclear which text responds to which, or indeed, if both texts are responding to a common, earlier source.⁵³ But, for present purposes, it makes no difference which text came first. The attack upon the sophists in the *Meno* is hearsay and delivered by a character with dubious motives; while the defense given by the *Dissoi Logoi* is the defense of the sophists themselves. The sophists should be given the benefit of the doubt.

Now what reason is there for rejecting out of hand the possibility that the sophists were capable teachers of political *aretê*? As far as I can see, there is none. On the contrary, there are three solid reasons to assume that they were. First, the fragments show beyond a doubt that the sophists actually possessed the type of *aretê* in question (political excellence in the form of prudence in counsel and persuasiveness of speech). Furthermore, by all accounts, the sophists claimed the ability to teach this *aretê* to others. And finally, if Socrates’ testimony in the *Apology* is any guide, the students of the sophists not only paid huge fees for the opportunity to study with them, when it was all said and done, they “acknowledged gratitude” to the sophists besides.⁵⁴ It does not appear likely that the sophists were incapable teachers of *aretê* after all.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ For the various views on this question, see C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 78-9.

⁵⁴ *Apology* 20a2: *chrêmata didontas kai charin proseidenai*.

Could the sophists have perhaps lived up to their claims to teach *aretê*? The *Protagoras* and the *Meno* attempt to answer this question *a priori*, as it were. These dialogues suggest that the best way to know whether virtue can be taught is to work out, first, a solid, philosophical account of what virtue is in itself.⁵⁵ Of course, no such account is ever reached in these dialogues, so the reader is invited simply to suspend judgment. But there is another way to answer the question of the teachability of virtue, and that is to attempt it. This is what the sophists did. They viewed political virtue neither as a matter of aristocratic blood nor as a matter of chance, nor yet as a matter of pure, theoretical knowledge, but rather as a matter of *technê* or art. They viewed it, at least in part, as a complex body of skills and knowledge that could be analyzed and systematically displayed for others to acquire. Their claims may have been more or less exaggerated. But if one wishes to inquire into their success, the first place to begin is with an open mind about the very possibility of their success. This possibility is not only suggested by the considerations detailed above, it is made all the more likely by the fact that the sophists possessed extensive political experience, first rate analytical minds and an express interest in pedagogy—a combination of traits rarely found in teachers or statesmen today.

Several questions present themselves once the question of sophistic teaching is approached with an open mind, and these are questions that are treated in the remainder of this work. How exactly did the sophists teach *aretê*? A comparison among the sophists as well as a comparison between sophistic and Socratic pedagogical methods recommends itself. Secondly, how does sophistic *aretê*, various though that may be, compare to Socrates' notion of *aretê*? Are

⁵⁵ *Protagoras* 361c: "For my part, Protagoras, when I see the subject in such utter confusion I feel the liveliest desire to clear it up. I should like to follow up our present talk with a determined attack on virtue itself and its essential nature. Then we could return to the question whether or not it can be taught." *Meno* 100b: "but we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what it is in and by itself." It should be borne in mind that in the immediate context of both passages, virtue denotes *political* virtue.

they comparably moral, comparably useful, and comparably human? If not, why not? And finally, what, if anything, can be learned from the sophists concerning the theory and practice of political virtue in the modern world? Is there, perhaps, some coherent and hospitable middle ground between the highly intellectual (and necessarily sceptical) approach to virtue one finds in Plato's Socrates, on the one hand, and sheer relativism and/or immoralism on the other? These are questions that I believe can be answered based on the surviving records of the sophists.

PART III

**THE SOPHISTS' APPROACH TO A VIRTUOUS LIFE:
ETHICS AND POLITICS**

CHAPTER 9

SOPHISTIC VIRTUE AND TRADITIONAL GREEK ETHICS

Modern scholars, especially in political science, have tended to make untenable generalizations about the Greek sophists and/or to impute to Plato a critique of the sophists that was never his.¹ This has been the point of much of the forgoing work. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a generalization about the sophists that *is* tenable, namely, that their moral teaching, their ethical outlook in general, was basically conventional. By “conventional” I do not mean what Leo Strauss meant when he referred to the sophists as “vulgar conventionalists.” For Strauss, the sophists were “conventional” because they believed (allegedly) that things like law and justice originate in convention, not in nature or in divine work; and moreover, that convention actually stands in the way of what is natural, namely, taking advantage of others. The trick of sophistry, according to Strauss, lay in “cleverly exploiting the opportunities created by convention or in taking advantage of the good-natured trust which the many put in convention,” while seeking “to have more than others.”² Strauss’s view of the sophists is untenable for three reasons: (1) because it depends upon regarding Thrasymachus as the quintessential sophist, when in fact Thrasymachus was no sophist at all; (2) because it assumes that what Thrasymachus said explicitly, real sophists like Protagoras must have thought implicitly—a problematic assumption;³ and (3) because it simply ignores all the evidence that does not fit the view. Indeed, as a generalization about “the sophists,” Strauss’s vulgar-

¹ It was the argument of chapter 6, above, that Plato’s critique of the sophists is less uniform and less caustic than is frequently maintained.

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 114, 116.

³ It is one thing to suppose justice a matter of convention rather than nature, something else entirely to regard this as a license for injustice. Protagoras *was* a conventionalist in the first sense, but emphatically not in the second. Strauss blurs the two positions together.

conventionalism thesis is sufficiently refuted by the fact that both Prodicus and Hippias regarded basic moral values as ordained by the gods and as absolutely incumbent upon everyone.⁴

What I mean by conventional is simply traditional, or, if not traditional, then at least in no way *immoral*. In other words, the sophists accepted without much ado the basic moral values of civilized Greece. It is true of course that by the fifth-century there were a *number* of competing moral traditions—Homeric, Solonic, Pindaric, and so on—that differed from each other in significant ways.⁵ But this does not change the fact that these were *all* traditions, or that they agreed in many fundamental respects. Thus to align oneself with any one of them meant to stand upon fairly solid moral ground. This is the claim I am making for the sophists, not that they necessarily embraced *the right* morality, but that they took ethical positions of an indisputably traditional provenance.

If it follows from this that the sophists were not moral philosophers, that is in fact the case. They did not, as Socrates did, inquire deeply into the underlying truth of traditional moral convictions. Often this is presented as a criticism all its own: Plato has Socrates say in the *Republic* (493a) that sophists teach nothing other than common beliefs (*ta tôn pollôn dogmata*); they “know nothing in truth” about what is really good or bad.⁶ But whether one should blame

⁴ See chapter 2 above and the more detailed analysis below; Protagoras also regards basic moral conduct as incumbent upon everyone (*Protagoras* 322d4-5, 326d6-7); but he evidently did not regard it as ordained by the gods; for even though in the myth Plato ascribes to him (*Protagoras* 320d-322d) Protagoras describes justice as a divine gift from Zeus, he also makes it clear that in *real* terms (i.e., non-mythological terms), it must be learned (see G. B. Kerferd, “Protagoras’ Doctrine of Justice and Virtue in the ‘*Protagoras*’ of Plato, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* [1953]: 42-5); moreover, Protagoras’ position with respect to the gods in general was that he could not know whether or not they even exist (DK 80 B2); this of course does not preclude the use of myth as a pedagogical device, but it does preclude a dogmatic belief in the divine origin of right.

⁵ See A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), who exaggerates the tensions; his view is rightly tempered by J. L. Creed, “Moral Values in the Age of Thucydides” *Classical Quarterly* 23 (1973): 213-31; and by Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 13-18; see also Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 33-47.

⁶ Cf. Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 116: “what is characteristic of the sophist is unconcern with the truth, i.e., with the truth about the whole.”

the sophists for not being moral philosophers, particularly moral philosophers of a Socratic-Platonic type, is a question I want to take up elsewhere (see chapter 11). Suffice it here to note that in denouncing the sophists for teaching a *merely* conventional morality, Plato acknowledges that it *was* conventional morality they were teaching after all.

Next a word or two about method: the generalization being offered in this chapter is based upon the extant evidence of the three major sophists' moral views: Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias.⁷ It is not based upon anything from Thrasymachus, Callicles, Polus, Gorgias, Euthydemus or Dionysodorus. Why not? Because these figures, as the first part of this dissertation has shown, were either not sophists at all, or else (in the case of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus) they were atypical sophists. And the purpose of this chapter is not to draw generalizations about rhetoricians or pseudo-sophists, but about those figures with the most legitimate claim to the title "sophist." It is too often the case that commentators will look to later, degenerate sophists as a way of better understanding earlier ones. This is a teleological approach, which identifies the essence of a thing with its final form. But to apply this method to human beings is to violate the fundamentals of human freedom and responsibility. Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias *did not hold* the immoral views of the rhetoricians or the later sophists; and even if "sophistry" became immoral later on, it was not necessarily earlier sophists who were the cause. Moral traditions break down; younger generations rebel against their elders. But to hold the first sophists responsible for moral positions they did not take is nothing less unjust, nothing less absurd, than to hold Moses responsible for the Pharisees.

⁷ The traditionality of Hippias' ethical outlook was discussed in chapter 2; here, I limit myself to a discussion of Prodicus and Protagoras.

Finally, it should be noted that the generalization being offered here—that sophistic morality is essentially conventional morality—is not original to this dissertation. It has been anticipated by several scholars, particularly by Terence Irwin:

Plato never suggests that all or most sophists are hostile to traditional morality. He rejects popular prejudices against the supposed dangers of sophistic education (*Meno* 91a6-92c7); and he criticizes sophists for just the opposite reason, that they uncritically accept and defend ordinary beliefs about morality (*Republic* 493a6-d7). The sympathetic presentation of Protagoras illustrates this objection; the sophist simply describes and develops conventional views, but cannot justify them, or show that what seems true to most people really is the truth about morals. Calicles the radical critic is no sophist; and even if Thrasymachus is one, Plato never suggests that his view is at all typically sophistic.⁸

Irwin's view of the sophists has not caught on. Perhaps one reason for this is that Irwin does not sufficiently demonstrate his view by recourse to concrete examples of the sophists' work. That is precisely what the present chapter is meant to do.

PRODICUS' HERCULES AT THE CROSSROADS

The basic moral teaching of Prodicus' famous *epideixis* about Hercules at the crossroads is that virtue is better than vice.⁹ Hedonism, self-aggrandizement, exploitation and opportunism (the qualities so often associated with the sophists) are explicitly rejected there for a life of earnest commitment to the needs of one's household, city and friends. The conventionality of the speech is plain. Writing in 1850, the historian George Grote said that it served "not merely

⁸ Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: the Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 35.

⁹ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.i.21-34; for the basic facts about the speech—its genuineness, its function within the context of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, etc.—see chapter 2 and appendix A, where I have translated the entire speech.

as a vindication of Prodicus” against the reproaches heaped upon him by posterity, “but also as a warning against implicit confidence in the sarcastic remarks of Plato.”¹⁰ It is true that at least since the publication of Alexander Grant’s *Ethics of Aristotle* in 1885, it has been customary to find fault with Prodicus for not representing the full complexity of the moral life, as Aristotle would later try to do in his *Ethics*.¹¹ But however that may be, its moral conventionality, so far from ever being challenged, has never been seriously denied: “Against the moral orthodoxy of the piece, not a word can be said,” writes Grant, “and we may safely assert, that had all the discourses of the sophists been of this character, they would not have fallen into such general disrepute.”¹²

The speech opens with Hercules taking refuge in a quiet place to meditate upon the choice between virtue and vice. He is said to have reached that stage of youth in which one becomes one’s own master (*autokratores*), hence the need for a choice. It is important to recognize that Prodicus has not written a treatise on ethics; his is not a philosopher’s account of morality. Prodicus has written an *epideixis* to motivate people toward virtue. It is no doubt an oversimplification to present our moral development as beginning with such a choice—a

¹⁰ George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 7 (London: John Murray, 1850), pp. 512-513.

¹¹ Sir Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle: Illustrated with Essays and Notes* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1885), p. 145: “It may be said almost universally that all youths aspire after what is good. If it depended on a choice made once for all at the opening of life, all men would be virtuous. But man’s moral life consists in a struggle in detail; and this the figure of Prodicus fails to represent.” Grant is right, of course, but it must be added that Plato’s *Republic* and Augustine’s *Confessions*, in presenting the life of virtue (or salvation) as hinging upon a momentous choice, also fail to represent the complexity of the matter; Prodicus is at least in good company; but more can be said for him (and Plato and Augustine) than that; the fact is that Grant has failed here to distinguish between philosophy and moral exhortation.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 146; cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 278, who writes with a philosopher’s contempt: “if all sophistic teaching were like this it would confirm the view expressed by Plato in the *Republic* (493a) that the so-called wisdom of the Sophists boils down to a rehash of the conventional opinions of the crowd.” Because Prodicus’ speech does not fit most commentators’ views of the sophists, it is usually ignored; its absence is conspicuous, for example, in Eric Voegelin’s chapter on the sophists in *Order and History*, vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 267-331.

rationalistic fiction to be sure. But this does not detract from the merits of Prodicus' speech. Indeed, precisely because Prodicus fictionalizes and rationalizes the choice his listeners must make day in and day out for virtue over vice, he makes their choice seem that much more stark, that much more clear. Hercules becomes everyman, at every moment; and his simple choice for virtue is meant to motivate our much more complicated, perpetual choosing.

Hercules is approached by two goddesses, Virtue (*Aretê*) and Vice (*Kakia*), and much is revealed by their appearance alone.

One was beautiful to see and noble in nature (*eleutherion phusei*); her person was adorned with purity, her eyes with a sense of shame (*aidô*), her figure with moderation (*sôphrosunê*), and her clothing with light. The other was thickened up into plumpness and softness, and all gussied up so her complexion would seem more white and red than it really was (*tou ontos*), her body straighter than normal (*phusei*), her eyes more alluring, and her clothing more revealing. She often checked herself out, or looked around to see if anyone else was observing; and would frequently fixate upon her own shadow. As they came near to Hercules, the first continued in her same way, but the other, wanting to get ahead (*phthasai*), leapt towards Hercules.

Virtue exhibits *aidôs* and *sôphrosunê*, two virtues with strong, traditional associations. An alternate translation for *aidôs* is “regard for others.” It is the fundamental political virtue that makes community life possible.¹³ *Sôphrosunê* may be rendered “self-control,” “moderation” or “temperance.” It is, of course, one of the four cardinal virtues represented in Plato's *Republic*.¹⁴ Meanwhile Vice exhibits a preoccupation with the physical, an excessive love of oneself, and a

¹³ See my discussion of the “Myth of Protagoras” below.

¹⁴ See, e.g., 430e, where *sôphrosunê* is defined as the mastery over pleasures and desires.

marked desire to get ahead of others—apolitical qualities *par excellence*. But what is significant here is not just that Prodicus identifies virtue with its conventional political forms and vice with hedonism and self-advancement; it is that he goes so far as to associate conventional morality with what is natural (*phusis*) and to present vice as an adaptation or perversion of nature. This is crucial. For Strauss's view is that the sophists all think that "by nature everyone seeks only his own good" and that "regard for others arises only out of convention,"¹⁵ but Prodicus will have none of this. For him, what is conventional is also what is natural.¹⁶

Vice next proceeds to deliver to Hercules a speech that promotes her own way of life: "If you make me your friend," she says, "I shall lead you along the sweetest and easiest road;¹⁷ you will taste of every delight, and never have any struggles." Among her promises are a blissful ignorance of wars and of affairs (*pragmatôn*), the ability to indulge in every physical pleasure, and the power to exploit the hard work of others in order to sustain one's physical habits. She represents herself to Hercules as Happiness incarnate (*Eudaimonia*), though she admits that her enemies refer to her as Vice (*Kakia*).

¹⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 115.

¹⁶ For an alternative view, see Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), p. 217: "The story of Heracles presents dramatically in the form of a myth the transition, or, more accurately perhaps, the evolution from physis to nomos." However, Untersteiner's view depends upon equating "that which the gods ordain" with *nomos*, not *phusis* (see p. 226, n. 80), which seems a mistake; in fact, a little further down, Untersteiner contradicts himself and writes (bottom of p. 217) that what the gods ordain is reality (*ta onta*) and that this equals *phusis*.

¹⁷ The idea of the two roads (*hodoi*)—one to virtue, the other to vice—did not originate with Prodicus; its earliest appearance is in Hesiod's *Works and Days* 287-92: "Badness can be got easily and in shoals; the road to her is smooth and she lives very near us. But between us and *aretê* the gods have placed the sweat of our brows; long and steep is the road that leads to her. . . ." One thinks also of the passage in the *Iliad* (I.188 ff.), where Homer sings: "And the anger came down on Peleus' son, and within his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword, driving away all those who stood between and kill the son of Atreus, or else to check the spleen within and keep down his anger." For other antecedents (as well as a long list of imitators), see Margaret Coleman Waites, "Some Features of the Allegorical Debate in Greek Literature," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 23 (1912): 1-46.

Vice's speech here represents a perennial temptation, or, as one commentator has dubbed it, a "tyrannic dream": the "human inclination to believe that the most desirable life is the life of unlimited power for the sake of pursuing whatever our hearts desire."¹⁸ As such, it is nearly identical to the temptation Glaucon and Adeimantus confess to Socrates at the beginning of the *Republic*. In fact, Plato's *Republic* and Prodicus' *Hercules at the Crossroads* serve very similar purposes in terms of moral pedagogy: both try to combat the temptation of vice by arguing that *true* happiness depends upon virtue. But these works also differ in important ways,¹⁹ and chief among the differences are the conceptions of happiness and virtue they put forth. Indeed, Prodicus' understanding of happiness and virtue are far more traditional than those of Plato's Socrates, and the best way to illustrate this is in terms of the well-known apparatus that Glaucon sets out in *Republic* book 2.

Glaucon's Apparatus: Three Types of Goods

There are three types of goods, Glaucon tells Socrates (357b-c). One type includes goods enjoyed for their own sake, such as tasting a fine wine or enjoying a beautiful sunset; the pleasure lies precisely in the activity itself, and no benefit or harm is expected beyond that. The second type includes goods enjoyed both for their own sake and for what comes out of them--reading a new cookbook or tackling a philosophical problem with a friend: these are enjoyable in and of themselves, but one also looks forward to the results. And finally there are goods enjoyed *only* in their result, and not at all in the activity that goes into them; these may include (depending upon who one asks) physical exercise, medical treatment, or work in general. Now these are quite different sorts of goods; and what Glaucon wants Socrates to tell him is to which

¹⁸ Stephen G. Salkever, "Tragedy and the Education of the *Dêmos*: Aristotle's Response to Plato," in J. Peter Euben, ed. *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 282.

¹⁹ See the next chapter for important differences in pedagogical method.

group virtue belongs.²⁰ Is virtue something good in itself *regardless* of its consequences? Is it both good in itself *and* good for its consequences? Or is it *only* good for its consequences and not at all for itself? This is indeed an important question. For it amounts to asking whether virtue is intrinsically valuable or whether it is merely instrumental (like a bike or a carriage) for obtaining a good or set of goods that lies beyond it. If it is merely instrumental, one may then wonder whether it is the *best* means to pursue the goods in question—perhaps vice would be a better means. Thus how one defines things like virtue and happiness makes a great deal of difference in terms of the perennial temptation to vice. Let us now look at three possible answers: the traditional answer, Plato’s answer, and the modified-traditional answer offered by Virtue herself in Prodicus’ famous speech.

The Traditional Answer and its Flaw

The traditional answer can be found in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (286-315), which portrays the goal of life as the accumulation of wealth and honor, and regards hard work (*ergon*) as the necessary means to attain this. Hesiod’s view (once one makes the necessary adjustments for terminology²¹) thus places virtue squarely in Glaucon’s third category of goods: i.e., as the toilsome means to posterior goods. “Through work,” Hesiod writes, “you will grow rich in flocks and substance,” idlers will envy you, and you will acquire great fame; for “fame and

²⁰ The question is actually about justice (*dikē*), not virtue; but see the following note.

²¹ The terminological problem here is worth noting; Glaucon and Adeimantus use the word *aretē* interchangeably with justice (*dikē*) to denote moral conduct in general (see, e.g., *Republic* 363d1, 365a5), though in its original meaning *aretē* denoted something more like the perfection of one’s abilities or the fulfillment of one’s potential. Thus when Hesiod uses the word *aretē*, he uses it to describe what he regards as the *goal* of life (one’s wealth and honor) rather than the type of conduct that goes into this (see e.g., note 14 above). But what is important for present purposes is that Hesiod recommends *moral* conduct (hard work) as the means for attaining one’s goals as opposed to immoral conduct (exploitation, cheating, etc.). Thus his view belongs in Glaucon’s third category and is exposed to all the dangers that this category entails.

renown attend upon wealth” (308-310). The road to success is rough (*trachus*) at first—it demands sweat and hard work—but once one is there, life becomes easy (*rhaidios*).

One might refer to this as an “investment-theory of happiness.” Its basic characteristic is that it regards happiness as a stockpile of goods—wealth, food, companions and fame—and understands hard work as a necessary investment one must make to secure these things. The view has always had a large following; it is the dream of retirement in Florida or the willingness to stick with a high-paying job one does not enjoy. And it may truly be said that without this view, societies would be significantly less productive. But whatever its merits or demerits in terms of human productivity, the view leaves itself open to at least one very serious objection: if happiness lies entirely in the goods one is working *towards*, and not at all in the work itself, then why should one play by the rules? Why not try to obtain the same goods by easier means? Exploitation, deceit, opportunism and crime are just as useful for securing material goods (perhaps even more so) than the tedious old traditional way of hard work. So why not be vicious? This is the problem with the traditional view of virtue as it is articulated by Hesiod: it leaves open the possibility that “the life of the unjust man” may be “far better than that of the just man.”²²

Plato’s Answer

One of the great accomplishments of Plato’s *Republic* is that it repairs this chink in virtue’s armor. But it does so at a significant cost vis-à-vis traditional Greek ethics. For Plato breaks decisively from the traditional view of virtue and happiness, and offers in its place a view fit mostly for philosophers. *True* virtue (we learn from the *Republic*) is not to be found in material goods or in the honor that attends them, but in philosophy. As such, it is valuable both

²² Glaucon again: Plato *Republic* 358c.

in itself and for the things it produces.²³ As an activity in itself, virtue (or philosophy) is the actualization of a most sublime desire—the desire for wisdom—and thus it is extremely enjoyable. In terms of its products, virtue-as-philosophy produces any number of goods: knowledge, a right ordering of the soul, a harmonious existence, and so on. Thus Plato closes off the argument in defense of vice. One can cheat and steal and take advantage of others, but one will never obtain thereby the true joys of a philosophical life. Nor can one simply *pretend* to be a philosopher; for while that may well earn one a *reputation* for wisdom, it will never deliver the real goods that philosophy has in store.

But Plato's response to the universal temptation of vice, for all its philosophical splendor, leaves something to be desired. For human beings are not *only* philosophers by nature. We continue to seek happiness in *things*. Thus the problem with Plato's refutation of vice is that it only refutes with an invitation to philosophy. Plato demonstrates that the philosopher will be much happier than the tyrant, but he does not show how a human being might be happy and virtuous outside of philosophy. The problem is only deepened when one considers that some poor individuals cannot be philosophers *at all*. Perhaps they have no intellectual talent; perhaps the necessities of life have made away with their time. What does Plato have to offer them? Only partial and unsatisfactory answers at best: non-philosophers must be lied to, for their virtue shall consist only in obedience to philosophers.²⁴

Prodicus' Answer

It is now possible to appreciate the significance of Prodicus' answer, which comes in the form of two consecutive speeches delivered by Virtue—one to Hercules, the other directly to

²³ Hence Plato's Socrates places virtue in Glaucon's second category of goods (see *Republic* 358a).

²⁴ These remarks are obviously sketchy, but this is not the place for a detailed analysis of the *Republic*; I am only attempting to illuminate the differences between the invitations to virtue one finds in Plato and Prodicus.

Vice. In the first speech, Prodicus does not stray too far from the traditional view of virtue found in Hesiod. He has Virtue instruct Hercules as follows: “Let me tell you truly what *is* [*ta onta*], exactly how the gods have ordained it [*heiper hoi theoi diethesan*]”.²⁵

For all things good and fair, the gods give nothing to man without work [*ponos*] and care [*epimeleia*]. If you want the favor of the gods you must worship the gods: if you desire the love of friends, you must show kindness [*euergetêton*] to your friends: if you desire to be honored by some city, you must assist that city: if you deem it valuable to be admired by all of Greece for *aretê*, you must strive to do good for Greece: if you want land to yield you fruits in abundance, you must care for that land: if you think you should get wealth from flocks, you must tend to those flocks: if you want to grow great through war and want power to liberate your friends and subdue your enemies, you must learn the arts of war from those who know them and must practice their right use: and if you want your body to be strong, you must accustom your body to be the servant of your mind, and train it with toil and sweat.

The close relationship between this speech and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (286-315) has been frequently noted in the literature. What is particularly important for present purposes, however, is that Prodicus essentially agrees with Hesiod as to what sorts of things ordinary human beings desire. Philosophy is not even on the list. People want to be well off and respected by their friends and fellow-citizens. Beyond that, they want the power to preserve these goods for themselves and for their loved ones. Moreover, like Hesiod, Prodicus regards it as a fact of nature or (as he puts it) the “will of the gods” that people have to work hard to obtain these

²⁵ Cf. note 2.

goods. But now, let us put the same question to Prodicus that was put to Hesiod above: Why should people toil and sweat for goods they can obtain much more easily through vice?²⁶

Prodicus' answer is this: because the goods in question are not *nearly* as valuable when they are obtained by vice. This is the point of Virtue's second speech, which she addresses directly to Vice: "What good [*agathon*] do you really have," Virtue asks Vice, "and what pleasure [*hedu*] do you know, when you will do nothing to earn it?" Certainly one does not have the sweetest and most enduring pleasures of all, which include (1) a just commendation (*epainos*) from others, and (2) the personal satisfaction that attends one's own fine work (*ergon kalon*). Moreover, the happiness one does have when one lives a life of vice is very insecure; for one's present deeds are always causing stress (*barunomenoi*) and one's past deeds making one ashamed (*aischunomenoi*). But this is not so with the followers of virtue—they look back on their past deeds fondly and find pleasure in their present well-being. Thus, Virtue says, her way is the *makaristotatên eudaimonian*, the happiest happiness of all.

To a certain extent, Prodicus' defense of virtue anticipates Plato's. For Plato too argues that a tyrant will be perpetually plagued by his misdeeds.²⁷ But what is different about Prodicus is, again, the value he places upon unphilosophical or worldly goods. Like Hesiod, Prodicus recognizes that material prizes are very much worth having. His followers will want to become rich in flocks, strong in body, and win praise for defending their friends. Prodicus, however, improves upon Hesiod by bolstering the argument for virtue. What he adds is the insight that prizes in general are by far more valuable when they are legitimately won. In other words, one

²⁶ The question is implied by a quick interjection from Vice: "Do you notice Hercules how hard and long is the road to mirth [*epi tas euphrosunas*] this woman is describing to you? But I shall lead you by the easy and short road to happiness [*eudaimonia*]."

²⁷ *Republic* 571a-576c.

must *work* for them and do nothing that may be perceived as unfair. One is reminded at this point of the chariot race in Book 23 of the *Iliad*, in which Antilochos defeats Menelaos “not by speed but by trickery.”²⁸ Menelaos asks the boy to swear in front of the whole army that he used no guile to win the race. The boy cannot do it. And so, the prize becomes worthless to him. It is true that Antilochos is offered, and accepts, the prize in the end; but the reason for this is also very much to the point: “you have suffered much for me [here at Troy] and done a great deal of hard work,” Menelaos tells Antilochos.²⁹ Antilochos accepts the prize not for the race (in which he cheated), but for legitimate hard work he has performed in battle.

The point of all this is that Prodicus’ *Hercules at the Crossroads* stands quite squarely upon traditional moral ground—much more squarely than Plato’s *Republic*. It recognizes goods such as wealth and honor that have always been deemed worthy of human striving, and it shores up the position of virtue not (as Plato does) by dramatically changing the sorts of goods human beings should desire, but by showing that the value of everyday goods depends in large measure upon how they are attained.³⁰ The case of Prodicus alone is enough to show that Strauss’s

²⁸ Homer *Iliad* 23.515 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 606-7.

³⁰ The relevance of Prodicus’ answer to modern ethical debate is revealed if one considers how modern ethicists have, by and large, followed Plato. For example, in his book *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 188 ff., Alasdair MacIntyre describes a highly intelligent seven-year-old child who is learning to play chess. The child has no particular desire to learn the game, but he is promised candy if he will play, and even more candy if he can win. “Thus motivated, the child plays and plays to win” (p. 188). However, as MacIntyre notes, so long as it is only candy that is motivating him to play chess, he has no reason not to cheat. Indeed, he has *every* reason to cheat, as long as he can get away with it. This is a great illustration of Glaucon’s third category of goods and the temptation to vice that goes with it. The good in question is candy; playing chess is the means to that end; and cheating at chess may prove a better means. Most philosophers recommend removing this temptation by re-orienting pupils to a completely different set of goods—hence, MacIntyre: “But, so we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons” for playing chess” (*ibid.*). But this is not what Prodicus does. Prodicus retains the goods in question—the boy will still like candy—but shows him that his candy will taste even better if it is legitimately *earned*. Prodicus is right about this, and the insight certainly extends beyond physical goods. Imagine, for example, what it feels like to receive the glowing praise of a friend or a community for something one did not do. How much more would one enjoy the praise were it genuinely earned? That is Prodicus’ point.

generalization about sophistic ethics is not actually generalizable. But this does not go quite far enough. For it is still possible to argue that Prodicus is but an exception to the obvious rule that the sophists were unconventional and morally subversive. Thus it is necessary to examine another case, the one that Strauss himself cites: Protagoras.

PROTAGORAS

Protagoras is often regarded as a shady character, morally speaking,³¹ and this for two reasons: because he taught his students how “to make weaker arguments stronger”³² (which seems subversive on the face of it); and because he appears sneaky and evasive in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*, when Socrates asks him what he teaches.³³ Both of these facts are indisputable. However, as evidence for Protagoras’ immorality or the immorality of his teaching, they are far from conclusive. Indeed, when interpreted properly, both these facts suggests not that Protagoras was a teacher of immorality, but rather that he was, like Prodicus, an essentially conventional moralist.

Making the Weaker Argument Stronger

Consider, for example, Protagoras’ practice of “making the weaker argument stronger.” It cannot be doubted that Protagoras taught this art or that it often entailed defending positions that were obviously false. Why else would Aristotle report that people were “rightly offended” by it and that it made use of “falsehood” and “probability”?³⁴ What can, and *should*, be doubted

³¹ See Strauss, *Natural Right*, p. 117; cf. Strauss, “The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 58; and see also Patrick Coby, “The Education of a Sophist: Aspects of Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Interpretation* 10 (1982): 139-58.

³² See Aristotle *Rhetoric* II.24, 1402a23; In Stephanus Byzantius, under “Abdera”, Eudoxus of Cnidus is cited as saying that Protagoras *invented* the weaker and stronger argument (see DK 80 A21).

³³ *Protagoras* 318a-328d.

³⁴ *Rhetoric* II.24, 1402a25-29; the translation of this passage by W. R. Roberts in Jonathan Barnes, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 2235, is misleading; a more

however is the interpretive leap that usually follows at this point, i.e. that *if* Protagoras taught people how to make the weaker argument stronger, he must have also taught untraditional (probably even self-promoting) moral doctrines. The problem with this inference is that there are *legitimate* uses for the art of making the weaker argument appear stronger (falsehoods, probabilities, and all). Thus while the art certainly *could* be used as a tool for self-promotion, it was not necessarily used that way by Protagoras and his students. What we would need to see (and do not have) is evidence explicitly linking Protagoras' use of this art with untraditional, immoral causes.

In defense of making the weaker argument appear stronger, I shall be brief, since in every free society from fifth-century Athens to our own, this art has found able defenders in those genuinely committed to legal fairness, political wisdom, philosophy and science.³⁵ Indeed, the clearness of political thinking and the fairness of political deeds depend upon it. When, for example, we grant the right of a vigorous defense to someone accused of a crime—someone whom everyone “knows” to be guilty—we call upon this art of making the weaker argument appear stronger. Does a vigorous defense often entail “probabilities” and facts everyone believes to be “falsehoods”? Of course it does. But we grant this right nevertheless; for we can never be so certain of another person's guilt that we can afford simply to ignore his defense. And what is true in legal proceedings is true in other areas of life as well: without the chance to hear the case that can be made for positions we do not hold, we have no opportunity for improvement, no opportunity for sound deliberation, and no opportunity to remedy past mistakes. Will the case

literal translation by Michael J. O'Brien appears in Rosamond Kent Sprague, ed. *The Older Sophists* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), p. 13.

³⁵ See John Stuart Mill, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” in *On Liberty*, ed. David Spitz (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1975), pp. 17-52.

for the weaker argument often be weak itself? Probably, yes—but what if it is? Let us respond to it by showing just that, and we shall be better for it. Thus teaching students how to make weaker arguments appear stronger means teaching them how to argue, how to reason, and how to persuade. It does not necessarily mean teaching them to take unconventional or immoral views. If one wants to say *that* about Protagoras, one shall need to supply further evidence.

The evidence usually supplied at this point is a passage from Aristophanes' *Clouds* where Pheidippides comes "to learn the two speeches: the stronger [*ton kreitton*], whatever it may be, and the weaker [*ton hêttona*], which argues unjust things [*t' adika*] and overturns the stronger."³⁶ The language of stronger and weaker is unmistakably Protagorean and it is clearly associated here with injustice. In fact, Aristophanes then personifies the two speeches, naming the stronger one Just and the weaker one Unjust; and gives to Unjust speech the following lines:

Consider, lad, all that moderation [*sôphronein*] involves, and how many pleasures [*hêdonôn*] you're going to be deprived of: boys, women, games, relishes, drinking, boisterous laughter. Yet what is living worth to you if you're deprived of these things? Well, then. From here I go on to the necessities of nature [*tês phuseôs*]: you've done wrong, fallen in love, committed some adultery, and then you've been caught. You're ruined, for you're unable to speak [*adunatos legein*]. But if you consort with me, then use your nature [*phusei*], leap, laugh, believe that nothing is shameful [*aischron*]! For if you happen to be caught as an adulterer, you'll reply to the husband that you've done him no injustice; then you'll refer him to Zeus, how, "even he was worsted by love and women; yet how can a mortal be greater than a god?"

³⁶ Aristophanes *Clouds* 880-1104.

This passage has been tremendously influential in shaping people's prejudices against Protagoras.³⁷ And yet, there is no reason to suppose that Aristophanes has portrayed Protagorean pedagogy fairly. After all, the passage also abounds with references to Prodicus' *Hercules at the Crossroads*—the personification of the two speeches, the defense of physical pleasure, the references to nature, etc.—but Prodicus certainly did not teach that injustice was better or more natural than justice. Indeed, he taught the exact opposite!³⁸ And if Aristophanes is so reckless with Prodicus, why should we suppose he has been any fairer to Protagoras? It is necessary to constantly remind ourselves that Aristophanes is a comedian, whose goal it was to make people laugh, not to report accurately what people really did or said. And if one requires further evidence of the gap that separates comedy from factual reporting, one need only recall the way Aristophanes portrayed Socrates.³⁹

But besides rightly doubting Aristophanes' faithfulness to fact, we have other reasons for giving Protagoras the benefit of the doubt—or rather, good reasons for believing that Protagoras' ethical outlook (like that of Prodicus) was the exact opposite of the way Aristophanes portrayed it. The reasons are these: (1) Of all the sources that refer to Protagoras' art of argumentation in general or to his teaching of stronger and weaker arguments in particular, not one (save

³⁷ See, especially, G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 268-9.

³⁸ Xenophon does not spell out Hercules' choice for the just life, but it is attested to by a scholium on Aristophanes' *Clouds* 361 (DK 84 B1), which reads: "There is extant a book of Prodicus entitled *Horai*, in which he portrayed Hercules interviewed in turn by Virtue and Vice, each soliciting him to elect the manner of life represented by herself, with Hercules *ultimately choosing the hardships offered by the former over the fleeting pleasures promised by Vice*" (italics mine). Aristophanes exactly reverses the situation.

³⁹ The comparison between Aristophanes' and Plato's portraits of Socrates has been greatly facilitated by the translations by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West in their *Plato and Aristophanes: Four Texts on Socrates*, revised edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); for Socrates' own complaints about the Aristophanic portrait, see Plato *Apology* 18d, 19a-20a.

Aristophanes) suggests that Protagoras intended this art for unjust use.⁴⁰ This would be a very strange lacuna indeed were Protagoras truly a teacher of injustice. (2) In the *Meno* (91c), when Anytus accuses the sophists of corrupting the youth,⁴¹ Socrates immediately cites Protagoras as counter evidence: “Surely it is incredible that Protagoras took in the whole of Greece, corrupting his pupils and sending them away in worse moral condition than when they came to him, for more than forty years.” Protagoras lived to be seventy, Socrates points out, “and all that time, nay to this very day, his high reputation has never waned.”⁴² And (3), the portrait that Plato paints of Protagoras in the dialogue that bears his name is one of a thoroughly moral man, and a thoroughly committed teacher of *moral* virtues.⁴³

Now this last point, though it has been observed many times,⁴⁴ is also a matter of debate. Indeed, it is precisely Plato’s portrait of Protagoras that Leo Strauss cites as evidence for

⁴⁰ See DK 80 A1-30.

⁴¹ I suspect that the prejudice articulated here by the crotchety old nobleman Anytus (I say prejudice, because it is immediately revealed that he has no first-hand experience at all of the sophists), is just the sort of attitude Aristophanes was playing to in the *Clouds* by casting all the sophists (including Socrates) as corrupters of youth. Large segments of Greek society had good reason to be suspicious of the sophists. The situation is described well by A. W. H. Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and Sophists: Protagoras 316b-328d*,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 3-12; esp. p. 10: “In Athens as in other Greek states, a restricted number of families of *agathoi* (not the *agathoi* as a whole) had traditionally taken a prominent active part in politics. These were the repositories of political wisdom; and their old members, at least, must have resented the wandering ‘foreign’ teachers who claimed to be able to teach what was necessary to succeed in politics in any city. (The younger members doubtless flocked to the sophists, along with others who could afford to do so. . . . Again, many of the poorer citizens must have had suspicions of the likely political effect of the expensive education, which only the wealthier members of society could afford, offered by the sophists.”

⁴² Plato *Meno* 91e3-9.

⁴³ See for example 329b-c and 348d-e; what is at issue in the dialogue is not whether Protagoras teaches moral virtue in the everyday sense of the term, but whether his (and everyone else’s) understanding of virtue can withstand Socratic scrutiny.

⁴⁴ See especially Gregory Vlastos’s introduction to *Plato: Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), pp. vii-xxiv.

Protagoras' sneakiness and covert immorality.⁴⁵ Let us therefore turn to an examination of the *Protagoras* with the understanding that if it is possible to show that Strauss's interpretation is either unsound or at least open to serious doubt, then the usual evidence brought against Protagoras' ethical outlook will be exhausted.

The *Protagoras*

In fact, no extensive analysis of the *Protagoras* is required at this point. It will suffice simply to show where the sophist endorses and claims to teach basic moral virtues. This he does, of course, in his myth about the origins of mankind and in the two speeches that immediately follow.⁴⁶ In the myth, Protagoras says many things that are not quite traditional; for even though it had long been told how Prometheus saved mankind by stealing fire from Hepheastus, etc., Protagoras adds and subtracts features from this mythological tradition at will.⁴⁷ Moreover, Protagoras is willing to recast major portions of the myth into a *logos* that makes no reference to gods at all, as we might expect of someone who doubted whether or not the gods even existed. But neither Protagoras' reworking of mythological material nor his agnosticism necessarily make him a teacher of unconventional morality; and it is right here that one must draw the line. For the virtues Protagoras claims to teach in his speech (never mind their origins) are these: respect for others (*aidôs*), justice (*dikê, dikaiosunê*), and self-control (*sôphrosunê*). He says in no

⁴⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 117 (cf. pp. 114-16); cf. Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," pp. 45-49, and 54-58.

⁴⁶ For a detailed description, see the previous chapter; on the overall structure of the passage, see G. B. Kerferd, "Protagoras' Doctrine," p. 42. The myth proper extends from 320c8 to 322d5, and is followed (down to 324d1) by interpretations and illustrations related to the myth; then Protagoras drops *muthos* for *logos*, myth for argument, and essentially recasts the whole account into plain speech; I follow Kerferd in regarding the *logos* as an alternative to the myth, not a continuation of it; what Protagoras says in one way in the myth is precisely the same material that he says in another way in the *logos*.

⁴⁷ See most recently Alfredo Ferrarin, "Homo Faber, Homo Sapiens, or Homo Politicus? Protagoras and the Myth of Prometheus," *Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2000): 289-319.

uncertain terms (322d, 325a, 328b) that he regards these as political virtues of the first order, without which no cities can exist. Moreover, he says that anyone who cannot exhibit these virtues, at least to some basic degree, is not fit for society and should either be banished or killed.

The problem is that these are not the *only* virtues Protagoras taught. For he had earlier claimed (318e5-319a2) to teach *euboulia* (the ability to deliberate well in personal and public affairs), so that his students might become extremely capable speakers and doers of deeds.⁴⁸ And these virtues (*euboulia* and the art of speaking) seem different than the virtues Protagoras touts in his myth and subsequent *logos*. In fact, they seem radically different insofar as *aidôs* and *dikê* are the virtues of a citizen (co-operative virtues), while *euboulia* and the art of speaking are the virtues of a leader (competitive virtues).⁴⁹ Thus, to the extent that Protagoras treats all these virtues as if they are the same, he would appear to be equivocating.⁵⁰ And one must then ask *why* he is equivocating.

There are a number of possibilities. By far the most common answer is that Protagoras is speaking to multiple audiences. He is speaking to Hippocrates, who wants to learn the skills necessary to become a powerful and successful leader—thus he must stress leadership virtues at the outset. But he is also speaking to a suspicious Athenian *dêmos* (or, more precisely, showing Socrates how he *would* speak to such a *dêmos*), and making it seem as if the virtues he teaches are egalitarian virtues such as justice and respect for others. It is a *captatio benevolentiae*, writes Adkins, a speech of “great rhetorical skill . . . addressed to as many sections of the Athenian

⁴⁸ *dunatôtatos, prattein kai legein*.

⁴⁹ For the dichotomy (an over-drawn one, in my view) between competitive and co-operative virtues, see A. W. H. Adkins, “*Aretê, Technê, and Democracy*,” p. 4 ff.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 6-10..

public as possible.⁵¹ On this reading, Protagoras is made out to be a bit of a sneak; for he realizes that *politikê aretê* means one thing for those gifted enough to be leaders, and something else entirely for those who must be followers, but he conceals this fact behind an egalitarian smokescreen. His character may thus be questioned to the extent that he uses deception to protect himself and his elite students from public envy.

Strauss's interpretation, however, is significantly more cynical. According to Strauss, the reason for Protagoras' equivocating is that he has something ugly to hide—much uglier than the promotion of aristocracy (concealed or otherwise). What Protagoras is hiding on Strauss's view is that “having more than others is the highest good,” and that “the appearance of justice combined with actual injustice will lead one to the summit of happiness.”⁵² In other words, Protagoras is hiding the fact that, like Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, he is essentially an immoralist. It is true, Strauss would admit, that Protagoras' myth makes a big deal out of conventional virtues, but what it teaches to the attentive listener is not that one should be just and temperate, but quite the opposite: it teaches that the requirements of civic virtue “are perfectly fulfilled by the mere semblance of justice.”⁵³

But now the question is this: if Plato wanted to say that Protagoras subscribed to an immoralist view, why didn't he just come out and say so? He certainly had no difficulty imputing such a view to Thrasymachus, Polus, Callicles, Glaucon or Adeimantus. Why should Protagoras be any different? And why is Plato so kind in his treatment of Protagoras on the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 12; for a somewhat more cynical view along similar interpretive lines see Patrick Coby, “The Education of a Sophist, esp. p. 144. Coby, however, makes a number of factual errors that might have been avoided had he looked more carefully at Kerferd, “Protagoras' Doctrine.”

⁵² Strauss, *Natural Right*, pp. 116, 117.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

surface? These questions must be answered if we are expected to believe, beyond what is actually written in the *Protagoras*, that Protagoras was an immoralist. Certainly Plato raises his readers' suspicions, as is his wont. But it may well be the case that Plato does not accuse Protagoras directly of immoralism because Protagoras did not hold immoral views. Perhaps he was, as the dialogue suggests in several places, a basically moral man and a teacher of moral virtue. If this is true, it would still be necessary to account for Protagoras' equivocating on the matter of what he teaches; but this, I think, can be easily done without invoking the cynical interpretation of Strauss.

The most likely reasons for Protagoras' equivocations on the matter of what virtue is are, first, that he is speaking to multiple audiences;⁵⁴ and, second, that Plato wants the remainder of the dialogue to be an inquiry into the unity of the virtues. Plato, in fact, needs Protagoras to equivocate so he can have Socrates ask the very question that he asks at 329c, viz., "Is virtue a single whole, and are justice and self-control and holiness parts of it, or are these latter all names for one and the same thing?" But beyond this, one can say something else in Protagoras' defense; for there is an explanation within his own speech of the relationship between the virtues of a leader and those of a citizen, which neither requires the very cynical interpretation of Strauss *nor* the moderately cynical view of Adkins. According to Protagoras, the virtues practiced by leaders, while different from the virtues of a citizen, are nevertheless related to the latter in an essential way: leadership must always be limited by *aidôs* and *dikê*. In other words, a leader cannot employ speech, strategy or anything else in a way that goes beyond the bounds of justice and respect for others. In fact, Protagoras says this explicitly in a line (322e2-323a1) that has been frequently overlooked: "political excellence [*politikê aretê*]," Protagoras says, "must

⁵⁴ As per Adkins, "*Aretê, Technê, Democracy and the Sophists.*"

always proceed entirely from justice and temperance.” Is he lying? He could be. But there is no reason to assume that he is. He may well believe exactly what he says—that without virtues like justice, respect for others and temperance, political communities simply could not exist; that whatever else a leader does, whatever other skills he employs, he must employ them within the bounds of these fundamental virtues. If this is Protagoras’ position—and it is a tenable political theoretical stance—it would follow that what Protagoras practices and teaches others to practice is precisely political excellence within the bounds of justice and respect for others.

CONCLUSION

It has become a commonplace among political theorists to present the Greek sophists as promoters of immorality and teachers of subversive skills. I have focused on Leo Strauss’s articulation of the commonplace only because it is so clearly expressed and highly visible. However, like so many myths about the sophists, this one has its roots not in any concrete evidence from sophistic sources but rather in a tendency toward hostile interpretation. Aristophanes, who was one of the earliest and most powerful of the sophists’ detractors is the voice that, more than any other, informs the way Strauss interprets everything having to do with the sophists. Aristophanes’ view that the sophists facilitated the corruption of traditional Greek values and the growth of self-aggrandizement is imported into Plato’s dialogues where it does not belong. But the purpose of this chapter was not only to expose a common but unfounded generalization about the sophists; it was also to put a more plausible generalization in its place. The view that I have argued for here is one that was expressed some time ago by Terrence Irwin. I have only tried to support the view with evidence. It is that the sophists practiced and taught a form of morality that was essentially traditional. The question of *how* they taught traditional

morality, a question that has significance for modern political education, will be the topic of chapter 10.

CHAPTER 10

HOW VIRTUE IS TAUGHT: REFUTATION, EXHORTATION AND ASSOCIATION

The argument of the last chapter was that the sophists propounded a basically conventional or traditional set of moral values. When they claimed the ability to teach *aretê*, they meant that they could teach students how to exhibit the qualities of a political leader, tempered by the moral demands of community life. The question, then, is how exactly the sophists did this: i.e., *how* did they teach *aretê*? Rarely is this question put to the sophistic texts, since it is usually assumed (following Plato) that the sophists were counterfeit teachers. But, assuming for the time being that the sophists *could* live up to their claims, it would seem a most worthy pursuit to inquire into their methods. For in every mature society the problem of imparting traditional forms of excellence to succeeding generations is a formidable one. Indeed, the problem is so serious that one can hardly afford to ignore potential sources of insight for reasons of historical prejudice. This chapter focuses particularly on the sophistic methods of exhortation and association, but it does so against the backdrop of Socrates' approach to the problem of teaching virtue.

Socrates, of course, denied that he could teach *aretê*. And yet his pupils Plato and Xenophon portray him as far more capable of teaching it than others.¹ The question, then, is how Socrates did this. Certainly one of his chief pedagogical methods was the *elenchus*, or art of refutation, which is portrayed throughout the early and middle Platonic dialogues. But Socrates employed other methods too, though this is not well known. Like the sophists, he practiced both

¹ On Socrates' denial that he is a teacher, see Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.ii.2-3; I.ii.8; and chapter 7, n. 8; for his students' counter-claim that he *could* teach, see Xenophon *Ibid.*, I.iii.1, I.iv.1; and compare Plato, *Euthydemus* 278d-282d and 288c-293a.

exhortation and association, and did so to good effect, according his disciples. There are, of course, important differences in the way Socrates and the sophists took up these methods, but there are also striking similarities. The argument of this chapter is that the sophistic methods of exhortation and association are far more effective than Socratic *elenchus* as a means of imparting *aretê* and that Socrates' own educational activities attest to this.

REFUTATION

The practice of refuting one's comrades by means of a question-and-answer style of conversation (*elenchus*) was not a Socratic invention,² but Socrates was probably the first person to apply this technique to the field of moral education. It is worth stressing that *elenchus* was, for Socrates, a moral-pedagogical technique, since it is often presented exclusively as a method of philosophical inquiry.³ However, Plato's *Apology* supplies a rich account of how Socrates used *elenchus* for moral-educative purposes. When the oracle at Delphi had declared Socrates the wisest of men, Socrates was incredulous and decided to put the oracle to the test by examining all those people in Athens reputed to be wise. Socrates found that those with the greatest reputations for wisdom were not nearly as wise as they seemed and that, unlike Socrates himself, they were quite unaware of their ignorance. At this point, what had begun as an attempt to test or refute (*elenchein*) the oracle now seemed an impossible task: the oracle was irrefutable (*anelenkτος*). And so Socrates began, instead, to regard his examination and refutation of human beings as a service to the Delphic god. He decided that he would refute people in order to show that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (23a), that people think they know about virtue

² The invention of dialectical refutation is variously ascribed to Zeno of Elea (Aristotle, fr. 65 Rose) or to the sophist Protagoras (Diogenes Laertius IX.51).

³ See Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 17-30.

when they do not (29e), and that people value unimportant things too highly (30a). These are distinctly moral-educative goals, and Socrates tells his jury that “no greater good has arisen for you in the city than my service to the god” (30a).

There is another description of Socratic refutation in Plato’s late dialogue, the *Sophist*, that also reveals its moral-educative function. The Eleatic Stranger has just described several methods of teaching virtue, when he comes to what he calls a method of *kathartikê*, or purification. (That Socrates’ art of refutation is meant by this becomes clear as the description unfolds.) The method consists in cross-examining (*dierôtôsin*) a person who thinks he is saying something reasonable, but whose opinions are in fact various and inconsistent. The opinions are then collected together in conversation, placed side by side, and shown to conflict (230b4-8).⁴

And this is said to have the following effect:

The people who see this [i.e. that their opinions are self-conflicting] get angry with themselves and become gentler toward others; they lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves, and no loss is more pleasant to hear or more long-lasting in effect. Just as doctors who work on the body think that the body cannot benefit from food until the internal obstacles to food are removed, so the purifiers of the soul think that the soul will not benefit from the teachings [*mathêmatôn*] that are offered to it until someone shames it by refuting [*elenchôn*] and removes the opinions that interfere with learning; thus the soul must be rendered cleansed and in such a state that it believes it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more. (230b8-d4)

⁴ Several scholars have struggled to articulate a precise description of Socratic *elenchus* as it is portrayed in the early and middle Platonic dialogues; see especially Richard Robinson, *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 7-19; Gregory Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 27-58; and Hugh H. Benson, “The Dissolution of the Problem of the Elenchus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 13, ed. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 45-112.

Here refutation is presented as a *preparation* for moral instruction, as opposed to a substantive teaching.⁵ But it stands, nevertheless, as a part of moral education in general. For besides the fact that the success of positive teachings depends precisely on the readiness of the soul that refutation brings about, being refuted also nurtures specific moral qualities: gentleness, modesty, and a realistic sense of what one knows. There can be little doubt that Socrates regarded and employed refutation as a way of leading his interlocutors from a worse to a better moral state.

The brother sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus also practiced an art of refutation in connection with teaching virtue. But the true educative use of this art undoubtedly belongs to Socrates alone. For while it is true that in the *Euthydemus*, the brother sophists claim to be able to impart virtue by refuting someone again and again,⁶ all they can actually do is render their pupil hostile toward themselves and toward education in general. Socrates, meanwhile, renders his interlocutors gentle and philosophical.⁷ These different outcomes can be explained by the different ways in which Socrates and the sophists refute: Socrates builds refutations out of his interlocutors' *own* moral beliefs. As Nicias says in the *Laches*:

Whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation [*dialegomenos*] must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. (187e6-188a2)

⁵ In practice, however, Socratic refutation often involves positive moral teachings; see further Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," p. 44, n. 47.

⁶ *Euthydemus* 273e-275a; cf. chapter 4, above.

⁷ This, at any rate, is the picture one gets from the *Euthydemus*, as from the passage of the *Sophist* above; however, there are numerous exceptions (see below).

But this not the way Euthydemus and Dionysodorus approach refutation. They build their contradictions and refutations out of pre-made verbal paradoxes. They lure their students into artificial traps, as it were. And thus while Socratic refutation stands as a method of moral instruction, sophistic refutation (as Euthydemus and Dionysodorus practice it) is nothing but a game (*paidia*).⁸

The more one thinks about it, though, the more refutation—even Socratic refutation—seems a rather odd way of teaching virtue. For one thing, it tends to make people angry more often than it makes them gentle: “You are well advised not to leave Athens and live abroad,” says the just-refuted Meno to Socrates, “for if you behaved like this as a foreigner in another country, you would most likely be arrested as a sorcerer” (*Meno* 80b). In fact, when the question comes up at Socrates’ trial why so many people are angry with him, Socrates points to just one thing: his practice of refutation. Socrates recalls for his jury how he went around refuting the politicians and became hated (*apêxthomên*) not only by them but also by everyone present. He tells how he moved on to the poets and craftsmen, and again felt himself “becoming hated” (21e1). Finally, he relates how certain youths tried to imitate his refutations by refuting others in a Socratic manner; and Socrates became hated for this as well (23c8-9). Thus, far from rendering people gentle, refutation seems to have systematically turned people against Socrates. Indeed his *elenctic* enterprise alone, according to his own testimony, produced a city full of people so hostile towards him that they dragged him into court and sought to put an end to his life. In the face of evidence like this, it is difficult to maintain that refutation can be relied upon for a positive moral effect.

⁸ Socrates calls it a game at *Euthydemus* 278b-c.

Some people, of course, did respond positively to being refuted. Nicias, for example, professes to find pleasure and utility in the experience (*Laches* 188a6-188c3). But even in these cases one has to wonder how long lasting the moral effect really was.⁹ “Nothing is easier to expunge than the effect of a dialectician,” wrote Nietzsche.¹⁰ And this seems to be well borne out by the lament Plato assigns to Alcibiades in the *Symposium*: “I know perfectly well that I cannot prove Socrates wrong when he tells me what I should do, yet the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in to my desire to please the crowd” (216b).

Other interlocutors appear temporarily silenced or dumbstruck by refutation but not really persuaded. One thinks especially of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* and Calicles in the *Gorgias*. And the reason for this would seem to be precisely (*pace* the passage from the *Sophist*) that Socrates’ interlocutors do *not* become angry with themselves when they are refuted; they become angry with Socrates! Thus, Euthyphro famously compares Socrates to the master craftsman Daedalus: “This tendency for our statements to go in a circle and not stay in one place is not my doing,” Euthyphro says; “it is you who are the Daedalus” (*Euthyphro* 11c-d).¹¹ And Meno compares Socrates variously to a stingray who numbs people’s lips or a magician who casts spells: “At this moment I feel you exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell” (*Meno* 80a). In fact, so many of Socrates’ interlocutors remain unmoved

⁹ See Richard Robinson, *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 17-18; and Alexander Nehamas, “What did Socrates Teach and to Whom did he Teach it?” in *Virtues of Authenticity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 71, who quotes Nietzsche and Plato’s *Symposium* to similar effect.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of Idols and the AntiChrist*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 42.

¹¹ Daedalus is reputed to have invented statues so life-like they could move around by themselves.

after being refuted by him that, again, it is very difficult to see how the method is supposed to have had great force.¹²

All these examples taken together suggest that refutation should be used very judiciously if it is going to be used at all. In the *Apology* (30a3-4), Socrates announces his willingness to refute “*anybody*, young or old, citizen or foreigner.” But even Plato seems to have reservations about this policy. For in the *Republic*, he has a much more cautious Socrates warn Glaucon that “Those with whom one shares arguments should possess orderly and stable natures, not as is done nowadays in sharing them with whoever chances by and comes to it without being suited for it” (539d; cf. *Euthydemus* 304a). Furthermore, the Socrates that Plato presents in the *Republic* fully acknowledges that refutation can be morally harmful. People who learn to refute may “fall quickly into a profound disbelief of what they formerly believed, and thus become, along with the whole activity of philosophy the objects of slander among the rest of men” (539c). Such cautionary remarks underscore Plato’s awareness that refutation is not a method of moral instruction for just anyone. Plato thus retains it within the overall educational scheme set out in the *Republic* only after placing careful (and notably un-Socratic) restrictions on its use.¹³ It would be fair to conclude therefore that refutation works only sometimes and only on a certain type of person, and that the dangers of the method are substantial.

EXHORTATION

A much more fruitful approach to teaching virtue is the method of exhortation routinely employed by the sophists. An exhortation is simply a speech that inspires its audience to live

¹² Another example is *Hippias* (see *Hippias Minor* 376b). Alexander Nehamas, “What did Socrates Teach and to Whom did he Teach it?” p. 70, lists no fewer than ten interlocutors who walk away from Socratic refutation unmoved.

¹³ Among other prerequisites for learning dialectic, of which refutation is a part, the *Republic* requires that the pupil be at least thirty years of age and subject to a battery of careful designed tests (537d).

virtuously, but the sophists had a rather special way of doing this.¹⁴ They worked their exhortations into beautiful, mythical stories about gods and heroes, virtues and vices, and thus managed to make them extremely compelling. Hippias refers in the *Hippias Major* to an exhortation he has recently delivered in Sparta concerning the noble practices (*kalôn epitêdeumatôn*) which young men ought to take up (286a). Hippias sets his exhortation just after the fall of Troy and has Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, ask the wise old Nestor “what practices a person should take up during his youth in order to win the highest respect” (286b). Nestor then propounds (*hupotithêmi*) to his young admirer “a great number of excellent rules of life” (286b3-4). Unfortunately, we do not know what these excellent rules of life were, since the content of the exhortation has not come down to us.¹⁵ But Hippias evidently earned the utmost respect from the Spartans for this speech.

Another sophistic exhortation is Prodicus’ education of Hercules at the crossroads by *Aretê*, or virtue personified.¹⁶ Hercules is made to stand for everyman as he faces the fundamental decision of his life: the choice between virtue and vice. Prodicus portrays Vice as a deceptive harlot, *Aretê* as a genuinely attractive counselor of wisdom. And in a speech to

¹⁴ Several Greek words correspond to the English verb “to exhort”: *parakeleuomai*, *paramutheomai*, *protrepô* and, in a qualified sense, *epideiknumi* (from which derives the noun *epideixis*); an *epideixis* is literally a “showing” or “display,” and its ostensible purpose in the hands of the sophists was to display their own intellectual and rhetorical abilities and to entice prospective students; but sophistic *epideixeis* often did much more than this; they often presented full-fledged moral exhortations aimed at inspiring their audiences to practice virtue. While not all *epideixeis* had this moral-hortatory component, several of the most famous ones did. One might therefore think of an *epideixis* as a “display” not only of the sophists’ talents, but also (in many cases) of the life of virtue as well.

¹⁵ To judge from Plato’s overall portrayal of Hippias, the “rules of life” that he put forth would have been none other than traditional moral values. Plato has Hippias emphasize in the *Hippias Major* (284b) that the Spartans will not tolerate unconventional teachings. And Hippias himself appears morally conventional in the *Hippias Minor* when he refuses again and again to accept the radical moral theories put forth by Socrates (e.g., to commit wrongs voluntarily is better than to commit them involuntarily, etc.); see especially, 376b7.

¹⁶ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21-34; for a fuller treatment of this *epideixis* see chapter 9.

Hercules as ontologically profound as it is morally instructive, *Aretê* is made to refute the “easy life” promised by vice:

I will not deceive you by a pleasant prelude: I will rather tell you truly the things that are [*ta onta*], as the gods have ordained them. For of all things good and fair, the gods give nothing to man without work and care. If you want the favor of the gods, you must worship the gods; if you desire the love of friends, you must show kindness to your friends; if you desire to be honored by some city, you must assist that city; if you deem it valuable to be admired by all of Greece for *aretê*, you must strive to do good for Greece; if you want land to yield you fruits in abundance, you must care for that land . . . and if you want your body to be strong, you must accustom your body to be the servant of your mind, and train it with toil and sweat. (Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.27-28)

Clearly an exhortation, this speech aims not only at refuting Vice, but also at recommending specific virtues: piety, friendship, service to one’s city, respect for elders, temperance, patience and hard work.¹⁷ And as with Hippias’ Nestor speech, this is done artfully by creating a speech within a speech. The sophist exhorts his audience to virtue with a narration about how an admirable hero was once exhorted by a goddess. One finds oneself suddenly and powerfully removed to a distant world of imagination.

The engagement of the audience’s imagination in both these sophistic exhortations could not have been accidental. For imagination transforms what would otherwise be a set of pedantic moral precepts into something much closer to personal experience.¹⁸ Another way of describing

¹⁷ Not all of these virtues appear in the excerpt quoted; the entire speech is translated in appendix A.

¹⁸ Impressed by Prodicus’ speech, and anxious to defend the sophist from ancient as well as modern attacks, George Grote wrote in volume 8 of his *History of Greece*: “Who is there that has not read the well-known fable called “The Choice of Hercules,” which is to be found in every book professing to collect impressive illustrations of elementary

this, perhaps, is in terms of “narrative distance.” The sophists do not exhort people directly; they retell legendary exhortations. And if this works anything like the way it works with novels and films today, the audience will have found itself unexpectedly and powerfully drawn in.¹⁹ Stories disarm while they morally instruct. They appeal to aesthetic rather than rational impulses.²⁰

Socrates appears to have made use of exhortation as well; but here things get a bit complicated. For a number of familiar passages of Plato would lead one to doubt that Socrates really did exhort people to virtue. Certain passages in the *Gorgias*, for example, suggest not only that Socrates disliked making speeches, but also that he would never have tried to address a large audience.²¹ His approach was rather to persuade *individuals* by securing their personal commitment to specific moral propositions (a method which, as many teachers know, becomes less effective in proportion to the size of the group one addresses). In fact, Socrates all but says in the *Gorgias* that it is *impossible* to teach anything of importance to a large audience.²²

Moreover, if the *Gorgias* invokes doubt about Socrates’ ability to exhort large audiences, the

morality? Who does not know that its express purpose is, to kindle the imaginations of youth in favour of a life of labour for noble objects, and against a life of indulgence?” (London: John Murray, 1850), pp. 511-12.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 211-225 argues that human actions in general become intelligible only in terms of a “narrative” self-understanding. In other words, we understand any given action we might take *in relation* to actions (either our own or others’) that have preceded and in relation to the stories we hope to enact. It follows for MacIntyre (and I think he is right) that set narratives such as novels, plays, poems, etc. have a tremendously powerful and emotive effect upon our own conduct. The most effective way to teach moral conduct, MacIntyre argues, is through story.

²⁰ As aesthetic appeals to morality, sophistic exhortations are not far removed from the poetic and literary ways in which virtue was customarily imparted in Greece. One of the prime venues for such instruction was the *symposium*, or drinking party, in which a myrtle branch was passed from guest to guest and poetry of a moral nature recited; see further, H. I. Marrou, *A History of Greek Education in Antiquity*, trans., George Lamb (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), pp. 70-1; it should be borne in mind that most of the great sophists were also poets.

²¹ For his dislike of speeches, see *Gorgias* 465e, and recall Socrates’ insistence throughout this and other early dialogues upon *dialogomenos* (conversation) and *bracheôs legein* (speaking briefly); for his eschewal of large audiences, see *Gorgias* 474a-b, where Socrates tells Polus: “I know how to provide one witness for what I say: the man himself to whom my speech is directed, while I bid the many farewell; and I know how to put the vote to one man, while I don’t converse with the many either.”

²² 455a, 476a.

Sophist would have us believe he never exhorted at all. For, there, exhortation is characterized as a wrong-headed and ineffective way of teaching virtue, which Socrates' art of refutation is specifically meant to replace.²³ The problem with exhortation, according to the *Sophist*, is that "if someone supposes himself wise, he will never be willing to learn anything about what he thinks he's [already] clever at" (230a). Thus, the only approach to teaching virtue with any chance of success would be one that removes false beliefs before attempting to impart new ones—Socratic *elenchus*.

However, these passages are misleading. For it is plain from other texts that Socrates *did* exhort people with moral speeches; he *did* address large audiences; and he even (contrary to the impression one gets from the *Sophist*) used exhortation successfully as a way of removing people's false moral beliefs. If this last feat should seem impossible, it may help to recall that even in Prodicus' speech of *Areté* against Vice, one finds the refutation of specific moral beliefs—beliefs that Prodicus' audience may well have harbored within their souls about the potential utility of vice. True utility, Prodicus makes clear, comes not from pleasure, luxury or the exploitation of others, but rather from hard work, friendship, and the other virtues listed above. Thus it is quite possible to refute and to exhort at the same time. And Socrates similarly weaves refutations into his exhortations.²⁴

One text that refers unmistakably to Socratic exhortations is the *Apology* (29d ff.), where Socrates tells his jury that even if they were to threaten his life, he would still continue to exhort

²³ *Sophist* 230a-e; the word for exhortation here is *paramutheomai*.

²⁴ The secondary literature on Socratic exhortation is surprisingly sparse; this may be because the passages we have just examined from the *Gorgias* and *Sophist* suggest that such a thing did not exist; it may also be due to the "analytical" bent of so many modern commentators on Socrates and the fact that Socratic refutation lends itself better to analytical analysis than does exhortation. However that may be, most accounts of Socratic education neglect the topic entirely; a few exceptions will be noted below.

them (*parakeleuomai*) in the way he always has. He then supplies a short example of the kind of exhortations he delivers:

O best of men, you are Athenian, from the city that is best reputed for wisdom and strength: are you not ashamed that you care for having as much money as possible, and reputation, and honor, but that you neither cultivate nor give thought to prudence, truth, or how your soul will be the best possible? (29d-e)²⁵

Besides the fact that this little exhortation aims clearly at removing “false” beliefs by identifying them and juxtaposing them with other, “true” beliefs, there are several things worth noting. One is that, unlike the sophistic exhortations just examined, this exhortation is direct: no story is told, no narrative distance maintained; Socrates simply tells his audience what he thinks. Moreover, Socrates goes much further than the sophists in actually imputing beliefs to his audience.

Prodicus had attacked the arguments of vice *in abstracta*, never for a moment alleging that his audience actually possessed those beliefs (though they might have). Socrates by contrast attacks views that he explicitly ascribes to his audience. Finally, it is important to note the reliance of Socratic exhortation on both reason (*logos*) and shame (*aidôs*). The overarching question Socrates puts to his audience is whether or not they are ashamed (*aischunê*) to be acting and thinking as they do. And (since they obviously are not) Socrates attempts to shame them by showing them the irrationality of their conduct. Thus where sophistic exhortations are essentially aesthetic appeals to virtue, beckoning people to the beauty of a virtuous life, Socratic

²⁵ Socrates characterizes his exhortations in the *Apology* as the first step in a process that may potentially have two additional steps; for *if* someone whom Socrates exhorts comes forward and disputes (*amphisbêtê*) him, Socrates will then proceed to question him (*erêsomai*), scrutinize him (*exetasô*), and refute him (*elenxô*)—this is clearly the method of Socratic refutation discussed above; if the interlocutor then seems to Socrates not to care about virtue after all, Socrates will throw a reproach upon him (*oneidizô*)—a third and final step.

exhortations are essentially rational appeals that emphasize the shamefulness of vice. Where the sophists exhort with a positive example, Socrates exhorts with a negative attack.

All these observations are further borne out in the longest example of Socratic exhortation we possess, that found in the *Cleitophon*.²⁶ The central argument of the *Cleitophon* is that Socrates is exceptionally good at exhorting (*protrepein*) people to virtue, but rather ineffective when it comes to teaching people what virtue entails. The dialogue ends before Socrates can respond to this charge. Thus, if it is Platonic, it presents a unique and unanswered critique of Socrates. But for present purposes, what is important is not the critique of Socrates, but rather the description of Socratic exhortation that this dialogue contains. *Cleitophon*, the dialogue's main speaker, presents Socrates as "the best of all human beings" at exhorting men to virtue (410b).²⁷ He recites an example of a Socratic exhortation he has heard: "O mortals, whither are you borne? Do you not realize that you are doing none of the things that you should?" As in the example from the *Apology*, Socrates begins with an interrogative designed to evoke shame. Next comes his attempt to make manifest his audience's irrationality:

You men spare no pains in procuring wealth for yourselves, but you neither see to it that your sons, to whom you are leaving this wealth, know how to use it justly, nor do you find them teachers of justice. . . . But when you see that you and your children have had a thorough education in grammar, gymnastics and music (which you consider to be a

²⁶ The authorship of the *Cleitophon*, a short dialogue subtitled "On Exhortation" (*protreptikos*), has been a matter of scholarly controversy; but as Clifford Orwin notes in his interpretive essay "On the *Cleitophon*," in Thomas Pangle, ed., *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 117: "None of the ancient grammarians . . . is known to have regarded it as suspect, and there are no compelling philological reasons for assigning it to anyone but Plato."

²⁷ *Cleitophon* was an Athenian statesman (active 411-405 B.C.); his only other appearance in the Platonic corpus is in the *Republic*, book 1, 340a ff.

complete education in virtue) and that you *still* have turned out to be no good at using wealth, how can you fail to despise our present system of education, and seek those who will rescue you from this lack of culture? Yet surely it is this dissonance, this carelessness . . . that makes measure and harmony disappear between brother and brother, city and city, as they oppose each other, clash and fight, inflicting and suffering the utmost horrors at war.

Many of the ideas expressed in this exhortation (which runs for at least a page further) will be familiar from other dialogues. The *Apology*, *Laches*, and *Meno* all portray Socrates reproaching individuals for not seeking teachers of virtue for themselves or for their children.²⁸ The *Republic* famously shows Socrates' concern for the close relationship between personal, psychological imbalance, on the one hand, and large-scale political unrest, on the other. But here in the *Cleitophon* these ideas are expressed not to individuals but to all and sundry, and they are expressed not by means of dialectical refutation but within the compass of a single, hortatory speech.²⁹

As to the effectiveness of Socratic exhortations, Cleitophon reports that “they are superbly moving [*protreptikôtatous*], superbly beneficial [*ôphelimôtatous*] and truly such as to awaken us from slumber” (408c2-4). And there is no reason to doubt this report. But, on the other hand, there is good reason to believe that sophistic exhortations would have been even more effective than their Socratic counterparts. For one thing, sophistic exhortations (as best one

²⁸ *Apology* 20a-b, 24d ff.; *Laches* 185a ff.; *Meno* 91a ff.

²⁹ *Protrepein*, the word used for “exhortation” throughout this dialogue, means literally “to urge forward.” It may refer either to an exhortation given to a large audience or to a single individual. In the *Euthydemus*, as in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, the word refers to Socrates' conversations with individuals—on which, see the very thoughtful essay by David Roochnik, “The Serious Play of Plato's *Euthydemus*,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (1990-1): 211-232. In the *Cleitophon*, however, *protrepein* clearly refers to speeches Socrates has delivered to a mass audience.

can make out from the few examples that survive) do not depend on eliciting the shame of their audience. And if we have not learned from Socrates' exchange with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, then we should know from numerous political experiences in the modern world, that shame cannot always be counted upon to secure a positive moral effect. There are always people who are simply shameless, who refuse to give in to the appeal.³⁰ Thus sophistic exhortations appeal not to the shame of vice but to the honor and beauty of virtue.³¹ This is a significant difference. These exhortations are essentially positive rather than negative, imparting a desire *for* something rather than an aversion *from* something. Secondly, the directness of Socratic exhortation combined with its generally critical tone is likely to make its audience defensive. It is hard to be open-minded toward instruction when one is openly under attack. Sophistic exhortations, by contrast, attack nobody in particular. They criticize in a way that is oblique and easy to hear. Finally, the highly rationalistic style of Socratic exhortation could only have appealed to a very limited audience.³² Yet sophistic exhortation with its eloquent language and mythical style must have appealed to nearly everyone.

These considerations point to two conclusions: first, that the method of exhortation, whether in the sophists' hands or in Socrates' hands, was probably a much better method of teaching virtue than the dialectical method of refutation; and, second, that in the sophists' hands it was probably superbly effective. It is interesting to note on this score that Socrates was not

³⁰ This is not to say that shame is powerless in all cases. Indeed, the right kind of person can be deeply moved by it. Thus one finds preachers, politicians, parents and mentors alike appealing at times to shame; but this is not effective for everyone.

³¹ On the "beauty" of virtue, see especially *Hippias Major* 304a-b.

³² I have spared the reader from the extreme twists and turns of the *Cleitophon* exhortation, but the entire passage should be consulted.

above resorting to sophistic exhortations in a pinch. Xenophon reports that Socrates used Prodicus' "Choice of Hercules" in order to break one of his own comrades of intemperance.³³ After several attempts at reasoning with the lad, Socrates simply recited Prodicus' exhortation *verbatim* and allowed it to speak for itself. The contrast between a reasoned and an aesthetic appeal to virtue could not be more dramatically illustrated.

ASSOCIATION

Another method of teaching virtue is association. Literally a "being with" (*suneimi*, *sungignomai*) or "living together" (*homileô*, *prosomileô*), association was a part of both sophistic and Socratic pedagogy. There are, of course, important differences in the way the sophists and Socrates approached this method: the sophists embraced it openly, charged a fee for it, and promised great benefits to their pupils in return; Socrates associated for free and promised nothing.³⁴ And yet, in the final analysis, the evidence suggests that the effect of Socratic and sophistic association on the pupil was strikingly similar. In both cases, it appears to have been the *most* effective method of imparting virtue to one's students.

Before considering the evidence for this, however, it will serve us well to recall that association did not begin with Socrates or the sophists, but had a long and emotive history behind it. Association was the method, according to Homer, that the aged horseman Phoenix had used with Achilles to render him a great "speaker of words and doer of deeds."³⁵ It was also the

³³ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.21 ff.

³⁴ The contrast can be seen sharply at Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.2.5-8.

³⁵ *Iliad* 9.438-443; see further Frederick Beck, *Greek Education: 450-350 B.C.* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), p. 55-66, esp. p. 60-1: "The method he [Phoenix] adopted was that of individual tuition, working through the close association of pupil and tutor. In conjunction with oral instruction on modes of conduct, the pupil also learns by imitating his teacher in all their joint activities. The relationship has a strong emotional basis—'with my heart's love'—as Phoenix reminds him [Achilles], and this bond of affection between teacher and pupil facilitates the learning process."

method, according to even older legends, used by Chiron, “most righteous of the centaurs,” to train generations of heroes from Asclepius and Jason to Peleus and Achilles.³⁶ Over time these mythical examples of association came to represent for the noble families of Greece something of an ideal pattern to be copied. An entire literary genre developed around the sorts of “sayings” or advice a tutor might supply to his charge. Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Theognis’ famous “Sayings to Cyrnus,” and Isocrates’ speech *Ad Nicoclem* are all part of this tradition.³⁷ But while “sayings” were certainly an important component of the close relationship between teacher and student, association was not just a matter of precept. Indeed, it was primarily a matter of personal example, as is clear from Theognis’ “Sayings to Cyrnus”:

I shall give you some good advise, Cyrnus, of the sort that I myself learned from the good men [*tôn agathôn*] when I was but a child. . . . Associate [*prosomei*] not with bad men, but always cling to the virtuous. Drink, eat, and sit with the great and powerful and take delight in their company; for from noble men you will learn noble ways, but if you mingle with the bad you will lose what sense you have. Understand these things and associate [*homilee*] with the good, and someday you will say that I am a good counselor to my friends.³⁸

³⁶ Chiron is supposed to have lived with his pupils in the woods off mount Pelion for periods of up to twenty years in order to impart to them his superhuman skills in hunting, healing and warfare; these legends are referred to rather cryptically in Homer (*Iliad* 4.219; 11.832; 16.143) and in Hesiod (fr. 49 and 96); but the richest source is Pindar; see especially *Pythian Odes* III, IV.102 ff., and IX.29 ff.; and *Nemean Ode* III.43-48, IV.60; see further Beck, *Greek Education*, pp. 49-51.

³⁷ A few fragments survive of a very early “Sayings of Chiron” (*Chirônos hypothékai*),” a didactic poem in the epic style attributed by the ancients (wrongly) to Hesiod; on the genre of “sayings” (*hypothékai*) in general, see the illuminating remarks of Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. I, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 194 and 462 n.16.

³⁸ Elegy A, 27-39; translation mine, from the Greek text of T. Hudson-Williams, *The Elegies of Theognis and Other Elegies Included in the Theognidean Sylloge: A Revised Text* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1909).

The idea that virtue can be simply picked up, as it were, by prolonged contact with virtuous people became, by the fifth century, an axiom of aristocratic culture. Of course, it might be argued that what one finds here is not so much a “method” of teaching virtue at all; for there is a certain vagueness and mysterious about the whole business. And yet there is real insight here as well. As Aristotle would later argue in the *Ethics*, virtue is as much a matter of practice and habit as it is a matter of knowledge to be verbally communicated. Verbal maxims, rules of thumb, discussions about actions, and exhilarating exhortations all have to do with the transmission of virtue, but these do not constitute virtue in and of themselves, nor does the mastery of them make one virtuous. Association, on the other hand, by supplying not only “advice” but also physical examples of virtue in practice, had a significant advantage over merely verbal methods like exhortation.

It was one of the major strengths of the sophists’ pedagogical approach that they recognized the value of association. Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias all used this method extensively.³⁹ As to what sophistic association entailed exactly, perhaps it will be best to address this first in a general way, and then more specifically. Generally speaking, sophistic association involved either parents entrusting (*paradidomi*) their children, or else a young man entrusting himself, to the long-term care of a sophist, with the expectation that the sophist would render his pupil “better” (*beltious*), in both a moral and practical sense of the word. The opening scenes of the *Protagoras* supply the best example of this.⁴⁰

The noble lad Hippocrates, excited by the news that Protagoras is in Athens, and eager to “associate with him” at all costs (313b), rouses Socrates out of bed before dawn to discuss the

³⁹ See Plato *Apology* 19e-20a; and *Hippias Major* 282a-c.

⁴⁰ See also *Hippias Major* 283e; and *Laches* 186a-e.

matter. A typically cautious Socrates suggests that they go see Protagoras and question him about the potential benefits of associating with him. When they catch up with Protagoras, they find him surrounded by a group of students, many of them foreigners who have obviously left their own cities to associate with the great sophist on his travels. Socrates approaches the sophist, only to find him a little cautious: “A man has to be careful,” Protagoras warns, “when he visits powerful cities as a foreigner and induces the most promising young men to forsake associations with others—relatives, acquaintances, older or younger... on the grounds that by association with him they will become better [*beltious*]” (316c5-d1). Eventually, however, Protagoras is persuaded to explain just what Hippocrates can look forward to if he does associate with him: “Young man, if you come with me, your gain will be this—the very day you associate with me you will go home a better man [*beltion*], and the same for the next day; and each day you will make progress toward a better state” (318a).

One would be right to wonder at this point (as Socrates does) what exactly this is supposed to entail. But here we reach a level of specificity where the various sophists begin to diverge. For Protagoras, becoming “better” meant that Hippocrates would learn prudence (*euboulia*), not only in his private affairs—how best to manage his household—but also in public affairs—how to realize his maximum potential in political speech and action (*Protagoras* 318e5-319a2).⁴¹ Association must have lent itself particularly well to such instruction. After all, Protagoras himself possessed these virtues (see chapter 2). Therefore, he could simply exhibit them in practice. But, at the same time, it provided extended opportunities for him to engage his

⁴¹ This is very similar to what Phoenix is said to have taught Achilles (see above). For an interesting defense of the importance of *euboulia* as a component of moral-political education, see Paul Woodruff, “Socratic Education,” Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 26.

students in exercises that he could monitor.⁴² Other sophists certainly had different notions of “betterment” in mind and went about imparting it in different ways. Hippias seems to have equated betterment with self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*),⁴³ and thus immersed his students in myriad technical studies from arithmetic and geometry to astronomy and music (*Protagoras* 315c, 318e).

But the specific “techniques” that fall under the heading of association are not as important as the method in general. There were many of them, and they tended—it must be admitted—to have a sort of pseudo-scientific air. One senses this, for example, in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, where Strepsiades—who merely wishes to learn the art of rhetoric so that he can elude his creditors—is shown how to measure the footsteps of a flea in melted wax and made to endure a lot of “useless” talk about geometry, astronomy and geography. Hippias is similarly ridiculed in the *Protagoras* for dragging his students through a host of specialized material instead of simply teaching them what they came to learn.⁴⁴ In general, the sophists were probably anxious to justify their high fees by appearing to have reduced the whole matter of teaching virtue to the hard and fast rules of a *techné*. But the real power of their method did not lie in such techniques. What was especially important was simply that the sophists spent long hours with their pupils and allowed their own moral and intellectual qualities to shine forth. They supplied a paradigm, as it were, for their students to imitate and gave them time to practice virtue under expert

⁴² Protagoras required his students to analyze moral poetry and to stage formal debates; on his use of poetry, see *Protagoras* 339a; on his staging of debates, see Diogenes Laertius IX.52 (=DK 80 A1).

⁴³ Suidas, under “Hippias of Elis” (=DK 86 A1).

⁴⁴ See *Protagoras* 318e.

guidance.⁴⁵ If specific techniques were involved such as analyzing poems and staging debates, these probably did no harm—they may have even been edifying—but it was really the mere fact of associating more than the techniques employed in the process that accounted for the method’s effectiveness.⁴⁶

Of course, association is by no means a perfect method of teaching virtue. And Plato’s Socrates is particularly good at pointing out the problems. If association *were* so effective, for example, then why do the sons of so many great and virtuous people turn out worthless? This is a question Socrates asks repeatedly.⁴⁷ Certainly if teaching were as simple as associating, virtuous parents would have managed to impart their own virtue to their sons. Or if they were too busy with the affairs of state, they might have simply handed their sons over to someone who was not so busy, and thus everyone would be virtuous. But this is not what happens. Moreover, certain other people (Socrates included) turn out to be extremely virtuous even though they have not associated with anyone in particular. Thus Socrates remarks rather comically in the *Laches* that he has yearned for an enriching association with the sophists since his youth, but has never had the money to pay for it (186c). Yet he is so virtuous that Nicias and Laches—two

⁴⁵ At least two fragments attest to Protagoras’ emphasis on the importance of practice in education: “Education requires natural endowment (*phuseôs*) and practice (*askêseôs*)” (DK 80 B3); and “*Technê* is nothing without practice (*meletês*) and practice nothing without *technê*” (DK 80 B10).

⁴⁶ In his essay “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 488-541, Michael Oakeshott quotes a passage from the reflections of an Eton master (William Cory) who clearly grasped the essence of education by association: “At school you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. . . . You go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person’s thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge.”

⁴⁷ See *Protagoras* 320a-b *Meno* 94a-e.

distinguished Athenian generals—approach him for pedagogical advice. Such anomalies as these lead Socrates to wonder whether virtue is really a matter of teaching *at all*.

Moreover, there is the problem of the role of wisdom in virtuous conduct. The method of association seems to assume that virtue is just a bag of practices one picks up by observing virtuous people. But this is far too simplistic. For the same practices that are considered courageous in one situation may turn out to be foolish in another. The practice of forgiveness, for example, may lead to political peace or political disaster. Thus being virtuous is not simply a matter of practices. And what seems to determine the whole matter—to decide whether one is acting virtuously or viciously—is not the mastery of practice but of thought. Virtue seems to boil down to some kind of wisdom. But what is this wisdom? This is the question that Socrates famously asks, and never satisfactorily answers. And Socrates' inability to answer this question, or to find someone who *could* answer it, led him to assume a posture of ignorance with respect to virtue and to deny adamantly that *he* at least was able to teach it.

But while Socrates' skepticism regarding the whole enterprise of teaching virtue serves to remind us that neither association nor any other method is perfectly effective, his skepticism seems to go too far. Indeed, like all forms of extreme skepticism, it is given the lie in a certain sense by the actions of the skeptic himself. Socrates was, by almost all accounts, and in nearly every traditional sense of the word, an extremely virtuous man. Laches praises him for his military bravery in the Athenian retreat at Delium: "If others had been willing to behave in the same manner," Laches declares "our city would be safe and we would not then have suffered a disaster of that kind" (*Laches* 181b). And Plato and Xenophon alike attest to Socrates' consistently excellent conduct: Socrates did not fear death; he exercised self-control over his passions; he did not covet wealth; he endured extreme conditions of hot and cold weather; he

was pious; obedient to the law; and so on. Thus while his words may have been skeptical, Socrates' conduct was never that of someone who was confused about virtue. Indeed, he was in every sense, according to Xenophon, a *kalos k'agathos*, a noble and good man.

More importantly, Socrates was also able to *teach* these virtues to many of his students. Here the testimony of Xenophon is indispensable. For in his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon rejects the charge that his teacher was a corruptor of youth and refutes the criticism expressed in the *Cleitophon* (see above) that while Socrates could exhort men to virtue he could not actually make them virtuous.⁴⁸ The way Xenophon refutes both these charges is to point to Socrates' practice of association. Consider the following passages.

Passage 1: I find that all teachers show [*deiknuntas*] their disciples [*tois manthanousi*] how they themselves practice what they teach, and lead them on by speech. And I know that it was so with Socrates: he showed [*deiknunta*] his associates [*tois sunousi*] that he himself was *kalos k'agathos* and conversed most nobly about virtue and other things concerning men. (I.2.17)

Passage 2: Criton was a true associate [*homilêtês*] of Socrates, as were Chaerophon, Chaerecrates, Hermogenes, Simmias, Cebes, Phaedondas, and others who associated with him [*hoi ekeinô sunêsan*] not that they might shine in the courts or the assembly, but that they might become *kalos k'agathos*, and be able to do their duty by house and household, and relatives and friends and city and citizens. Of these not one, in his youth or old age, did evil or incurred censure. (I.2.48)

⁴⁸ Xenophon seems to know the *Cleitophon*, or else the ideas that it expresses, very well: "If any hold the opinion expressed in some written and spoken criticisms of Socrates that are based on inference, and think that although he was consummate in exhorting men to virtue, he was an incompetent guide to it." (*Memorabilia* I.4.1).

Passage 3: No less amazing is it to me that some believed the charge brought against Socrates of corrupting the youth. In the first place, apart from what I have said, in control of his own passions and appetites he was the strictest of men; further, in endurance of cold and heat and every kind of toil he was most resolute; and besides, his needs were so schooled to moderation that having very little he was yet very content. Such was his own character: how then can he have led others into impiety, crime, gluttony, lust or sloth? On the contrary, he cured these vices in many by putting into them a desire for virtue and by giving them confidence that self-discipline would make them *kaloi k'agathoi*. To be sure, he at no time promised to be a teacher of this; but, by letting his own light shine, he made his followers [*tous diatribontas*] hope that they, by imitating him, would become such as he was. (I.2.1-4)

Other passages could easily be cited. But these passages already make it clear that Socrates used the method of association to lead a number of young men to virtue. Xenophon is convinced of this. For, in the first place, Socrates was manifestly a *kalos k'agathos* himself and his very character gave his associates hope that they too could become *kalos k'agathos*. Moreover, Socrates managed to “show” his associates what virtue looked like in practice and, by “letting his own light shine,” gave his students a paradigm that they could imitate. This describes the method of association to perfectly. Thus while Socrates may have expressed extreme doubts about the possibility of teaching virtue, these doubts were not borne out in practice. He was *de facto* a teacher of virtue whether he liked it or not.

Finally, it is necessary to note the striking similarity between the way Xenophon describes Socrates' ability to teach virtue by association and the way the sophists describe their

own ability. What Socrates was able to teach his associates, according to Xenophon, was how “to do their duty by house and household, and relatives and friends and city and citizens,” which closely resemble the claims Protagoras makes above. And Socrates “*always* made his associates [*sunsignomenous*] better men [*beltious*] before he parted with them,” Xenophon insists (1.2.61; my italics), which is practically identical to Protagoras’ promise to Hippocrates above.⁴⁹ Thus, again, in practice the Socratic and sophistic approaches to association do not appear all that different. They both render their pupils better by setting an example for them to imitate and they both seem to do this very effectively.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this chapter has been to consider the principal methods by which the sophists fulfilled their claim to be “teachers of virtue.” And both the methods here considered—exhortation and association—appear to have been reasonable and highly effective. There is nothing radical or untoward about the way the sophists undertook to teach their pupils virtue. This is an important point to stress, since we so often hear that the sophists were charlatans. Whatever may or may not have been questionable about the *substance* of their teachings, their *method* of teaching was beyond reproach. Moreover, there are at least two conclusions to be drawn from considering sophistic and Socratic pedagogical approaches side-by-side. First, it is fair to say that Socrates, not the sophists, was the pedagogical radical. The method of *elenchus*

⁴⁹ It is telling to observe how Xenophon accounts for the problem of Critias and Alcibiades, both of whom associated with Socrates and both of whom turned out to be complete scoundrels. The problem was not, according to Xenophon, that their association with Socrates was ineffective, but rather that there wasn’t *enough* of it. Citing Theognis with approval, Xenophon reminds his readers that “the society of honest men is a training in *aretê*, but the society of bad men is virtue’s undoing” (1.2.20). Thus virtue requires constant practice and *long* periods of association. “Just as poetry is forgotten unless it is often repeated, so instruction, when no longer heeded, fades from the mind” (*ibid.*). What is interesting about this is that it favors a sophistic view over a Socratic one. Socrates believed that “to know the good is to do the good,” that no one can commit a crime who “knows” what virtue is. It was the sophists who insisted on the importance of practice.

had probably never been used as a method of moral instruction prior to Socrates' adaptation of it for that purpose, and it clearly has drawbacks: it tends to make people angry; it tends to silence people without really persuading them; and its effect (even when it succeeds) is usually short-lived. Secondly, it appears that Socrates was not *entirely* as radical in practice as he was in theory. For he shared certain practices with the sophists. This is, in itself, an important point that has not been adequately stressed in the secondary literature on Socratic pedagogy. Socrates used not only the *elenchus*, but also exhortation and association as a means of making people "better." But Socrates did not just employ these methods, he employed them to such good effect that they tended to outshine his own method. When Xenophon wants to prove to his readers that Socrates could *indeed* teach virtue, he refers not to the *elenchus*, but to *protreptien* and to *suneimi*, to exhortation and association as Socrates' most powerful instruments. Thus when Socrates was at his best at teaching virtue, he was using sophistic, not Socratic, methods.

A final reflection: just as there is a noticeable disjunction between what Socrates *said* about teaching virtue and what he actually *did*, there is a similar disjunction among modern-day admirers of Socrates. We lovers of Socrates tend to glorify the *elenchtic* method while dismissing the common-sense methods of exhortation and association. And yet, in practice we tend (just as Socrates tended) to use these very methods when it matters most. A reconsideration of our beliefs about teaching virtue seems to be called for, and such reconsideration will ultimately, I believe, point toward a newfound respect for the sophists. In the following chapter, the political implications of sophistic ethical and pedagogical approaches shall be considered—again in relation to Socrates—and it will turn out, again, that the sophists have something valuable to offer.

CHAPTER 11

SOPHISTIC CITIZENSHIP: CONCLUSION

Scholars who have sought the political-theoretical significance of the sophists have located this in a number of different areas: in the origins of social-contract theory, in the opposition between “vulgar” and “philosophic” conventionalism, or in the birth of democratic and “liberal” ideals. Yet, as the previous chapters have shown, such analyses make relatively little sense of the evidence about the sophists taken as a whole. While this dissertation has suggested throughout that the political-theoretical significance of the sophists *in general* lies elsewhere, it is the purpose of this chapter to spell this out in more detail. The argument of this chapter is that the significance of the sophists lies not so much in the realm of “doctrines” (which, after all, varied widely from one sophist to another) as in the intersection between thoughts and deeds, theory and practice. Indeed, what is most significant about the sophists is their practice of striving ardently for political excellence and teaching others to do the same within the context of a *received* set of basic values. The sophists were not political philosophers, nor were they trying to be; and this is precisely what is theoretically significant about them. While they were certainly expert debaters and to a certain extent cultural critics as well, their practice was not to scrutinize deeply or systematically the core values of Greek society but rather to *enjoy* those values and excel in them. They were—to borrow an analogy from MacIntyre—like those who strive to become expert at chess, accepting the rules as they find them, rather than those who criticize the rules to such a degree that they never enjoy the game.¹ In this sense, the sophists appear most significant when they are juxtaposed with Socrates, particularly the

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 188-91, 197. On “enjoying” rules and “accepting them as one finds them,” cf. Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 407-437.

Socrates of Plato's *Apology*: the "gadfly." For Socrates was precisely a critic of received values.² The central argument of this chapter is that the sophists and Socrates represent two rival versions of citizenship, one active and relatively unquestioning, the other questioning and relatively inactive; moreover that neither of these two versions of citizenship is adequate by itself and that, therefore, some sort of balance, however precarious or imperfect, must be struck between them.

Perhaps it will be objected at the outset that a dichotomy between sophistic and Socratic citizenship is a false one. It would indeed be false if it were presented too starkly. After all, Socrates was not *completely* withdrawn from public life: he served bravely in the Athenian army,³ and when he was elected by lot to the Council of Five Hundred, he courageously (though unsuccessfully) opposed a trial of eight Athenian generals.⁴ But Socratic citizenship is characterized much more by questioning and withdrawal than by decisive public deeds. On the other side, sophistic citizenship was not completely *unquestioning*: Prodicus raised challenging questions about vice, Protagoras about punishment, and Hippias about "higher law." But

² For this view of Socrates, see Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). While I agree in general with Villa's reading of Socrates, I would stress, where Villa does not, that Socratic citizenship stems from a divine ground. Villa wants to offer Socrates to his readers as model of citizenship for our times; and what he admires in particular is Socrates' way of conscientiously opposing "political authority, social norms, and credal restraints with the invocation of *no authority higher than the thinking, morally consistent individual*" (p. 41, italics mine). In order to do this, however, Villa must deny (though he offers no real argument) that Socrates' *daimonion* was a *divine* voice. On Villa's reading, *daimonion* translates as "inner voice," and it is simply "the practice of ruthless self-examination" (*ibid.*).

³ See *Apology* 28e. Socrates fought in three engagements: Potidaea, Delium and Amphipolis. The battles are described in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I.56-65; II.58, 70; V.6-10; and IV.90-101. On Socrates' courage, see *Symposium* 220d-221b; and *Laches* 189b.

⁴ In 406 B.C., fifty men from Socrates' tribe were elected by lot to serve on the Council. Socrates was elected chair (also by lot). That year, Athens won a major naval victory in their war against Sparta, near the Aegean island of Arginusae. Due to bad weather and some confusion, however, the ten victorious generals were unable to pick up the bodies, both living and dead, of their comrades at the site of the battle. Upon returning to Athens, eight of the generals were accused of neglecting their duty. The formal accusation came before the Council and it fell to Socrates to bring the matter to a vote. He refused (See *Apology* 32b-c), but was over-ruled. The six generals who were still in Athens at the time of the ruling were executed. For a good account of the incident, see Mark Munn, *The School of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 184-187.

sophistic citizenship is not primarily about fundamental questions. It is about action. Thus the difference between Socrates and the sophists is *not* the difference between questioning and not questioning, acting and not acting—it is not a complete logical disjunction. It is the difference between two ways of blending or combining the invitation to act with the invitation to question. Socrates and the sophists stand at different ends of a spectrum and the opposition between them is one of degree.

SOPHISTIC CITIZENSHIP

Sophistic citizenship is not as foreign as the name may suggest. Indeed, contemporary political theorists who tout the “civic virtues” or cry out for a revitalization of civic life have a basically “sophistic” version of citizenship in mind. Whether they hail from the Right (virtue theorists, neo-Aristotelians and communitarians) or from the Left (activists and/or participatory democrats), these theorists share a basic assumption “that action is better than thought or inaction, affiliation better than alienation, belief (in one’s “cause,” the moral purposes of one’s community, or simply the value of belonging) better than doubt or unbelief.”⁵ In this sense they have much more in common with the sophists than with Socrates.

Consider once again Prodicus’ Hercules speech. Though Hercules has repaired to a quiet spot (*eis hêsuchian*) in order to contemplate (*aporounta*) the future direction of his life, his contemplation does not take very long: he is quickly persuaded by *Aretê* that he should become a “good doer [*ergatên agathon*] of fine and wondrous deeds [*tôn kalôn kai semnôn*].⁶ What will these deeds be? They will be both private and public. In the private realm he will strive to obtain the favor of the gods, the love of friends, and the bounty of his labor. In the public realm

⁵ Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, p. xi.

⁶ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.i.27.

he will struggle (*poneô, epimeleomai*) “to win the honors of a community by becoming its benefactor”; he will be an “active participant [*summachos ergôn*] in the works of peace and a strong ally in the deeds of war”; and he will seek to protect his friends and to harm his enemies.⁷ These are the things that are *kalos*; they are beautiful and fine, a delight both in the doing and in the memory of their having been done.⁸ The essential features of sophistic citizenship are all present in this speech. Let us draw them out and consider them in relation to other texts as well.

Action and Contemplation

The first thing to notice is that the balance struck between action and contemplation in Prodicus’ speech leans heavily in the direction of action. Hercules is stirred to perform noble deeds: “No great deed [*ergon*] is done in heaven or on earth except through me,” *Aretê* proclaims.⁹ Thus if Hercules is to become virtuous, he must become a “doer.” However, contemplation is not exactly shunned. Were it not for contemplation, Hercules would lack the insight necessary to become virtuous. He is a reflective person, someone who ponders and evaluates the possible courses his life might take (*aporounta, poian hodon epi ton bion trapêi*). But virtue requires that contemplation eventually be set aside. For contemplation stands prior to virtue in the same way that education stands prior to one’s career. It is something noble and good, but basically preparatory.

One is reminded here of the famous passage in the *Gorgias* where Callicles admonishes Socrates for failing to achieve the “proper” balance between action and contemplation.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27, 31, 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

The truth, therefore, you will know if you proceed to greater things [*epi ta meidzo*], once you have let philosophy drop. For philosophy, to be sure, Socrates, is a graceful thing, if someone engages in it in due measure at the proper age; but if he fritters his time away in it further than is needed, it is the corruption [*diaphthora*] of human beings. For even if he is of an altogether good nature and philosophizes far along in age, he must of necessity become inexperienced [*apeiron*] in all those things that one who is to be a noble and good man, and well reputed, must have experience of [*empeiron*]. Indeed they become inexperienced in the laws of the city, in the speeches one must use to associate with human beings in dealings both private and public, in human pleasures and desires, and in sum they become all in all inexperienced in customs and characters. Whenever, therefore, they enter into some private or political action [*praxis*], they become ridiculous.¹⁰

Callicles is not a sophist, nor is his view of citizenship sophistic in most of its details. But in *this* regard at least, he and the sophists agree: philosophy stands in an anterior position to virtue itself. In a certain sense it is both necessary and good: “In a young lad, I admire it,” Callicles admits, “and it seems to me fitting [*prepein*], and I consider this human being to be a free man [*eleutheron*], whereas the one who does not philosophize I consider illiberal [*aneleutheron*], someone who will never deem himself worthy of any fine and noble action [*oute kalou oute gennaiou pragmatos*]” (485c4-d1). But philosophy is in no way *sufficient* for becoming *kalos k’agathos*. Indeed, it may get in the way. Thus Callicles’ basic point—an indisputable one, it seems to me—is that where one persists too far in philosophy, where one commits oneself to it

¹⁰ Plato *Gorgias* 484c4-e1.

wholeheartedly, one loses just that much opportunity to gain practical experience and wisdom.¹¹ Far from denying this, Socrates repeatedly admits it,¹² and his own fate seems to confirm it as well.

Now Prodicus' notion of "contemplation" runs significantly deeper than Callicles' idea of "philosophy." Philosophy is, for Callicles, just silliness and drivel (486c 6-7), a sort of childish game of refuting (*elenchôn*) which, though fitting for free youths, is not serious; while for Prodicus, contemplation is a genuine wrestling with life's deepest question: the question of how one ought to live. Thus the verb Prodicus chooses to represent this—*aporeô*—stems from the adjective *aporos* and means literally to stand at an impasse, to lose one's way and to lack the resources to move on. Hercules must listen attentively to the appeals of *Aretê* and *Kakia*, and his choice will have serious consequences. And yet, for both Prodicus and Callicles such moments are merely temporary. They are a phase to be passed *through*. Perhaps a virtuous life would be impossible without contemplation, but it would also be impossible with too much of it.

Private and Public

Another aspect of sophistic citizenship is the relationship between private and public deeds. Private deeds are good, so far as they go; thus Hercules will want to serve the gods, love his friends, cultivate his garden, tend to his sheep and enjoy life's pleasures in due proportion (28, 30). But private deeds are not enough. In fact, one of the specific temptations of Vice, as Prodicus portrays her, is that her followers will have no concern for wars or affairs (*ou polemôs oude pragmatôn phronteis*). One is reminded here of Pericles' remarks to the Athenians in the Funeral Oration:

¹¹ Cf. Hippias' remark to Socrates at *Hippias Major* 304a-b.

¹² *Gorgias* 521b, 527a; *Apology* 17d ff..

Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics—this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has *no business here at all*.¹³

Prodicus seems to be saying the same thing. It is vicious to have no concern for public affairs (*pragmatôn*). A virtuous man will rather desire (*epithumeô*) to be honored by some city. He will want “to study the techniques of war from those who know them and to practice their right use” so that he can “liberate his friends and subdue his enemies” (28).

Moreover, when the sophists speak of performing public deeds and participating in public affairs, they are not thinking of something merely minimal. The Athenians were well aware of the novel attitude (see the next section on Socrates) that citizenship required merely that certain “duties” be fulfilled: serving in the army during wartime, participating on the Council when elected by lot, etc. But this was not the sophists’ view. The sophists rather assumed that their students would want to be *leaders*, i.e., would want to shape policies rather than trust others to shape them.¹⁴ In modern political science terms we would say the sophists assumed a high degree of political efficacy and a low degree of political trust. They assumed a wholehearted, participatory citizenship. As Hegel remarks in the *Philosophy of History*, “the character of the [Athenian] citizen was plastic, all of a piece. He must be present at the critical stages of public business; he must take part in the decisive crises with his entire personality—not merely with his vote; he must mingle in the heat of action—the passion and interest of the whole man being

¹³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* II.40 (italics mine).

¹⁴ This assumption is also evident in the remarks Protagoras makes about his curriculum at *Protagoras* 318e-328d.

absorbed in the affair, and the warmth with which a resolve was made being equally ardent during its execution.”¹⁵ Ironically, Hegel thought that the sophists *destroyed* rather than nurtured this form of “plastic” citizenship, but this is because Hegel regarded Socrates as a sophist.¹⁶

Political Skills

The sophists did not commit the error that many modern theorists of citizenship commit today: they did not assume that one could participate effectively in politics without developing certain political skills. Voegelin has described these requisite skills with insight and eloquence:

The mastery of typical situations and arguments in public debate, a stock of thorough knowledge with regard to the public affairs of the polis in domestic and imperial relations, a ready wit, a good memory improved by training, a disciplined intellect ready to grasp the essentials of an issue, the trained ability of marshalling arguments on the spur of the moment, a ready stock of anecdotes, paradigmata and sayings drawn from the poets for illustrating a point, general oratorical perfection, skill in debate leading to more or less graceful discomfiture of an opponent, a good appearance and bearing, natural and trained charm in conversation—all these were required for success in the competitive game of the polis.¹⁷

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 255.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70: “And it was in *Socrates* that, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the principle of subjectivity—of the absolute inherent independence of Thought—attained free expression. . . . The rise of the inner world of Subjectivity was the rupture with the existing Reality. Though Socrates himself continued to perform his *duties* [my italics] as a citizen, it was not the actual State and its religion, but the world of Thought that was his true home. . . . The principle of Socrates manifests a revolutionary aspect towards the Athenian State; for the peculiarity of this State was that Customary Morality was the form in which its existence was moulded. . . . In Athens that higher principle which proved the ruin of the Athenian state, advanced in its development without intermission.”

¹⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 270. Cf. Euripides *Hecuba* 814-19: “O luckless me! Why is it that we mortals take pains to study all other branches of knowledge as we ought, yet we take no further pains, by paying a fee, to learn thoroughly the art of persuasive speaking [*peithō*], sole ruler where mortals are concerned, so that we might be able to persuade people of what we wish and gain our ends?”

These are, of course, precisely the skills the sophists taught. In fact, no other “angle” or “reading” of the sophists makes as much sense of their varied curriculum as this. Protagoras (recall from chapter 2) taught skill in debate; he taught people how to see the multiple sides of any issue and to construct counter-arguments from opposite appearances. This may seem like mere fun and games, or worse (as Aristophanes would say), corruption. But when Protagoras describes his curriculum in the *Protagoras*, he clarifies how all these skills relate to effective citizenship. If one wants to become capable or powerful in public affairs (*ta tês poleôs dunatôtatos*), if one wants to be able to act and to speak (*prattein kai legein*), then one needs to learn *euboulia*, soundness of judgement.¹⁸ And the best way to learn soundness of judgment, Protagoras must have thought, would be to master the art of argument (*logos*).¹⁹ “Argument” here obviously means more than simply refuting; it means *thinking*.

In Prodicus’ Hercules speech the importance of persuasive argument is built into the very fabric of the speech itself. The goddess *Aretê* does not explicitly recommend that Hercules study the art of argument, but this is precisely what she herself has mastered and what saves Hercules from sin. Indeed, were it not for *Aretê*’s ability to persuade, to speak the truth convincingly and to tear her opponent’s arguments to shreds, Hercules would have mistaken Vice for “happiness” (as Vice identifies herself) and taken the wrong course. Moreover, as one steps back from Prodicus’ speech, one realizes that Prodicus’ *own* persuasive ability is responsible for its overall effectiveness. Prodicus was a highly skilled political speaker. Like all the major sophists, he

¹⁸ *Protagoras* 318e5-319a2, to which Socrates responds (319a4-5): “You seem to me to be speaking of the political art [*tên politikên technên*] and to be promising to make men good citizens [*agathous polititas*].” And Protagoras emphatically assents.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 312d7.

was a diplomatic representative of his city, a “leading” citizen.²⁰ And what he taught, besides his hallmark ability to use words precisely, was how to put together a persuasive speech.

The sophist Hippias supplies the most direct statement of the importance of persuasive speech. “What is most beautiful and most precious,” he tells Socrates, “is the ability to produce an eloquent speech to a law court or a council meeting or any other official body whom you are addressing, to convince your audience, and to depart with the greatest of all prizes, your own salvation and that of your friends and property.”²¹ Hippias was, of course, famous for his polymathy: he taught all sorts of subjects ranging from the history of Greek cities to his unique art of memory (*mnêmonikon*). But it is likely (as Voegelin points out above) that most, if not all, of these skills were recognized as more or less related to political excellence. One may have studied geometry and astronomy with Hippias, and this was perhaps to a certain degree an end in itself, but what one ultimately acquired was a set of resources or skills for political thinking, speaking and acting.

Moral-Epistemological Commitments

The final feature of sophistic citizenship I wish to discuss is its candid acceptance of certain basic ethical-political goods. I have already pointed out that sophistic citizenship places a high value upon action, particularly *public* action. But *why* does it do so? The only answer one really finds in the sources—probably the only answer the sophists gave—is that such things are beautiful, *kalos*.²² Just as Hippias says (above) that what is most *kalos* of all is the ability to

²⁰ See *Hippias Major* 282b-d.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 304b.

²² On the meaning of the word *kalos*, see Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Hippias Major* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), p. 110: “Most translators render *kalos* as “beautiful,” and they are partly right. Like beauty *to kalon* is something splendid and exciting; and in women or boys it is the loveliness that excites carnal desire. But the use of *kalos* for that quality is embraced by its use as a quite general term of commendation in Greek. “Noble,” “admirable,” and

produce an eloquent speech, so *Aretê* tells Hercules that “a *kalos* deed of one’s own doing is the most marvelous sight to behold.”²³ But what is *kalos*? The question would have struck the sophists as absurd.²⁴ Of course, they could have enumerated many goods that were considered *kalos*. *Aretê* lists a number of them for Hercules, and Hippias supplies a similar list for Socrates: “I maintain that always, everywhere, and for every man it is most *kalos* to be rich, healthy, honored by the Greeks, to reach old age and, after burying one’s parents nobly, to be borne to one’s own tomb with solemn ceremony by one’s own children.”²⁵ But to ask *why* such things are *kalos* or to search for some single element that all *kalos*-things have in common would be to waste one’s time with “trumpety nonsense.”²⁶

With sophistic citizenship, therefore, the buck stops at common sense. The values they embrace are simply those of conventional Greek morality.²⁷ (Here is where the resemblance between the sophists and Callicles stops.) What the sophists offer their students is not a new degree of insight (critical or otherwise) into commonly held beliefs—not primarily, at any rate—but rather a program of study for attaining excellence *within the bounds* of those beliefs.

It has been frequently suggested that to proceed as the sophists do without philosophy, i.e., without asking fundamental questions about the “foundations” of moral truth, is to place

“fine” are better translations, and of these “fine” is best of all in virtue of its great range. Different sort of things are commended as *kala* for different sorts of qualities: boys for their sex appeal, horses for their speed, fighting cocks for their spunk, families for their lineage, acts of war for their courage, speeches for their truth, and so on. Our “beautiful” translates *kalos* only in a few of its many uses.

²³ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.31.

²⁴ “What is *kalos*?” is, of course, the central question of the *Hippias Major* (see 286d1), and Hippias may be taken to represent all the sophists when he tells Socrates that one who persists in such questions is a dolt (*amathês* 290e3).

²⁵ *Hippias Major* 291d-e.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 304b5-6.

²⁷ See chapter 9.

oneself on a slippery slope to injustice.²⁸ But this seems at once to underestimate the moral force of tradition and to overestimate the power of philosophy. The traditional morality of the sophists entails an explicit recognition of such qualities as justice, respect for others, honesty, sacrifice for one's community, and especially personal honor. And though they could not (or would not) account for these values in a philosophically penetrating way, they nevertheless took them seriously. Indeed, because of the seriousness with which the sophists pursued honor in particular, the mere *semblance* of the other virtues would never have sufficed.²⁹ One must *deserve* to be honored if the unique pleasures deriving from this good are to be felt; one must be able to look back at one's life and "take pleasure in the memory of past deeds."³⁰ As for philosophy, if it promises to *save* one from injustice and point the way to a better kind of life, it has some explaining to do: it needs to show not only why traditional morality is unjust, but also that there is some clear alternative, some other way of life that promises to be better. This is precisely what Socratic citizenship attempts to do, but it does not do so in a completely satisfying way.

SOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Perhaps the very notion of "Socratic citizenship" will strike some readers as wrongheaded. Socrates was, after all, a *philosopher*, and the enterprise of philosophy is usually

²⁸ Hence Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, p. 23: "The implication of Socratic examination is that virtually every moral belief becomes false and an incitement to injustice the moment it becomes unquestioned and unquestionable." Cf. pp. xii: "[Socratic examination] is radical because it suggests that civic virtue and morals, unaccompanied by intellectual hygiene—by thinking which dissolves opinions rather than solidifying them—are the invariable accomplices of injustice and immorality." Villa is very much reflecting here the view expressed by Hannah Arendt in "Thinking and Moral Considerations" *Social Research* 51 (1984): 7-47, and of other post-World War II political theorists of German descent.

²⁹ *Pace* Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 117.

³⁰ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.1.28 and 33.

taken to be quite distinct from that of politics.³¹ In fact, Socrates seems to admit as much in the *Apology* in three different ways. He tells his jury (a) that because of his service to Apollo—his mission of going around and questioning people—he has no leisure for tending to the business of the city (*tôn tês poleôs praxai*); (b) that whenever he tries to do political things (*ta politika pratein*), a certain voice (*phônê*) comes and turns him away; and (c) that even if he *were* to do political things (*pratein ta politika pragmata*), he would quickly be silenced and killed. Thus, Socrates says, he lives privately (*idiôteuein*) but not publicly (*dêmosieuein*).³² Such passages suggest that “Socratic citizenship” is an oxymoron: one can either be Socratic or a citizen, but not both.

However, other passages tell against this view and suggest, instead, that Socrates *did* practice a form of citizenship—unique and novel, to be sure, but a form of citizenship nonetheless. The key to appreciating this lies in understanding what Socrates was doing with his “private” time. As he reminds his jury near the end of his trial:

I did not keep quiet during my life, but neither did I care for the things that occupy the many: moneymaking and business matters and generalships and being a demagogue and other offices and political clubs and factions that come to be in the polis. . . . Instead, I went to each of you privately [*idiai*] to perform the greatest benefaction, as I affirm, and I attempted to persuade each of you not to care for any of his own things until he cares for himself—how he will be the best and the most prudent—nor to care for the things of the

³¹ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), and “The Problem of Socrates,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed., Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). The “estrangement” of philosophy from politics is lamented by Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and by Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, who, however, argues that it is neither necessary nor desirable.

³² Plato *Apology* 23b7-c1, 31d3-5, 31d5-32a2.

city [*tôn tês poleôs*] until he cares for the city itself [*autês tês poleôs*], and so to care for the other things in the same way. (36b5-d1)

Though Socrates chose to live privately rather than publicly, this does not mean that he was “apolitical” or that he neglected the duties of a citizen.³³ Rather, he redefined those duties to accommodate on the one hand his deep, religious insight into the ignorance of human beings,³⁴ and on the other hand his awareness of the hostility of “the many” to this message.

This accommodation meant that, for the most part, Socrates avoided the public arena, but he did not neglect its inhabitants. Indeed, one would have to say that he cared for them tirelessly: reminding them each as individuals to “care for the city itself.”³⁵ Far from neglecting the duties of citizenship, therefore, Socrates believed he exceeded them. He was, by *his* reckoning, Athens’ greatest benefactor (*euergetes*).³⁶

Thus when Socrates says—as *per* (a), (b), and (c) above—that he has neither the time nor the incentive to tend to “the business of the city” or to “do political things,” he means this in the sense that the *hoi polloi* would mean it: he means that he does not pursue public offices. But in

³³ As noted by C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 156. For the contrary view, see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicolas D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 167-194; Richard Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 196; Gregory Vlastos, “The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy,” *Political Theory* 11 (1983), 500-501; Thomas G. West, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 182-3.

³⁴ *Apology* 23a5-7: “It is probable, men, that really the god is wise, and that in this oracle he is saying that human wisdom is worth little or nothing.”

³⁵ *Apology* 31b3-5, where Socrates points out to his jury: “that, on the one hand, I have been careless of all *my own* things and that for so many years now I have endured that the things of my family be uncared for; but on the other hand, I *always* do your business [*to de humeteron pratein aei*], going to each of you privately [*idiai*], as a father or an older brother might do, persuading you to care for virtue”; cf. Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.iv.15: “Would I [i.e., Socrates] play a more important role in politics, Antiphon, if I engaged in it myself alone, or if I produced as many competent politicians as possible.”

³⁶ *Apology* 30a6, 36c4, 36d5.

fact Socrates *does* “do political things.” Indeed, if the *Gorgias* is any guide, Socrates viewed himself as perhaps the *only person ever* to “do political things.”

I think that I am one of very few Athenians—not to say the only one—who puts his hand to the true political art [*alêthôs politikê technê*], and I alone of the men of today practice politics [*prattein ta politika*], inasmuch as it is not with a view to gratification that I speak the speeches that I speak on each occasion, but with a view to the best as opposed to the most pleasant. (*Gorgias* 521d6-e1)

If being a citizen means simply doing what the many do, Socrates was by his own admission a bad citizen. But if it means, instead, tending to the needs of the polis and the welfare of its people, seeking “the best” rather than the “most pleasant,” Socrates was a citizen through and through. Whether he was the *only* citizen, as he seems to have believed, or simply an unusual kind of citizen is a question I shall address below. But first, let us consider in more detail what “Socratic citizenship” entails.

Questioning

Without a doubt, the most prominent feature of Socratic citizenship is its perpetual tendency to question. Socrates’ questioning first became public—he tells his jury in the *Apology*—when he heard the report from Delphi that “no one was wiser” than he (21a7). Cognizant of the fact that he was not wise at all (21b4-5), Socrates began to contemplate (*aporeô*) what the oracle was saying; and he contemplated for a long time, until, reluctantly, he decided to conduct an investigation (*zêtêsis*). Socrates describes this investigation as an effort to refute (*elenchein*) the oracle. Whether he means by this that he thought the oracle was wrong or

rather that he thought it needed interpretation is a matter of debate.³⁷ But however that may be, the investigation entailed going around to one politician after another, examining them (*diaskopôn*) for wisdom. When Socrates discovered (much to his astonishment) that “those with the best reputations seemed . . . nearly the most deficient, while those with more paltry reputations seemed more prudent” (22a5-6), he decided at once that “the god really was wise” and that his “divine mission,” as it were, was to question people in order to reveal their ignorance (23a5-b7).

Another way to understand Socratic questioning is in relation to action. Socrates often presents his inquiries as a search for “*x*”, where “*x*” represents the knowledge, wisdom, intelligence, or prudence that would be required to ensure that one’s actions be good. In the *Euthydemus*, for example, Socrates leads the lad Clinias to see that “without intelligence and wisdom” (*aneu phronêseôs kai sophias*), none of the conventional goods such as wealth, health or power is really good (281a5-6). For “if ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites, inasmuch as they are more able to serve the leader who is evil; but if intelligence leads, and wisdom, they are greater goods” (281d6-8). It follows that one should pursue wisdom with all one’s heart and mind (282a5). Viewed in these terms, however, Socratic questioning results in a practical dilemma: if the wisdom that is sought is never found, how can one be *sure* that one’s actions are good? The answer is, of course: one cannot. And therefore Socrates

³⁷ West, *Plato’s Apology*, p. 106, thinks that Socrates was attempting “to show up the Delphic Apollo as a liar or a fool”; but cf. Reeve, *Socrates*, p. 23: “Socrates clearly does not mean that he intended to refute the oracle outright. His plan on discovering someone wiser than himself, was not to dismiss the oracle as false, but to return to Delphi in puzzlement (21c2). He believed from the beginning that, properly interpreted, the oracle had to be true. . . . Hence his strategy of refutation is interpretive only.” I have to agree with Reeve, especially because his interpretation allows us to make sense of Socrates’ remark a few lines later (22a4-5) that his investigation is “in accordance with the god” (*zêtounti kata ton theon*). It would seem that the god *wanted* Socrates to sense the contradiction in the oracle and put it to the test.

repeatedly counsels people to hold back on action: “Could a man benefit himself, possessing many things and doing many things [*polla Prattôn*], if he had no sense [*nous*]? Would he not benefit more by doing less *with* sense? Just consider: if he did less, he would make fewer mistakes [*examartanoi*];³⁸ if he made fewer mistakes, he would do less badly [*kakôs prattoi*]; and if he did less badly, he would be less wretched [*athlios*].”³⁹ Precisely because the questions Socrates pursues are questions related to how one ought to live (i.e., to action), his inability to answer them results in a moratorium on deeds.

Socrates’ priority of questioning over acting brings him, of course, into direct conflict with sophistic citizenship. The best place to see this is in the *Hippias Major*. Just after Hippias has told Socrates what is most *kalos*—viz., to produce an eloquent and persuasive speech that protects one’s friends, one’s property and oneself from harm—Socrates counters:

You, my dear Hippias, are blissfully fortunate because you know what way of life a man ought to follow, and moreover have followed it with success (so you say). I, however, am subject to what appears to be some divine misfortune [*daimonia tis tuchê*]. I wander about and contemplate forever [*aporô aei*], and when I lay my puzzlement [*aporian*] before you wise men, you turn on me and batter me with abuse. . . . And yet, how can you know whose speech is *kalos* or the reverse—and the same goes for *any action whatsoever*—if you are ignorant [*agnoôs*] of the *kalos*? Indeed, so long as you are in that state, how do you know that it is any better to live than to die?

³⁸ The word that comes to mean “sin” in the New Testament.

³⁹ *Euthydemus* 281b6-c3; cf. *Euthyphro* 4e3-7; *Hippias Major* 304d8-e3.

It is noteworthy that the word Socrates uses to express his perpetual puzzlement is the same word Prodicus had used in his Hercules speech: *aporeô*.⁴⁰ Socrates presents himself as a Hercules who cannot decide which road to take because he lacks sufficient information.⁴¹ He therefore creates a “third way,” which consists of *zêtêsis*, the search. It is the way of philosophy.⁴² And whenever Socrates encounters others who claim, or act as if, they *know* what is good, what is *agathos* or *kalos*, he examines them. And when he finds them ignorant, he shames them for acting without knowledge.⁴³ Again, the essence of Socratic citizenship is questioning.

Inaction

In practical terms, Socratic citizenship is characterized by inaction. This does not mean that Socrates never acts;⁴⁴ it means that he tries to avoid acting when an act may be unjust.⁴⁵ In 404 B.C., during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants, Socrates and four other citizens were ordered to

⁴⁰ Notice also the use of the word in the Delphic oracle passage above (*Apology* 21b7).

⁴¹ Cf. *Apology* 22a6-8: “I must display my wandering to you as a performing certain labors [*ponous tinas ponountos*] so that the divination would turn out to be unrefuted.” The allusion here to Hercules is unmistakable; see Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato and Aristophanes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 70, n. 34.

⁴² *Apology* 29c8-9.

⁴³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 29e3-30a5, “I will speak to him and examine him and test him. And if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, but only *says* he does, I will reproach him, saying that he regards the things worth the most as the least important, and the paltrier things as more important. I will do this to whomever I happen to meet, younger or older, both foreigner and fellow citizen [*astôî*], but especially to the fellow citizens, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kin.”

⁴⁴ See n. 3 above.

⁴⁵ There is an apparent logical problem here: if Socrates does not know what justice and injustice *are*, how can he know which actions to refrain from? To some extent, this problem is removed by the fact of Socrates’ *daimonion*, which turns him away from some things he would do, but never urges him forward (*Apology* 31c-d and 40a-c; cf. *Euthyphro* 3b; *Euthydemus* 272e; *Theages* 128d-131e; *Phaedrus* 242b-c; *Republic* 496c; *Theaetetus* 151a; and Xenophon *Memorabilia* I.i.2-9). Villa’s unwillingness to recognize the divine ground of Socratic citizenship renders his dealing with this problem very awkward (see *Socratic Citizenship*, pp. 25-26). However, sometimes Socrates seems to refuse to act not because his *daimonion* prevents him, but because the potential act is unconstitutional (see *Apology* 32a-d and the following two notes), and here the same problem arises. For to act only in accordance with the constitution is to assume (it would seem) that violating the constitution is unjust; but such a belief is not self-evident, especially when one distrusts the conventional moral views as much as Socrates does.

bring Leon of Salamis to Athens for execution. Four of the citizens went off on their mission; Socrates simply went home: “My whole care is to commit no unjust or impious act,” Socrates tells his jury as he recalls the incident.⁴⁶ Similarly, when Socrates was serving on the Council of Five Hundred,⁴⁷ and eight Athenian generals were indicted *en bloc* for failing to recover bodies after a battle at sea, Socrates alone urged the Assembly *not* to act. To act would have been unjust, Socrates thought, because the generals should have been tried separately.⁴⁸ Socratic citizenship is thus “more negative than positive, more a morality of abstention than the fulfillment of codified obligations.”⁴⁹ Socrates does not offer arguments about what *is* just and worthy of pursuing through action; rather he tries “to infect his fellow citizens . . . with his own perplexity . . . and his own passion for leading a life free from injustice.”⁵⁰

BETWEEN THE SOPHISTS AND SOCRATES

Once sophistic and Socratic citizenship are set out in this way, the question naturally arises: which version is best? However, this question proves difficult to answer. For both of these versions of citizenship seem to have a legitimate claim.

For example, when one studies the way citizenship actually *works* (i.e., how it was practiced in Athens and how it has been practiced ever since), one finds that sophistic citizenship has overwhelming *de facto* support. Whenever we run for office or lend our backing to a cause; whenever we initiate a lawsuit, support a political party, or use rhetoric to advance our interest;

⁴⁶ *Apology* 32d; see also Munn, *School of Athens*, p. 287.

⁴⁷ See n. 4, above.

⁴⁸ See *Apology* 32a-c; and Xenophon *Hellenica* I.6-7. Munn, *School of Athens*, p. 186, says there was no legal authority for Socrates’ claim.

⁴⁹ Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

whenever, in short, we *act* as if we know what is worth acting *for*—we assume the posture of the sophists and turn our back on Socratic doubt. Thus sophistic citizenship would seem to have the upper hand, not because it has commanded the support of the masses (the masses, after all, can be wrong) but because it has withstood the test of time; we come back to it again and again as the form of citizenship that works.

At the same time, however, Socratic citizenship seems to have the upper hand. Why? Because as long as citizenship has been practiced in the sophistic manner just described, it has been exposed to the very challenges that Socrates brings against it. These challenges have never been adequately met. Therefore, the reasonable thing to do, it would seem, especially if one wishes to avoid acting unjustly, is to act as little as possible. Moreover, Socrates' insistence on the purity of one's deeds—his recognition that what really matters is not the protection of property or even of oneself but rather abstinence from sin—would seem to anticipate Christian political teaching, and therefore add that much more authority to Socratic citizenship. It is no surprise, therefore, that Socratic citizenship has had its ardent defenders. To the extent that we take *seriously* the call to justice and to piety in our civic affairs, we invoke unmistakably Socratic ideals. While practices may fall short of ideals, and people may lose sight of what is most important—namely, avoiding injustice—it is nevertheless Socratic citizenship that (in our better moments) we recognize as best.

Perhaps the most valuable thing to be gained from setting sophistic and Socratic citizenship side by side is the insight that neither of them is best *simpliciter*. Indeed, as they are pushed to their logical extremes, both these forms of citizenship become impossible to maintain and increasingly destructive of essential features of human life. Imagine, for example, what sophistic citizenship would look like if pushed to its limit. This would mean acting politically,

and doing so *strictly* by the standards of convention: pursuing things that are conventionally pursued, limiting oneself by conventional limits, and all the while giving no quarter to Socratic questioning and doubt. In the extreme, this would be impossible. Why? Because conventional morality is not a uniform and harmonious force. It pulls its adherents in multiple directions at once, tempting them toward this and that mutually competing good. This was certainly true for Greek conventional morality,⁵¹ and it is doubly true today.⁵² Thus questioning cannot be avoided, and one cannot simply steer one's course by "convention." But, moreover, to *attempt* to do so would be to deprive oneself of something fundamentally human, namely, "the desire to know."⁵³ It may well be possible to travel through most of life without pausing to wonder about one's course or about the righteousness of one's deeds (private or public), but the dissatisfaction this entails (in old age, if not before) is so well known it has become almost a cliché. One finds oneself struck sooner or later by the anxiety of ignorance. To wonder is human. Indeed, it is arguably the highest human good. Thus to push sophistic citizenship to the limit is to deny an essentially human good.

Indeed, precisely because conventional morality is multiform and the desire for knowledge is essentially human, Socratic *elenchus* has always had a place. (Socrates never finds

⁵¹ This has been well demonstrated by Terrence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: the Early and Middle Dialogues* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 15-18, who identifies two powerful "traditions" of Greek moral thought—the "Homeric" and the "post-Homeric"—which compete for the allegiance of the fifth-century mind. Among the chief differences between Homeric and post-Homeric values is the emphasis placed upon "concern for others." While in Homeric societies, the hero had to possess this quality to a certain degree—he had to protect those who were dependent upon him and cooperate with group projects such as war—he could nevertheless fall significantly short here and still (so long as he remained rich and powerful) be *agathos*. By the fifth century, however, this was beginning to change, due largely to the influence of Hesiod, Solon, Xenophanes, and Aeschylus. Justice was gradually becoming the virtue *par excellence*. It was, however, not *simply* so: the fifth-century Greek citizen would have felt the force of both these moral traditions: one that prioritized justice and one that did not.

⁵² See, e.g., the brilliant discussion of this problem in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 6-22.

⁵³ Aristotle *Metaphysics* 980a22.

himself at a loss for conversation partners, nor does he ever fail to reduce his interlocutors to self-contradiction on the basis of their conventional beliefs alone.) But now, if Socratic citizenship is pushed as far as it will go, it becomes *equally* impossible and inhuman to maintain. Why does it become impossible? Because a person cannot live for a single day without accepting *and acting upon* unexamined moral beliefs. Even Socrates, whose motto was that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and who spent his every waking hour examining his beliefs and the beliefs of his fellow citizens—even Socrates!—could not live without relying upon unexamined moral beliefs. Some of the more conspicuous of his beliefs are (a) that the voice of god ought to be obeyed over the voice of political authority; (b) the belief itself that the unexamined life is not worth living; (c) that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice; and, most importantly, (d) that it is better to risk death from inaction than to venture upon a potentially unjust deed.⁵⁴ Not one of these beliefs is ever “examined” by Socrates in the sources we possess; and yet they clearly direct the way he lives, the way he *acts*, and the way he counsels others to act. Is Socrates to be faulted for this? Certainly not. *Le Coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*.⁵⁵ But the point is that he cannot be otherwise, for it is simply impossible to examine every belief. If the unexamined life were *truly* not worth living, then a great deal of human life would be necessarily worthless.

But the unexamined life *is* worth living, and this is the second point about pushing Socratic citizenship too far. When one makes human action always contingent upon prior critical reflection—when one “lives in the dread of besmirching the splendor of [one’s] inner

⁵⁴ Voice of god over political authority: *Apology* 29d; the unexamined life is not worth living: see *Apology* 38a; better to suffer than to commit injustice: *Gorgias* 469c; death is preferable to injustice: *Apology* 29d, 38e. For the claim that these beliefs are unexamined and/or undefended, see Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 2-31.

⁵⁵ “The heart has its reasons of which reason does not know.”

being by action and existence”⁵⁶—one necessarily foregoes certain essentially *human* goods. In the private sphere, this is evident in Socrates’ relationship to his household (*ho oikos*). He admits in the *Apology* that he has “no leisure” for the affairs of his house, and in the *Phaedo* we see him send his wife and child away so that he can spend his last waking hours with his philosophical companions.⁵⁷ In death, just as in life, Socrates left his family in poverty. But this is, it seems to me, to neglect something genuinely valuable. Extreme commitment to the “examined life” means the loss of certain concrete human goods, and this loss affects not only the examiner but those around him as well. This brings us to the political implications of radical Socratic citizenship: to push Socratic citizenship too far—to refuse to “dirty one’s hands” in the volatile mix of earthly affairs—means not only to forego such genuine goods as honor and personal power, it means, eventually, to forego the state itself.⁵⁸ For the health and safety of every state demands that one act at times with unhesitating resolve. Thus to insist upon purity and refuse to act until all the questions have been answered is, as Machiavelli famously pointed out, to invite the senseless and cruel destruction of one’s people.⁵⁹ Perhaps Socrates thinks it is best to *suffer* injustice rather than to run the risk of committing it, but his decision effects other people besides himself. The problem with radical Socratic citizenship is, therefore, that by *not* acting one essentially *acts*, for in one’s very hesitation one chooses for oneself *and others* that certain goods are not to be had.

⁵⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 400; cited in Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, p. 52.

⁵⁷ *Apology* 23b7-c1; *Phaedo* 60a.

⁵⁸ See Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 160-80.

⁵⁹ Cf. William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 210: “It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories over enemies or over nature gained.”

But if pure Socratic and pure sophistic citizenship are undesirable and, in the extreme, impossible, where does this leave us? It leaves us, I believe, with an unavoidable and irreducible tension. Both the desire to know and the desire to act are genuinely human desires. They both compel us. And yet they compel us in different directions. To live and to act in the ethical-political world is to choose, somehow, between these competing desires, not once, but over and over again. We choose between them in different ways or to different degrees, but we must all choose—more or less consciously—between them. One can neither rise above nor sink below the choice. The tension, therefore, between Socratic and sophistic citizenship is not the tension between good and evil, or anything of the sort. It is nothing other than the tension of human existence, which calls us at once strive for what is perfect, eternal and divine—i.e., to become god-like (*athanatidzein*) as much as possible—and to delight in what is present here and now.

Socrates and the sophists strike the balance between these impulses in radically different ways. Can one say whether Socrates or the sophists have it right? Not without invoking some criterion—some standard by which to judge what is truly worthy of human striving and what is not, or whether life is more valuable than death. But this is precisely the problem: no such criterion exists. Socrates' famous searches for the "x" referred to above come up consistently empty-handed. And while it is true that Socrates received guidance from his *daimonion*, this was of a strictly negative sort. There is no evidence that Socrates' *daimonion* stood for him as a criterion of truth of the sort that could tell him: "This is what is worth doing." But, if not the *daimonion*, then what? The fact is that Socrates, like all of us, had to navigate the tension between action and contemplation, between the human and the divine impulses in the soul, without the aid of a clear criterion. He had to muddle his way through. Socrates chose to place

the accent on contemplation; the sophists chose to place it on action. Who was right? Any answer one gives to that question will reveal nothing more than the will or faith of the answerer.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation began with a puzzle about how the sophists should be interpreted, for modern interpretations vary widely not only in terms of who and what exactly the sophists are understood to be, but also in terms how they get evaluated. The first part of this dissertation laid the groundwork for solving this puzzle by returning to the ancient sources for guidance. This investigation yielded the following results. First, it was found that the sophists *themselves* varied widely in terms of the types of interests and activities they pursued, and the following three types of “sophists” were examined: those like Protagoras, who taught a multifaceted set of skills and moral qualities; those like Gorgias, who taught only rhetoric; and those like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who taught eristic. Next, it was determined that the word sophist, while always denoting a wise man and teacher, came to be used in the mid-fifth century in a new way, namely, to denote a professional teacher of *aretê*. In this new, technical sense of the word, only Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias and (to a certain extent) the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were could be called sophists. Rhetoricians such as Gorgias, Thrasymachus, Polus and Callicles were not sophists because they emphatically declined to teach *aretê*.

But if the sophists were essentially “teachers of *aretê*,” then why were ancient thinkers such as Socrates and Plato so hostile towards them? This was the question that the second part of this dissertation addressed, first, by examining what exactly the criticisms against the sophists were, and secondly, by raising questions about the legitimacy of these criticisms. It was the finding of this section that while myriad criticisms and *ad hominem* remarks against the sophists could be pointed out, only two of these were worthy of serious consideration: the charge that the

sophists did not know what *aretê* was (because they could not define it), and the charge that they were incapable teachers. The purpose of chapter 8 of this dissertation was to challenge the legitimacy of these charges, and it was argued there that they are, in fact, illegitimate to the extent that they depend upon an overly-strict understanding of the “knowledge” required for practicing and imparting *aretê*.

This opened the door to the third part of this dissertation, which inquired more deeply into what exactly the sophists taught and how they went about teaching it. In terms of ethics, the sophists were shown to be teachers of an essentially conventional or traditional form of human excellence, which placed a high value upon everyday goods such as friendship, honor, wealth and personal security while, at the same time, recognizing such “moral” virtues as justice, respect for others and honesty. In terms of politics, they were advocates of a type of active citizenship that placed (in contradistinction to Socrates) action over contemplation, political speech over philosophical discourse and the pursuit of worldly goods in general over the quest for otherworldly perfection. This was shown to be both reasonable, and yet notably deficient as an approach to satisfying the needs of the complete human being. The two principal methods of sophistic pedagogy—exhortation and association—were examined against the backdrop of Socrates’ approach to teaching (the *elenchus*) and were found to be comparatively more effective.

In general, how one interprets the sophists depends upon two things: first, what one means by “sophist,” i.e., which historical figures one has in mind (for if the immoralists—Polus, Thrasymachus and Callicles—are included among the sophists, one’s interpretation of them is bound to be negative); and secondly, where one stands oneself with respect to the perennial tension between active and contemplative pursuits. If one’s disposition is thoroughly

philosophical, one is bound to be uncomfortable with the sophists' unquestioning acceptance of traditional moral norms and their general willingness to act towards what can only be described as uncertain moral ends. On the other hand, if one is practical by nature and generally at peace with existing moral and political structures, one is likely to view the sophists with admiration for their many impressive accomplishments. In the preceding sections and chapters, I have tried to present the sophists as fairly and even-handedly as possible. They are by no means deserving of unlimited praise, but they are also not deserving of the seemingly unlimited ways in which they have been misrepresented and misunderstood. What the sophists deserve, above all, is to be studied earnestly and to be understood for what they actually were.

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APPENDIX A

A NEW TRANSLATION OF PRODICUS' "HERCULES AT THE CROSSROADS"¹

And the wise Prodicus expresses himself in a similar manner concerning *aretê* in his composition about Hercules that he recites to the largest audiences. As I remember it, this is how he puts it:

When Hercules was growing from childhood into man's estate, at that time of life when young men become their own masters and reveal whether they will steer their lives down the road of virtue or that of vice, he went out to a quiet place to sit and ponder which road he should take. And there appeared to approach him two tall women. One was beautiful to see and free in nature (*eleutherion phusei*); her person was adorned with purity, her eyes with a sense of shame (*aidô*), her figure with modesty (*sôphrosunê*), and her clothing with light. The other was thickened up into plumpness and softness, and all gussied up so her complexion would seem more white and red than it really was, her body straighter than normal (*phusei*), her eyes more alluring, and her clothing more revealing. She often checked herself out, or looked around to see if anyone else was observing; and would frequently fixate upon her own shadow.

As they came near to Hercules, the first continued in her same way, but the other, wanting to be first, ran towards Hercules, and said: "Hercules, I see you are pondering which direction to steer your life in. If you make me your friend; I shall lead you along the sweetest and easiest road; you will taste of every delight, and never have any struggles. First, neither wars nor affairs (*pragmatôn*) will concern you; you will rather be considering what agreeable food or drink you can find, or what sight or sound you might like, or smells or sensations; or what

¹ Xenophon *Memorabilia* II.i.21-34

delicious young companion you might most enjoy, how you might sleep most soundly, or, in short, how you might hit upon all these things with the least amount of toil (*aponôtata*). And if there should arise some suspicion that a dearth of these things should occur, do not fear that I may lead to suffer toil and hardship of body and soul. Rather, you shall have the use of other men's work and never refrain from taking advantage whenever you are able. For to my companions I supply the power to seize benefits from all quarters."

And when Hercules heard this he asked, "Lady, what is your name?"

"My friends call me Happiness," she said, "but among those that hate me I am nicknamed Vice."

At this point, the other woman came up and said: "I, too, come to you, Hercules: I know your parents and I have carefully observed your nature during the time of your education. Whence I hope that, if you take the road towards me, you will turn out a good doer of beautiful and noble deeds, and I shall appear still more highly honored and more eminent for the good things I bestow. But I will not deceive you by a pleasant prelude: I will rather tell you truly the things that are, as the gods have ordained them. For all things good and beautiful, the gods give nothing to man without work and care. If you want the favor of the gods you must worship the gods; if you desire the love of friends, you must show kindness to your friends; if you desire to be honored by some city, you must assist that city; if you deem it valuable to be admired by all of Greece for *aretê*, you must strive to do good for Greece; if you want land to yield you fruits in abundance, you must care for that land; if you want wealth from flocks, you must tend to those flocks; if you want to grow great through war and want power to liberate your friends and subdue your enemies, you must learn the arts of war from those who know them and must

practice their right use; and if you want your body to be strong, you must accustom your body to be the servant of your mind, and train it with toil and sweat.”

And Vice interjected, as Prodicus tells it, and said: “Take note Hercules how difficult and long is the road to happiness (*euphrosunas*) that this woman describes. But I shall lead you to happiness (*eudaimonia*) by the easy and short road.”

And Virtue said: “You poor wretch, what good do you really have? And what pleasure do you know, when you are unwilling to do anything for it? You do not even wait for the desire of pleasant things to set in before you fill yourself up with them: finding cooks to give zest to eating, searching out expensive wines and running about in search of snow in the summer to make your drink more pleasurable; to improve your sleep it is not enough for you to buy soft blankets, but you must have frames for your beds. For not work, but the boredom of having nothing to do makes you desire sleep. You rouse your sexual lusts by means of tricks, when there is no need, using men as women: and so you train your friends, debauching them by night and plunging them into sleep for the best hours of the day. Though you are immortal, you are the outcast of the gods and a scourge to good human beings. Moreover, the sweetest of all sounds to hear—self-approval—you never hear; and the sweetest of all sights to behold—a beautiful deed of your own making—you never see. Who will believe what you say? Who will grant what you ask? Who in their right minds would join your throng? While your followers are young, their bodies are weak, when they become old, their souls are without insight. Lazy and sleek they thrive in youth, withered and weary they journey through old age. Their past deeds bring them shame, their present deeds distress. They run through pleasure in their youth and store up hardships for old age. But I consort with the gods and with good human beings. No beautiful deed of god or man comes about without me. I am the highest honor of all according to

the gods and men I walk beside: a beloved co-worker to the craftsman, a trusted sentinel to the manager of a house, a gracious assistant to servants, a good partner in the work of peacetime, a steadfast ally in the deeds of wartime, and the best company in friendship. To my friends, meat and drink bring sweet and simple pleasure, for they wait until they desire them. And a sweeter sleep falls upon them than upon idlers; they are not angered by waking up, nor for its sake do they neglect the things they ought to be doing. With me, the young delight in the praises of the old; the old are exalted by the respect of the young; all remember with pleasure their own past transactions and take delight in their present well-being. For through me, they are dear to the gods, loved by their friends, and honored by their country. And when their appointed time comes, they lie neither forgotten nor dishonored, but live on, celebrated and remembered for all time. *These things* are for you, Hercules, child of good parents. If you will work in earnest, you shall have the most blessed happiness of all.”

This is how Prodicus related the education of Hercules by Virtue, except he has adorned the thoughts in even finer phrases than I have done now.

APPENDIX B

WAS GORGIAS A SOPHIST?

Like the sophists, Gorgias traveled around to various cities in Greece, teaching certain skills to young men for pay (*Apology* 19e). But, like Socrates, he expressly disavowed the ability to teach *aretê* (*Meno* 95c). What, then, did Gorgias teach? According to Meno, one of his students, he taught people how to be expert at speaking (*deinous legein*). And if this is all he taught, then by the definitions set in chapter 5 of this dissertation, he should not be considered a sophist. But there has been some controversy on this point.¹ This is perhaps because Plato's Socrates occasionally refers to Gorgias as *sophistês*; and Socrates (as has been noted) tended to use that term very precisely. Although I believe that the few passages where Gorgias is referred to as a sophist can be explained and that it would be wrong to regard him as a sophist, the details need to be carefully considered.

EVIDENCE THAT GORGIAS WAS NOT A SOPHIST

The case for believing that Gorgias was *not* a sophist stems initially from two basic observations: (a) teaching *aretê* is an *essential* feature of sophistry in the technical sense of the term; and (b) at the end of the *Meno* (95c), Gorgias is described by his own student as someone

¹ The first person to doubt Gorgias' status as a sophist, to my knowledge, was Grote, who wrote in *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: J. Murray, 1868-70), p. 521: "If the line could be clearly drawn between rhetors and sophists, Gorgias ought rather to be ranked with the former." Grote's view was later followed and developed by Hans Raeder, "Platon und die Sophisten," *Proceedings of the Royal Danish Academy* (1938), p. 11, and "Platon und die Rhetoren," *ibid.*, (1956), p. 4. Raeder's view was then endorsed and carefully elaborated by E. R. Dodds in his revised version of the Greek text, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 6-10: "What then was Gorgias?" asks Dodds (p. 8), "If we can believe Plato, the answer is clear: he was simply *deinos legein* (*Symposium* 198c), a man who could alter the appearance of things *dia rhômên logou* (*Phaedrus* 267a), and whose only profession was to make others *deinous legein* (*Meno* 95c). His art was in fact the art of verbal magic, what he himself called 'the incantatory power which by its witchery enchants, persuades, and changes the souls of men' (*Encomium on Helen* 10)." Later, however, the case against Gorgias' status as a sophist was attacked (unconvincingly, it seems to me) by E. L. Harrison, "Was Gorgias a Sophist?" *Phoenix* 18 (1964): 183-192. And in the most recent translations of the *Gorgias*, no reference is made to the debate at all; see, e.g., James H. Nichols Jr., *Plato, Gorgias* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Gorgias has apparently recovered (rightly or wrongly) the title of sophist.

who claimed not to teach *aretê* and who ridiculed those who did. Taken together, these two observations place Gorgias' status as a sophist in doubt and lead one to probe further for evidence that Gorgias, perhaps, eschewed not only the business of teaching *aretê* but the title "sophist" as well. Such evidence appears consistently throughout the *Gorgias*.

The *Gorgias* is the only Platonic dialogue in which Gorgias himself is present, and the first thing to note about it is how Gorgias presents himself there. Plato draws special attention to this. He has Socrates inquire of Gorgias specifically (447c-449a): "You tell us yourself what one must call you—i.e., as a knower of what art." And Gorgias replies: "Of *rhêtorikê*, Socrates." Socrates then asks him, as if to be sure: "Then it is necessary to call you a rhetorician (*rhêtora*)?" And Gorgias confirms this emphatically: "And a good one, Socrates, if you wish to call me what I boast that I am." It should be noted that when Plato's Socrates encounters sophists in other dialogues, he quickly establishes that they are sophists;² indeed, he seems to delight in this. But he does not call Gorgias a sophist at any point during the entire course of the *Gorgias*.

Second, it should be noted that neither Gorgias' disciple, Polus, nor Gorgias' Athenian admirer, Callicles, regard themselves as sophists. Callicles, in fact, expresses his vociferous dislike for sophists, calling them "worthless" (520a). A little earlier, when Socrates had pressed Callicles with hard questions about the nature of the good (497a), Callicles had accused *Socrates* of being a sophist. All of this hostility towards sophists and sophistry takes place right in front of Gorgias, which would be odd, indeed, if Gorgias were a sophist.

Finally, Plato's Socrates takes great pains in the *Gorgias* to draw an explicit distinction between rhetoric and sophistry. He tells Polus (463a-466a) that in his opinion (*doxa*) neither rhetoric nor sophistry is a genuine art; they are, rather, clever substitutes for arts. To this extent,

² Compare *Protagoras* 349a, and *Hippias Major* 281d.

they share a common nature; but they are not substitutes for the same art. Sophistry is a substitute for the art of legislation (*nomothetikê*), which produces regulations concerning what is just and unjust both in political life and in the soul. Rhetoric, by contrast, is a substitute for the art of justice (*dikastikê*), which is used when disputes arise among people. Thus skill at sophistry and rhetoric are closely related on Socrates' view—both are forms of flattery—but they are not identical, if only because their areas of pseudo-expertise are different. This difference is then underscored by an analogy: as these arts stand in the soul, so the arts of gymnastics and medicine stand in the body. Gymnastics aims at routine maintenance of the body, while medicine aims at resolving problems that sometimes arise. As it turns out, these bodily arts have imposters as well: the pseudo-art of gymnastics is cosmetics, Socrates points out; and the pseudo art of medicine (which is primarily a dietary science in the ancient world) is cookery. The result of all this is that Socrates does not consider sophistry and rhetoric to be the same at all, except insofar as they are both forms of flattery. Neither “art,” therefore, is a particularly admirable one, but they are different nonetheless.

To sum up it appears from the evidence considered so far, that Gorgias went further than simply to disavow the teaching of *aretê*, as *per* the *Meno*. To judge from the *Gorgias*, he also took the logical next step of disavowing the title of “sophist” as well. And it appears that Plato recognized this fact, and even emphasized it in his work.

SOME PROBLEMS

However, Plato is much more equivocal about Gorgias' title than the evidence presented so far suggests. For in certain dialogues, he has Socrates refer to Gorgias either implicitly or explicitly as a sophist. And evidence derived from other sources also suggests that Gorgias may have been a sophist. Let us take a look at the evidence.

Problem 1

In both the *Hippias Major* and the *Apology*, Socrates suggests that Gorgias is a sophist either by calling him one directly (*Hippias Major*) or else by listing him along with other confirmed sophists. The passages read as follows:

Hippias Major 282b (Socrates to Hippias): I can support with my own testimony your statement that your art really has made great progress toward combining public business with private pursuits. The eminent Gorgias, *the sophist of Leontini* [my italics], came here from his home on an official mission, selected because he was the ablest statesman of his city. By general consent he spoke most eloquently before the Assembly, and in his private capacity, by giving demonstrations to the young and associating with them, he earned and took away with him a large sum of Athenian money.

Apology 19d-e (Socrates to his jury): If you have heard from anyone that I attempt to educate human beings and make money from it, that is not true either. Though this too seems to me to be noble (*kalon*), if one should be able to educate (*paideuein*) human beings, like Gorgias of Leontini, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. For each of them, men, is able, going into each of the cities, to persuade the young—who can associate with whomever of their own citizens they wish to for free—they persuade these young men to leave off their associations with the latter, and to associate with themselves instead, and to give them money and acknowledge gratitude besides.

Do these passages ensure Gorgias' status as a sophist? Not exactly. The following considerations should be borne in mind.³ (1) The *Hippias Major* and the *Apology* are thought to

³ Though the *Hippias Major* is regarded by some scholars as spurious, I treat it here as genuine; see chapter 2, n. 88.

be among Plato's earliest dialogues. And any number of things could have caused Plato to regard Gorgias as a sophist in his earliest dialogues, but not in later ones. For example, Gorgias may not have made his disclaimers about *aretê* until late in life—either later than the composition date of the *Hippias Major* or, alternatively, later than its dramatic date.⁴ Or Plato may not have realized that Gorgias was not a sophist until after composing the *Apology*. Either of these scenarios is possible. Therefore, the case is not settled just because Gorgias is referred to as a sophist in one or two early dialogues. (2) The meaning of the word sophist in the *Hippias Major* passage is loose enough, anyway, to include a Gorgias who disavows the teaching of *aretê* and who is, thus, not a sophist in the most technical sense. I would not go as far on this point as Raeder, who claims that “sophist” is used here in the old-fashioned, general sense of “wise man,”⁵ but I *would* argue that the word is used in such a way as to place the emphasis entirely upon teaching for *pay* and not at all upon *what* is being taught. Gorgias could easily be counted as a sophist so long as it is only “teaching for pay” that is being considered. But were Socrates to consider *what* precisely was being taught (as he later does in the *Gorgias*), he would have to distinguish between Gorgias' art and that of the sophists. For the same reason, the implicit reference to Gorgias as a sophist at *Apology* 19e should be discounted. For, once again, the point of the passage is simply to list people who teach for pay.⁶

⁴ On Hippias' *long* life, see chapter 3, n. 37; on possible dates for the *Hippias Major* see G. R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 156 ff.; and Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Hippias Major* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 93-103, both of whom arrive independently (and by different interpretive methods) at a date of ca. 395-390 B.C.

⁵ “Platon und die Sophisten,” p. 9. He is rightly criticized on this point by Harrison, pp. 184-5; Socrates clearly contrasts the sophists in this passage with earlier philosophers who neither taught for pay nor took an active part in politics.

⁶ Harrison, “Was Gorgias a Sophist?” pp. 183-4, places a great deal of weight upon these passages; Raeder and Dodds (rightly, in my view) dismiss them. It is also worth noting that Socrates' audience in the *Apology* was (as the charges against Socrates attest) incapable of distinguishing sophists from other sorts of teachers and intellectuals. Socrates may be speaking loosely because his audience thinks that way.

Problem 2

Next, there is ample evidence to suggest that Gorgias wrote and spoke about *aretê* in great detail, and this has been taken by some scholars as proof that he also *taught aretê* and that he was therefore a sophist. In the *Meno*, for example (71c-e), when Socrates confesses to Meno that he (Socrates) has no idea what *aretê* is, Meno cites Gorgias' recent appearance in Athens as a reason why Socrates *should* know what it is. Evidently, Gorgias had given a speech in Athens in which he argued that *aretê* entailed different things for men than for women and slaves.⁷ Moreover, in the *Helen*, Gorgias discusses *aretê* at length; in fact the entire piece is framed by a sort of catalogue of virtues and vices. But none of this, it seems to me, can be taken as proof that Gorgias considered himself a teacher of *aretê*, if only because to spend one's time discussing and defining a thing like virtue is not at all the same as teaching it. This should be clear enough from the case of Socrates. The question, therefore, is not whether or not Gorgias mentions *aretê* in this or that context; it is whether he regarded himself as a *teacher* of *aretê* like the sophists. Is there any evidence to suggest that Gorgias claimed to be a teacher of *aretê*?

There is some evidence that Gorgias was considered by *others* to be a sophist. Harrison brings forth some of this, and there is even more evidence than he seems to realize. In the very passage where Meno explains to Socrates that Gorgias disavowed the teaching of *aretê*,⁸ the implication (as Harrison has noted) is that Gorgias is a *most excellent* sophist, not that he is no

⁷ *Meno* 71e; cf. Aristotle *Politics* I.5, 1260a27: "Those who itemize virtues, as Gorgias does, speak much better than those who define [virtue in a general way]."

⁸ *Meno* 95b-c: Socrates—"And what about the sophists, the only people who profess to teach it [*aretê*]? Do you think they do?" Meno—"The thing I particularly admire about Gorgias, Socrates, is that you will never hear him make this claim; indeed he laughs at the others when he hears them do so. In his view his job is to make clever speakers." Socrates—"So you don't think the sophists are teachers?" Meno—"I really can't say. Like most people I waver: sometimes I think they are and sometimes I think they are not."

sophist at all. Moreover, Isocrates (who studied with Gorgias) refers to his teacher at one point as a sophist who theorized about nature along with Parmenides, Empedocles and others.⁹ But none of this testimony is to the point. For one thing, Isocrates (as we have noted) had a very loose definition of sophist, and for good reason: he was himself a sophist in the most technical sense of the word and wished to remind Athens of the longer tradition of admirable sophistry. As for the implication in the *Meno* passage: it is, after all, only an implication, not an explicit statement. And it is open to a number of interpretations. Quite possibly, what Meno means is something like this: “What I admire most about Gorgias is that he does not claim to teach *aretê*, which is a foolish business; and thus, if he were a sophist, which he is not, he would have to be considered a most excellent sort of sophist.” On the other hand, even if Meno does regard Gorgias as a sophist, one has to wonder to what extent this simply reveals Meno’s own naïveté (compared to a Socrates or a Plato) about what does and does not constitute a sophist. It would hardly be surprising if Gorgias’ eschewal of the term sophist were lost entirely on some of his students. Most of them, after all, simply wanted to learn rhetoric.¹⁰ What is important, however, is not what the average Athenian thinks, or what a young ambitious student of Gorgias thinks, but rather what the so-called sophist himself thinks. Again, is there any evidence to suggest that Gorgias himself took on the title of sophist? The answer is emphatically “no.” He evidently called himself a “rhetor.”

Problem 3

It has been noted by Harrison that the distinction between sophistry and rhetoric that Socrates presents in the *Gorgias*, is a very weak one, and that, therefore, this cannot be used as

⁹ Antidosis 268.

¹⁰ Cf. Hippocrates’ view of Protagoras at *Protagoras* 312c-d.

evidence to suggest that Socrates or Plato really maintained such a distinction.¹¹ Indeed, no sooner does Socrates expound the distinction, he calls his own words into question (465c):

This is the way they [sophists and rhetors] differ by nature, but—inasmuch as they are closely related—sophists and rhetors are mixed together in the same place and about the same things, and they do not know what use to make of themselves nor do other human beings know what use to make of them.

In fact, the two categories “sophist” and “rhetor” blur together in at least three different ways.

(1) Gorgias is drawn out by Socrates to admit that he would teach *aretê* were he to receive a student who lacks it. (2) What Gorgias teaches is *not* limited (as Socrates’ line of demarcation seems to require) to judicial speech but also includes, by Gorgias’ own admission, deliberative speeches as well. And (3) the sophists, moreover, taught people how to win lawsuits by means of rhetoric (even if this is not all they taught). Hence it is not clear that the distinction Socrates draws between rhetoric and sophistry can hold up; and if it cannot, then to argue that Gorgias is not a sophist because he is a rhetor is to argue nothing at all.¹² After attacking this distinction, Harrison next deals with what he takes to be the deathblow by supplying a reason why Gorgias might have disavowed the ability to teach *aretê* and yet have been a sophist: it was a sales gimmick, Harrison submits (p. 189), an attempt to seem a little different than the other sophists. But whether the case should be handed to Harrison, or to those like Raeder and Dodds who claim that Gorgias is not a sophist, depends very much upon how one interprets the *Gorgias*.

¹¹ Harrison, “Was Gorgias a Sophist?” pp. 186-7.

¹² See *Gorgias* 520a-b.

INTERPRETING THE GORGIAS

In the dramatic context of the *Gorgias*, there is a perfectly good reason for Socrates to make an obviously shaky distinction between rhetoric and sophistry, even if a much stronger distinction could have been made.¹³ It is useful for the education of Polus to do so. Socrates in effect tells Polus that the art he loves so much, rhetoric, being a form of flattery, is not all that different from sophistry and, indeed, that the more one thinks about it, the more similar they actually appear. Socrates then defines rhetoric and sophistry in such a way as to challenge Polus and to make him think more carefully about what rhetoric really is. It should be noted that Socrates calls the analogy an opinion (*doxa*, 463a), and one that he asks Polus explicitly to refute. It is, in other words, specifically tailored to make Polus angry—both by calling rhetors useless flatterers, and by suggesting that they are basically akin to sophists. The distinction is meant to draw Polus out and to get him to confess his own deep-seated motivations for learning rhetoric. Note that Socrates offers the whole analogy in a form that a rhetorician like Polus will understand: he offers it in the form of an *epideixis* (464b3) and goes heavy on the praise and blame.

In support of this reading, it is noteworthy that Socrates presents the analogy between rhetoric and sophistry to Polus not in his typical conversational style, but rather in a style that a rhetorician would understand: he presents it in terms of a *nomos/phusis* argument, as rhetoricians love to do: “this is how they differ by *phusis*”(465c), Socrates tells him. Note also that Socrates explicitly says he has produced his speech *just for* Polus:

Perhaps I have done a strange thing in that, not permitting you to make lengthy speeches,

I have myself extended a long speech. It is then appropriate to pardon me; for when I

¹³ Sophists and rhetoricians are consistently and precisely distinguished throughout the Platonic corpus; see, e.g., *Euthydemus* 305b-c and *Sophist* 222d, 225b; in light of this, if the line of demarcation in the *Gorgias* appears obviously artificial, the question is, simply: what is Socrates up to in the *Gorgias*?

spoke briefly, you did not understand, and you were able to make no use of the answer that I gave you, but needed a full description.” (465e)

The conclusions one can draw from this would seem to be the following: (1) it would be quite naïve to read this passage as though Socrates were announcing his *own* view about the difference between rhetoric and sophistry. It seems to me that both Raeder and Dodds make this mistake. And yet (2) it would be equally naïve to think that, just because the whole analogy breaks down, Socrates’ *true* view is that rhetoric and sophistry are identical. Again, Socrates’ own view cannot be determined from a passage where style and substance are both geared toward the education (leading out) of Polus. Harrison neglects this consideration entirely. A fundamental distinction between rhetoric and sophistry is, however, carefully presented in too many other Platonic dialogues to simply dismiss it (as Harrison does) as a sham distinction.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two considerations seem to me to topple Harrison’s case and to confirm our initial suspicion that Gorgias was not a sophist. They are, first, the fact (already noted) that Gorgias both disavows the teaching of *aretê* and never refers to himself as a sophist; and, second, the fact (not emphasized by Harrison) that Socrates draws a distinction between rhetoric and sophistry *at all*. Why should Socrates do this? Why should he distinguish in any fashion at all between rhetoricians and sophists if it was perfectly obvious to him and to everyone else, including Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, that these categories were the same?

This question finds its answer only in the dramatic context of the *Gorgias*. Plato’s Socrates makes the distinction between sophists and rhetoricians (whether he thinks it correct or not) because his interlocutors make such a distinction and because he is interested primarily in persuading them. Why do the interlocutors make such a distinction? The answer would appear

to be precisely because they do not regard themselves as sophists. This is why it is such a key moment in the *Gorgias* when Gorgias finally admits (460a), under considerable pressure from Socrates and from his own conscience, that he *would* in fact teach *aretê* to a student who came to him without it. That Gorgias' claim here is disingenuous, however, is evident from Polus' response at 461b: he simply cannot accept Gorgias' claim, and he suspects rather that Gorgias has said this *merely* out of shame. Callicles agrees (482d). Thus neither Polus (Gorgias' student) nor Callicles (his friend) believe for a minute that Gorgias would engage in teaching *aretê*.

A final observation: When Plato came to write Socrates' defense, a defense essentially against the charge that Socrates was a dangerous sophist, the leading argument was this: that Socrates does not teach *aretê*. In other words, it is absolutely fundamental to Socrates' defense that if one does not teach *aretê*, he is not a sophist. This, it seems to me, accounts for the recognition in Plato's writings of a permanent divide between sophists, on the one hand, and those who do *not* claim to teach *aretê*, on the other. The divide could not be ignored if Socrates' own defense was to hold up. Therefore, Plato cannot simply call someone like Gorgias a sophist—he can only *imply* that he is a sophist, and how that implication is made is a delicate matter: it must be made by getting Gorgias to admit, first of all, that he (unlike Socrates) *would* teach a student *aretê*. Thus the very manner in which Plato artfully suggests that Gorgias is a sophist seems to me to confirm the very reason that he is not.

VITA

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