

Paradoxes

edited by

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PETER CARRAVETTA

PARADOXES: THE SOPHISTS AS PHILOSOPHERS OF
LANGUAGE AND EXISTENCE

In the fifth century before the Common Era there appeared in the great city of Athens a group of progressive, liberal intellectuals called the Sophists. They were by and large foreigners, not exactly *barbaros*, but more like *metics*, resident aliens who, insofar as they might have gained citizenship, could claim some civil rights, though they were not allowed to participate in city politics. The sophists were professional teachers, specializing in lecturing on a variety of subjects and above all on language itself. For the first time in history, these intellectuals were paid for their services. They met a specific sociocultural need. In the sixth century Solon had effected some liberalizing reforms in the *polis*, and at the end of that century Cleisthenes, an *archon* or magistrate in Athens, introduced voting privileges, which some have argued signals the true beginning of democracy in the West. Not much later, Ephialtes and Pericles introduced further changes which basically transferred power from the Aeropagus to the Assembly. This meant so many more citizens could aspire to participate in running the commonwealth, but also, and just as crucial, advance in social class and status. These new opportunities created a demand for instructors in the arts of debate who could moreover furnish a well-rounded education. The sophists taught also *areté*, usually translated as virtue, but as translation is ever and always also an interpretation, things are much more complicated. Insofar as it was meant to equip this new burgeoning class with informed agendas and effective tools to participate in domestic public and social life, it had the sense of what today in America we call “values”. No need to remind the reader how discussions about

values are today tossed about by politicians, educators, parents and the media, let alone comparing them to those of other countries. Yet by a cautious retrojection of the criss-crossing of cherished, contested, vilifying or misunderstood accounts of what a given value may have entailed or required in the fifth century, we can in part surmise what the real world of the Sophists was like. At least, glimpse their interpretive horizon. Already in Athens we have a broader spectrum in social classes, competing interests, the thrust of a protobourgeoisie of sorts. New needs arise, and possessing noticeable speaking ability was a key factor in this changing public life.

But it was not only speech the sophists taught, for there is no discourse without some kind of intention and content. The sophists were aware of this, they consciously taught ideas as well, some of which were very paradoxical by our post-Platonic, post-Aristotelean ethical and mental habits. Some, indeed, were downright radical – we actually have in the surviving writings claims which in terms of our recent historical memory would sound like “all men are created equal”, and even “God is dead”! Above all, they taught that through language one can be empowered, may even gain access to the means of production and political authority. And *that* was bound to meet with some reticence, at times resistance, often explicit rejection. When we citizens of the institutionalized golden mean read about this state of affairs, from the plateaus of the XIX and XX century, we reflexively when not indignantly point out that these here sophists dared to teach for a fee, when ideally friendship and gratitude should have sufficed. But whose “ideal” was it, this of free education? Who could afford an education? And is it not high time we revise the lofty-sounding and retroactively imposed mythology whereby, at least in the West, knowledge should be pursued for its own end, and that learning, wisdom, is not something to be traded? Parents may teach their children for free, but for the past half a millennium any imparting of knowledge has been professionalized, and it is absurd and hypocritical to cite the fact that the Sophists “charged a fee” in quotation marks as if to suggest, my goodness, how could they do that? They must have been in bad faith! Well, educators and professionals on a salary should not be irked or ironical about this.

The real problem, perhaps, was another, for “the sophists sell wisdom to *all comers* without discrimination” (Kerferd 1999, p. 25). That egalitarianism, and the fact that they abjured, rejected or ignored notions of a Supreme Being *and* Epistemological Unity, set the stage for the negative and often dismissive interpretations of their message and thereby any possible contribution to philosophy¹. In the twentieth-century, in Euroamerica, the Sophists would be right at home, if only one would connect them to such names as Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Paul Feyerabend, Jacques Derrida, Marshall McLuhan, chaos theory, the American Bar Association, the no longer serious issue of truth in advertising, the ubiquity of political infomercials, and the reckless economic law of the market and its “ethical” justification, among other things. That said, there were elements in what the Sophists represented that are germane to the complex origin of method. First of all, the relationship between language and knowledge.

The challenge that Protagoras submits to the Eleatics is that it is neither God nor Being, but “man the measure of all things”. This famous assertion is at the root of much wrangling among philosophers, historians and philologists, most of it owed to the fact that each

¹ This trend of course begins with Plato, who features sophists in several of his dialogues, and gets progressively worse through the ages. A partial reappraisal began with Hegel, who “re-introduced” them into the history of philosophy as representative of the “subjectivists”. The historical reconstructions effected by Grote, Zellner, Nestle and Guthrie, though meant to validate the sophists’ contribution to philosophy, pedagogy and Greek thought in general, are dotted with caveats similar to those we saw above with the scholars of Greek myth. Cf. Kerferd 1999, pp. 4-14. It is largely owing to the work of Untersteiner, Kerferd and Schiappa that the sophists have been reintroduced into contemporary discussion outside of the closed circuit of classical philology and into philosophy and language studies, making over nearly half century a solid case for their rehabilitation. And it is only in very recent times that some even more far ranging revisionist work has been carried out; cf. in particular listed works by Pullman, Poulakos, Enos, Scenters-Zapico, Bett. Scott Consigny identifies two camps in this rehabilitation movement, the “foundationalists”, which includes Eric Havelock, Jacqueline de Romilly, Kerferd, Edward Schiappa, and Thomas Cole; and the “anti-foundationalists,” or neosophists, which would include, among others, Sharon Crowley, Victor Vitanza, Katheleen Welch, and Susan Jarratt (253). A detailed study of these currents will appear in a separate study.

succeeding generation interprets the previous one in terms of what suits its ideological bent and intellectual agenda. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this, as it is inevitable and by and large explainable: hermeneutics is also the history of interpretations right or wrong as they might have been. What is relevant is *how* this is carried out and with *what consequences* – often planned, but even more often unintended, – on the later social and cultural lifeworlds which make recourse to a particular authority to explain itself to its constituency. The passage reads:

For [Protagoras] says somewhere that of all things the measure is man, of things that they are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not².

Suddenly, it is humans who find themselves with the onus of accounting not only for the godhead, not only with aleatory Being, but for themselves, for their existence. *Pneuma* begins its long tra-vailed course toward *psyche*, toward *spirit*, someday, in the Modern epoch, it will identify itself as *ratio*. But, and no pun intended, *ratio* has had to deal all along the route with *oratio*. Long before the awareness of causal relationships – I think, *therefore* I am, –the sense of a split between supreme power and personal capacity is introduced, but unlike what happens with the Eleatics, the focus is no longer the Unsayable, but rather what *can* be said, and what can, what must, be articulated is that the reference point is now human existence itself. Before the preposition which can guide meaning, there is a new meaning that attracts to itself everything in the cosmos and everything on the earth: I exist, people exist, things exist: now what? How do we link these unconjoined generators of meaning. Hence the disclosing of a social world with a plethora of possibilities, some of which later generations preferred calling, in part to reassure themselves by ducking under formal systems, contradictions. Things are, and things are not: I

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152A, which Diels-Kranz consider an authentic fragment directly intercalated in the dialogue. I am citing from Sprague 2001, p. 19. Cornford translated it thus: “[Protagoras] says, you will remember, that ‘man is the measure of all things – alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not’” (in Hamilton & Cairns 1978, p. 856).

can only know what I see, what appears to me. What does that mean? Western philosophy usually picks this issue up beginning with Plato, who struggles mightily to tie the anarchic tendrils together, both in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Protagoras*. But that occurs decades later, and we shall see how he resolves the issue in a moment. The above citation has in fact been brought up precisely in order to focus on what follows immediately after:

Now doesn't [Protagoras] say something of this sort, that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so in turn it is for you, you being a man, and I too?...Isn't it true that at times, when the same wind is blowing, one of us will be cold and the other will not, or the one slightly and the other extremely so? –Indeed it is.– Now in that case shall we say that the wind is cold in itself or not cold, or shall we agree with Protagoras that it is cold to the man who feels cold but not so to the other? –We shall agree with him, it seems. –It also “‘appears’ so to each one, doesn't it?– Yes.– And ‘it appears’ surely is the same as ‘he perceives’? –It is. – Appearance, then, and perception are equivalent when one is speaking of warmth or anything of that sort. Then things are, I venture, for each person just as he perceives them (*Theaetetus* 152a-d)³.

One can sense how Theaetetus is being “set up” as an accomplice in the ensuing sarcastic character assassination⁴, in order for Socrates, well, for Plato, to pursue his discrediting of the sophists, and continue on his quest of re-instating a supreme order, the *Theoros*, clearly an authoritarian one, which for half a century had nearly disappeared.

³ Cornford's translation is clearly vitiated by his desire to make Socrates' attack more readable and acceptable to XX century minds sold on a Socratic pursuit of knowledge. The last response above is as follows: “Perception, then, is always of something that is, and, as being knowledge, it is infallible” (in Hamilton & Cairns 1978, p. 857). Here translation equals interpretation as rationalist ideology.

⁴ This will occur in part at 161c: “On the whole I'm quite delighted with his statement that what appears to each man also is. But I am surprised at the way he started his account, that he didn't say at the beginning of his Truth that of all things the measure his the pig or the baboon or some even more outlandish choice from among creatures endowed with sensation... he was in fact no more intellegent than a tadpole, to say nothing of other men” (Sprague 2001, p. 19).

What had the sophists wrought? A few lines from Antiphon, who has been cited as affirming “God has no need of us”, (DK B80) should suffice:

We [respect] and revere those who are of good parentage, but those who are not of good family we neither [respect] nor revere. In this behavior we have become like barbarians to one another, when in fact *by nature we all have the same nature in the particulars, barbarians and Greeks*. We only have to consider the things which are natural and necessary to all mankind. These are open to all [to get] in the same way, and in [all] these *there is no distinction of barbarian or Greek*. For we all breathe out into the air by the mouth and the nose, and we [all eat with our hands]... (DK B44; Sprague 2001, p. 220; emphasis added).

Lest we think there is present a classist distinction between “good” families (the aristocracy, the rulers?) and lesser social nuclei to mar the startling novelty, for the age, of the statement implying “all men are created equal”, a different version has:

We recognize and respect [the laws of nearby communities], whereas those of communities far away we neither respect nor revere. In this, however, we have become barbarized towards one another, whereas, in fact, as far as nature is concerned, *we are all equally adapted to being either barbarians or Greeks*... (Dillon & Gergel 2003, p. 150; emphasis added).

This is what is meant by man the measure of all things. At a time of growing Athenian pride and hegemony, this was not a good thing to be teaching people, especially of the lower classes. The multifaceted elaborations on the conduct of the orator first by Aristotle and then by Cicero and Quintilian were still far in the future, so the early rhetoricians were possibly their own worst enemies because they did not know what power they had unleashed. Yet what must be perceived here as relevant to our inquiry is that there is a search for a new *standard*, a frame of reference that does not discount the material conditions or existence of the speakers *as well as* the social institutions wherein human discourse occurs. And in order to forestall the tricky turning of tables practiced by Socrates on his naïve interlocutors, which is centered on the individual in relation to cosmos, we ought perhaps consider the recent suggestion by one classicist who, having reconstructed

the actual usage of certain terms in the V Century, believes that what is meant by the statement, *Pantôn chrêmatôn metron estis anthrôpos*, (DK80 B1) is more along the following tenor: “Of everything and anything the measure [truly-is] human[ity]...”⁵. It is mankind, humankind, the first and last frame of reference, not God, not eternity, but mortals in time, people in actual experience. God, eternity, and connexed values such a Unity and Perfection will have to be Translated into manageable frames *through* discourse, that is, rhetorically, in history. This should be kept in the background as we touch upon a few topics which reflect the need, for philosophy, to rethink, in our post-metaphysical and unpoetic times, the relevance of sophistic thought. For we are at a stage where Theory, Discourse, and Method are not as clearly marked as they will be after the Platonic deluge and the Aristotelean reconstruction and classification of all things created.

For nearly twenty-three centuries the sophists have been associated, and negatively, with the introduction on the cultural scene of Greece of *rhetoric* as a special discipline. Why negatively is still a matter for debate, but some of the reasons can be gleaned by reviewing the reactions to them in their own time and the first generations thereafter. The sophists had raised awareness of the import of language *as* language in the determination of the relation mind-world, humans-nature, as we will discuss in a moment, yet the word rhetoric actually did not even exist when Protagoras, Prodicus, Gorgias and Antiphon were admiring the work of Ictinus and Phidias on the Acropolis. *Rhêtorikê* is a fourth century coin which ought not to be imposed on fifth century intellectuals, and on Corax and Lysias as the “founders” of the discipline. The sophists were rather more concerned with the elusive *logos*,

⁵ Schiappa 1991, p. 121. Besides an acute, and astute, reconstruction of the lexico-semantic and stylistic distribution of key terms, to some of which we will turn below, Schiappa makes a strong case for a Protagoras who responds to, rejecting it, the extremism of Parmenides, freeing the interpretive horizon to accept and develop the Heraclitean perspective. For a different translation, which I cannot comment on here but is implicitly relevant, see David K. Glidden, where we read “Man is the measure of all states of affairs, of what is the case, that it is the case, of what is not the case, that it is not so” (my emphasis).

specifically with its proper usage, *orthos logos*, in part to distinguish themselves from the Eleatics⁶. Beyond that, they were interested in democratizing the *arête*, a term which meant excellence until Plato altered or reduced its sense to reflect the more abstract notion of Virtue. Justice, another key word in the Platonic corpus, at the time of the sophists was not *dikê*, but *dikaiosunê*, which also meant “personal excellence”. Following Havelock both Kerferd and Schiappa emphasize how the sophists actually addressed the issue of conduct in political discourse, given that popular courts were a new feature of social life and required hitherto unknown protocols of governing debate, or opposing arguments. The horizon of interpretation therefore includes something more, or other, than the above-discussed paradigm shift away from the “poetic” and the “mythological” mind set. We should rather read the sophists as proleptically planting the seeds of what later would be called the anthropology of religion and the rhetoric of argumentation⁷. More than that, we should read them *as* philosophers plain and simple.

But in order to accomplish that, we must move from the hermeneusis of To Say toward what was now needed, a configuration of To Explain, which points precisely to the emergence of a self-consciousness about how to use speech, how to make an other understand and yes, convince him or her that one’s position is the best among other contending ones. The misguided debate about and condemnation of the double-argument in Protagoras and in the *Dissoi Logoi*⁸, was meant to discredit the soph-

⁶ Cf Schiappa 1991, pp. 40 sgg. The author argues, convincingly, that the word rhetoric may have been coined by Plato when he wrote his *Gorgias*, in 385 BC, on the model of other Platonic lexical creations ending in *-ikê*, such as *eristikê*, *dialektikê*, *antilogikê*: “it would be remarkable if *rhêtorikê* was *not* invented by Plato” (44). The *rhêtôr* on the other hand was long known as “a politician who put forth motions in court or the assembly” (*ib.*).

⁷ Some of the philological notes here resonate with the work of Chaim Perelman.

⁸ Cf. in Dillon & Gergel 2003, pp. 318-333 and Diels-Kranz in Sprague 2001, pp. 279-293 for this Doric document, probably a set of student notes, made up of arguments and counterarguments, which has been associated with Protagoras’ two-*logoi* thematic, and analyses by both Kerferd 1999 and Schiappa 1991, pp. 89-102.

ists because one of their claims was that of every argument there can be a counterargument. Here we must invoke hermeneutics even in the sense of To Translate in order to clarify how two different explanations work and impact on the community. The older translations have: “On every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other” (Michael O’Brian); or “On every question there are two speeches [*logoi*], which stand in opposition to one another” (Theodor Gomperz); or “there are two opposite arguments on every subject” (Guthrie). These have been called *subjectivist translations* and tend to make Protagoras merely a rhetorician (in the negative sense) advocating that debate is possible on any topic and anyone can contradict someone else. But a careful reconstruction of the actual usage of the two key words in the aphorism, namely *logos* and *pragmata*, would not give us “issue”, “question” or “subject”, terms which our speaking and conceptualizing habits of the past two or three centuries find appropriate, but which reflect a mentality that has accepted logical dichotomies and the subject-object opposition. Rather, by what Schiappa calls a Heraclitean interpretation of the passage, the word *pragmata* ought to be rendered with “things”, as in the locution “hand me that thing”, which is an object, or “it seemed the thing to do”, which is a deed or act (Schiappa 1991). *Pragma* meant “reality” to Protagoras, and Untersteiner appropriately keeps this mind when he translates: “In every *experience* there are two *logoi* in opposition to each other” (Untersteiner 1954, p. 19; my emphasis). The point is that Protagoras was talking *about* the world, *something outside of the control of the speaker*, the implication now being that whenever we speak about *how* we relate to reality, there are *at least* two different and implicitly opposing ways to account for or explain the experience (Hence the second part of the “man is the measure” citation above intercalated by Plato in his *Protagoras*). However, with the new rendition we can fairly attempt to attribute to the historical Protagoras the development and legitimate recasting of the Heraclitean theory of flux and the presumed unity of opposites, insofar as *both* are present whenever we assess “what is”. But the crucial question at this juncture is that in the attempt to understand the concrete world of interpersonal relations, there is a novel dimension or space opened up which makes the speaker aware that a way of mastering the world must be devised,

a preoccupation which in turn forces a distinction between the natural world and the world of culture. And this, which I consider the greatest contribution of the sophists in general and Protagoras in particular, can be done only through the *logos*, or better, and more realistically, by means of diverse *logoi*, that is, the plurality of possibilities afforded by language as used by a variety of speakers, an awareness which seemed to offer previously unthought possibilities⁹. And, inevitably, this will spill over into the question of knowledge, for Protagoras believed *knowledge is possible for man*.

Here we are confronted with new interpretive horizons. We learn that for the first time, knowledge is grounded in what can be established to be the case (Untersteiner 1954, pp. 53 sgg.), which requires precisely that two positions be weighted and compared, though owing to post-Aristotelean habits of framing questions, we seem to prefer the agonistic language of opposition and conflict. In essence we can see in Protagoras the telescoping of three distinct moments originally derived from presocratic reflection but developed in novel ways, which turn on our adopted metacritical term of To Explain. Adapting to our need an assessment by Julius Moravcsik, we have:

- a. explanation in terms of origin,
- b. explanation in terms of constituency or “stuff,” and
- c. explanation in terms of entities and attributes¹⁰.

We are not yet up to the theorization of the distinction between substance and qualities, which will be taken up in Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras*. Readers may recall the query, referred to above: is the wind that feels hot to me and cold to you the *same* wind? Are hot and cold properties of the wind, or are they possible effects which surge up when a sentient being experiences the wind? In Protagoras’ extant writings this conundrum has traditionally been understood reductively

⁹ This will make Plato’s *Cratylus* seem irretrievably old-fashioned as soon as it was conceived.

¹⁰ Cited in Schiappa 1991, p. 95. Moravcsik’s article, “Heraclitean Concepts and Explanations,” appeared in the anthology *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. K. Robb, 1983.

as suggesting some sort of individualist anarchy or an atomization of perspectives, yet what is being introduced here is a *third element* which speaks directly to the retranslation of “man is the measure” as “humanity is what constitutes the *metron*, the criterion, of our understanding”: the wind may feel hot to you and cold to me, but if the temperature is 100 degrees Fahrenheit there is a *probability* that we both will state that this is a good thing, whereas if we see a house on fire down the block we may both observe that wind at this moment is not a good thing. What lurks underneath is the future problem of the relationship between *meaning* and *reference*. In the second of the three stages of To Explain just mentioned, which concerns constituency or the *quid* of what is *out there*, meaning becomes focal in the “objective” or external recognition that there exists a *doxa* which turns out to confer certain (semantic, symbolic) values to language-use. It is in the sphere of this now necessarily “included third” element, and through it, that we can begin to speak of what is common knowledge, the basis of *sensus communis*, so we may communicate at all, relying on the embedded encyclopedia of a particular society. Reference will turn out to be a factor in establishing the validity of factual or uncontestable statements, and this will eventually split into separate formal scales of values extending between concrete and abstract, the empirical and the propositional. But before we elaborate on this, let us address two more topics which will allow us to set up the context for an assessment of where Discourse – not yet rhetoric! – stands between Method and Theory, and what kind of hermeneutics was possible in pre-Platonic times which may still be relevant to us. These are the Stronger versus Weaker argument, and the unnerving possibility of an entrenched relativism in human affairs.

Since the fourth century BC, the sophists have really been a thorn on the side of philosophy, science, history and literary studies¹¹. Maybe

¹¹ Writes Schiappa: “Protagoras has been called the first *positivist*, the first *humanist*, the forerunner of *pragmatism*, a *skeptic*, an *existentialist*, a *phenomenalist*, an *empiricist*, an early *utilitarian*, a *subjective relativist*, and an *objective relativist*. (15) He furnishes a detailed bibliography of all the scholars who wrote proving the validity of each of these attributive labels (19n), though in the balance it appears the

it is time to live with the discomfort and abandon all hope of ever coming up with tidy one-two answers to all problems, as the American mass media persistently tries to do. Reality is more complex and our addiction to categories and disciplinary boundaries often makes it difficult to comprehend how a thinker thinks and speaks and whose understanding require we mentally straddle several camps at once. The sophists made discourse the center of their teaching, more concerned with logos (but, again, in an entirely different ways than the Eleatics) than with rhetoric (because it was a later attribution), and Protagoras has been called the first to develop what later became known the Socratic method in education. This polyvalent yet structured approach required the invention of a metadiscourse, the earliest grammar:

Protagoras was said to have been the first to divide up discourse (logos), according to one account into wish, question, answer and command, according to another into narration, question, answer, command, reported narrative, wish and summons, while the sophist Alcidas proposed a different, four-fold, classification, into assertion, negation, question and address (DK 80A1, paragraphs 53-54). In addition Protagoras distinguished the three genders of names, as masculine, feminine and those referring to inanimate objects (DK 80A27; Kerferd 1999, p. 68).

It follows then that beyond correct diction (*orthoepeia*) and correctness of names (*orthotés onomatón*) what had to be taught ended up being a process of determining what words were *appropriate for a specific situation*, what something so named is in context, as opposed to something else bearing a different name, thus raising simultaneously issues of morphology, semantics and reference¹². Two developments ensue at this juncture. One is that, *on the way to* rhetorical formalization, four different types of discourses can be identified that coordinate and circumscribe a discussion, including a philosophical research.

greatest number can be grouped in two hybrid categories: Protagoras as a humanist and pragmaticist *ante litteram*, and Protagoras as an objective relativist and subjective relativist, these latter two related in a chiasmic manner.

¹² On the relevance of Protagoras as first grammarian see Glen Most, who sees in the emphasis on the new relation set up between name and thing the shaping of a protohermeneutics.

These are *eristic*, *antilogic*, *dialectic* and *elenchus*. By the time we get to the Platonic dialogues, they are pretty much stabilized, but at the time of the historical Socrates and before, their range and deployment still overlap. We have mentioned briefly the Two-*logoi* Argument. The accusation against the sophists was that in this fashion we could never say anything about anything, whereas what I think was being thematized in a yet fuzzy way is that language is one thing, and the phenomenal world another, and that it is reasonable, and possible, that about the same entity two different or contrasting things can be said. In fact this condition bothers only those, mainly Platonists (known in postmodern critique as essentialists) and religious types, who must ground the meaning of a sentence in some supratemporal Axiom or Form or God. Furthermore, the power of a *logos* thus unrestrained means that, the question of a Truth with a capital letter losing its purchase on humanity, anyone can make a case if he or she argues appropriately, that is, persuasively, with force, relying on the perceptible perennial mobility of things. This introduces, as we have been saying all along, the cruciality of *place*, which we can describe as the temporally marked co-occurrence, and appropriate coalescence, of *speech and situation of the existent*. The relativism which was so abhorrent to many who preferred single-answer, authoritarian solutions is in fact necessary to any conception of dialogue if we think of speakers in given real-world situation, or what we have called above Contexts and Horizons. This position is valid if we wish to continue to believe that at the time of Pericles there was indeed a youthful democracy in the offing in which, as in all democracies, everyone has a right to defend his or her own beliefs and, moreover, where and when that is impossible for some reason, *someone else can stand up for them*. What Plato and the great systematizer Aristotle did was consider the technique of anti-logic argument solely on the logical plane, not on existential or political grounds. The reason for this power move is obvious: anti-logic demonstrates that there is no innate coherence in phenomena, and that what is called the real is itself illogical: what the idealists and the realists of a succeeding generation cannot bear, the sophists accept and deal with. The sophists thus are faced with, and attempt to explain, a characteristic of language in action which predates or subtends heuris-

tics, and that is *eristics*, which is fundamentally an attitude or a desire to make one's reasons, or beliefs, stand against the inevitable counterargument¹³. In his translation of Protagoras' dictum, as reported by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1402a23), Lane Cooper asserts that what is detestable about the sophists is their penchant for "making the worse appear the better cause". This reductive, "perverse version" (Schiappa 1991, p. 103), reflects the tone of scores of other indictments of rhetoric which lent credence to the myth that "rhetorical speech" – as if there were any other kind! – is *not* concerned with the truth, the sophists as a school being no less than profiteers and so on¹⁴. The fact is that what is intended is that the rhetor will essay to make "one argument *stronger* than another" (Schiappa 1991, pp. 107-111; my emphasis), which is perfectly plausible and realistic in real-life situations, it having precious little to do with the concept of Truth. This of course is linked to another of Protagoras' problematic aphorisms, namely, that "it is impossible to contradict"¹⁵. Clearly one cannot say that A is B and A is not B *at the same time*. What is left out of a more correct evaluation are connexed markers or marginalia which always go with discourse,

¹³ Cf. on this Paolo Valesio: "every discourse in its functional aspect is based on a relatively limited set of mechanisms...that reduce every referential choice to a formal choice"; and since "it is never a question – or at least, never primarily and directly a question – of pointing to referents in the 'real' world, of distinguishing true from false, right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, and so forth", the choice is "only between what mechanisms to employ, and these mechanisms already condition every discourse since they are simplified representations of reality, inevitably and intrinsically slanted in a partisan direction". Thus these mechanisms may appear "to begnoseological, but in reality they are *eristic*: they give a positive or a negative connotation to the image of an entity they describe in the very moment in which they start describing". (*Novantiqua*, 21-2; emphasis in the original)

¹⁴ These include scholars of the rank of Keith Erickson, Alexander Sesonske, and W. K. C. Guthrie. See in particular Alexander Sesonske, "To make the weaker argument defeat the Stronger" in Erickson 1979, pp. 71-90 for an expression of contempt for the sophists no longer acceptable by the scholarship of the past twenty years.

¹⁵ There is no passage that can be attributed to Protagoras with certainty which says *ouk estin antilegein*, it is always reported by secondary sources, from Plato through Diogenes Laertius. Taken veridically as representative of a logical statement, Aristotle can quite easily dismiss it (cf. *Metaphysics* 1005b19-20 and 1024b34).

insofar as discourse is never pure, not even when it seeks, and believes it has achieved, the crystalline transparency of the ideal metalanguage (symbolic logic, mathematics, the periodic table, etc.). These elements, which clearly belong in our interpretive model, are: *time*, *situation*, *context*. For it is perfectly coherent, indeed “logical”, to assert that A is B at Time *t*₁, and A is not B at Time *t*₂. There is no antilogic understood in the post-Aristotelean sense, nor unethical implication in Protagoras¹⁶, just a pedagogic aim which salvages the background consideration that one argument, A, which wins over another, B, albeit about the same object, C, is still allowing the givenness and relevance of C to exist and be given a significant role, as it attributes relevance in the construction of meaning to something *outside* of the speakers, something undetermined by either A or B. It is Discourse which is allowing at the same time an exchange, even a confrontation, between two possible speakers without assuming that whoever wins or loses the argument is taking the world down with them. In other words, it is not, as it will be in Plato, a question that one argument, A, cannot co-exist with another if it resolved it is at once a negation, not-A, or if it is made to assert that A is B – think of the way Socrates leads Theaetetus to agree that perception = appearance = being! – but, rather, that in the exchange A will convince more people to believe in its understanding, or accept its own version, of a given episteme – *and* given a whole set of other factors that always surround the *mise-en-scene* of language, such as character, mood, time, place, audience, etc. – than perhaps B is able to do. One is not better – logically, ethically – than the other: one just carries the day. That is why we have assemblies. In a democracy, laws can be promulgated and ratified, but also revoked or abrogated. Those who violate them, have a chance to explain why, as Antiphon’s *Tetralogy* amply documents.

It is this phenomenalism which, despite being rooted in a commonsensical empirism, makes critics incapable of seeing the philo-

¹⁶ Dumont makes a case that in presocratic philosophy the discussion on morality is quite limited, and we shouldn’t retroject it onto the sophists. Similar position is implied in Olfray.

sophically positive aspects of Protagoras' relativism. Phenomena and Discourse inhabit two altogether different spheres, but are related in lived time. Phenomena occur and humans try to make sense of them. They recur to logos for that. But though logos is still an undifferentiated expressive plenum, yet it can be understood as capturing at least three different aspects of phenomena. Following but modifying Kerferd, we can therefore distinguish three traits for possible real-world application of a logos deprived of its mythico-mystical aura:

1. Metalinguistic: logos as grammar-cum-rhetoric, which includes, as we have seen, statements, arguments, descriptions and other *metaterms*;
2. Logic: mental processes such as thinking, reasoning, accounting and explaining;
3. Reference: the world as offering context and horizon, the dreaded variable referent out there, that *about which* we are able to speak, which includes abstract constructs such as principles, formulas, natural laws insofar as they are "regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process" (Kerferd 1999, p. 83).

Understood that in any given speech act all three aspects may and usually do co-exist, we must nonetheless attempt to isolate and posit a few corollaries:

- a. the very question of Being is either overcome or made irrelevant except as a *topic* or theme just like any other and subject to ideological scrutiny;
- b. the question of reality acquires a more compelling and for the moment ambiguous aspect;
- c. and the position of the speaker as now those of examiner and judge, invested with the task of determining what features of the real, of the surrounding phenomena, can be said to bear such and such a meaning even while they may exist factually or may not *de facto* exist at all but can legitimately be supposed to exist, such as unicorns and utopias.

We shall ignore Gorgia's radical nihilism, but will make room for Antiphon's psychological approach, which veers toward an elementary form of subjectivism. There is no "solution" nor "answer" to the conceptual fields thus opened up. The possible resolutions will occupy Plato and Aristotle their entire lives, the first by developing both,

method and theory (where the latter is understood as a superior unitary frame of reference on the basis of which the distinction between the truth of a statement and absolute truth can be made); and the second by working on the notions of quality and predication.

In Protagoras' world the one thing we can be certain of is that *there is* a language that permits exchange and reveals effects on the organization of the social world, on that *nous* which has now left concerns for the *phusis* to the next generation of medics, astronomers, natural scientists, philosophers. What Protagoras, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, and Antiphon did understand is the *relativity of positions in the social spectrum*, the uncomfortable truism that might makes right and that therefore institutions and education deserved attention, that eristic seems to haunt heuristic constructs, that virtue *can* be taught, that change, becoming, is an essential element in language and human understanding, that the probable ought to be taken into consideration in any evaluation of a course of action, including metaphysical and epistemological decisions, and finally that interpretation is forever swimming in a sea of possibilities.

From the standpoint of our initial premises, Theory and Method are both negotiable in terms of what value we ascribe to Discourse. In terms of our model, Individual and Society are clearly *ab initio* related and co-enabling, the Work lends itself to varying meaning on the basis of time, place and context, the responsibility of the Interpreter is less theological or metaphysically biased and more subject to the eventualities of social and political intercourse. But the criterion for interpretation now rests solely with homo humanus.

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