

The Soul of Sophistry

Plato's "Sophist" 226a9–231b9 revisited

“The soul, my friend, seems to have been misunderstood by almost everybody, what it happens to be and what power it has” – *Nomoi*, X, 892 a

I

It is a widespread opinion that the first part of the *Sophist* (216a – 237b) is primarily concerned with the problem of finding an adequate definition of the sophist. Within this passage six different definitions are given, each unsatisfactory, until a seventh description leads to the main problems of the dialogue, namely the questions concerning non-being, being, the intertwining of forms and the problem concerning false statements. Whereas the first five definitions are relatively unproblematic, the sixth is known to be troublesome – it has a peculiar resemblance to the Socrates-figure of the elenctic dialogues.

In the following I shall argue that the so-called sixth definition is not a definition of the sophist at all, but a methodological reflection which plays a central role in the overall composition of the dialogue. I shall further argue that this methodological reflection shows that Plato did not change his basic notion of philosophy in the late dialogues towards a more ‘technical’ concept, as is often maintained, but in a fundamental way stayed true to the Socratic, ‘existential’ impulse.

II

Most commentators have noted that the description of the sophist that runs from 226a9 to 231b9 in a way distinguishes itself from the preceding five descriptions. Not only is it longer than any of the others (it is almost as long as the five previous ones taken together), it also has a very close resemblance to the portrait of Socrates given in earlier dialogues¹. In light of this, F. M. Cornford positively identifies the “sophist of noble lineage” (*he genei gennaia sophistike*, 231b9) with Socrates, although he admits that it is hard to see why Plato would want to include a description of his teacher in the ‘catalogue’ of sophists he is presenting us with. According to Cornford the passage is a digression, an argument that has come in by a side wind²; in this dialogue it serves no other function than to remind the reader of Socrates, although it might have been Plato’s original intention to return to this description in a never completed dialogue, the *Philosopher*³. This reading, however, which Cornford shares with many other interpreters, is rather unsatisfying. As G. B. Kerferd rightfully has maintained, it doesn’t seem to be in accordance with the textual evidence that the passage should be a mere digression without any further function⁴. The sheer length of it (it comprises one tenth of the entire dialogue) should make one suspicious of such an interpretative strategy. I believe that any adequate account of the passage must at least give a plausible answer to two questions: 1) Who is it that Plato wants to portray in this passage, and 2) what function does the passage have in the overall ‘economy’ of the dialogue.

Kerferd tries to explain the passage as follows: the general opinion, namely that the ‘definition’ is a portrait of Socrates, is misguided. What Plato is giving us is exactly what the text implies, namely a portrait of a certain kind of sophist, albeit of a different kind than the preceding ones⁵. Plato is here focusing on elements in the sophistic movement that he found “extremely valuable [and] a necessary preliminary to his own philosophy”⁶. In this way Kerferd gets rid of the problem as to why Plato would want to include the Socratic praxis in the description of the sophistic movement, in so far as the praxis in question isn’t that of Socrates. Moreover, he is able to give a reasonable account of the function of the passage; it is a natural part of Plato’s attempt to sketch the essence of sophistry, and an important one as well, in so far as Plato here acknowledges his debt to the great Sophists.

There is, however, good reason to doubt Kerferd’s explanation. Even though it might seem difficult to give a good explanation of why Plato would want to include the Socratic elenchus in the ‘sophist catalogue’, the text quite clearly indicates that this is what he does. The person described at the end of our passage (230b-d), who practices a kind of education through cross-examination, uncovering other people’s false belief in their own wisdom and thereby leaving the soul of the examined purified, is clearly a person who practises philosophy in a way very similar to that of Socrates, and certainly not a sophist⁷. If this is so, the question as to why Plato included this description still remains⁸. I believe that an adequate answer to this question will show that the passage plays a vital role for the understanding of the dialogue as a whole, a fact that to my knowledge has been overseen in the literature so far. To show this, a minute reading of the entire passage is needed.

III

Prior to our passage the Eleatic Stranger (henceforth the ES) and Theaitetos have tried to define what a Sophist is; it has proven most laborious and they have in fact come to no less than five different descriptions of him. As the ES puts it, the sophist is so complex a beast that he cannot be caught with one hand (226a6-7), and Theaitetos heartily agrees; they should, he suggests, use both hands.

This implies that the foregoing ‘definitions’ have somehow been faulty or not carried out in the right manner. Let us pay close attention to the answer that the ES gives Theaitetos:

It is necessary [i.e. to use both hands], and it must be done according to your ability (kata dynamin), when we pursue this (toionde) trail of his. And tell me: we have names for household activities, don’t we?

The answer is more complex than it might appear. First of all it is not entirely clear which trail the ES is referring to, i.e. what “toionde” is meant to point out. It is normally understood so as to refer to the immediately following description, starting with the differentiation of household activities. In that case, we are here presented with a new description. This reading is the basis for the above mentioned controversy, namely whether the following, being a new description of the sophist, is to be identified with Socrates or not. Instead of this, I suggest that we read the “toionde” as referring to the foregoing description of the sophist, the sophist as an eristic, a “quarreller” (antilogikes). This finds support in the fact that when our passage seemingly ends in aporia (232a) and the ES and Theaitetos explicitly return to the question about the essence of sophistry, it is precisely this characteristic of being a “quarreller” that is followed up on (232b6).

We are now left with a second problem with the answer: why is the ES asking Theaitetos about the names of certain household activities? If I am right in the above, the point can’t be to begin a new description, beginning with a new ‘generic’ concept, as is often maintained. I suggest that what we are about to be given is a methodological clarification, that will both show why the

preceding five descriptions have failed to grasp the essence of sophistry, and how we should proceed in order to reach a satisfactory account. In other words, the ES is pointing out what dynamis is needed if one wants to pursue the trail of the sophist.

To make this reading plausible, I need to make a brief comment on two points concerning the preceding part of the dialogue. First, when the question about the essence of sophistry is first raised (216c2-217b4), it is not formulated as a normal *ti estin*-question (i.e. “what is a sophist?”). The question is how one is to distinguish (*diakrinei*, *diaroumenoi*, *diorisasthai*) a sophist, a philosopher and a statesman from one another. That means, I believe, that any ‘definition’ of sophistry must include a determination of how it differs from philosophy (and, for that matter, from statesmanship).

This leads to the second point. The problem with the preceding five descriptions is exactly that they haven’t been able to show any such differentiation. The five definitions are as follows: the sophist is 1) a hunter of rich, young men, 2) a wholesaler of learning about virtue, 3) a retailer of the same, 4) a retailer or wholesaler of this learning, which he himself has ‘produced’, and finally as 5) a debater. Now, none of these definitions can be said to tell us exactly how to distinguish sophistry from philosophy. To communicate knowledge about virtue, whether this is the knowledge of other people or knowledge that is ‘self made’, is in itself hardly reproachable, and in a way it can be said to be an essential part of Plato’s own philosophy. As for the last description, it can certainly be claimed that Socrates himself is a good example of a debating (*eristikē*) or even “quarrelsome” (*antilogikē*) philosopher⁹. These traits, therefore, can hardly be said to give us a satisfying criterion by which to differentiate sophist from philosopher. Again, the fact that the descriptions include the taking of money shouldn’t lead us to accept this as the distinguishing mark. Even if one should find it reproachable to take money for teaching, this doesn’t invalidate the content of what is being taught. In other words, if the sophist could claim to know exactly the same as the philosopher and the only difference between them were the fact that the sophist takes money for his teaching, the entire quarrel with the sophists that dominates Plato’s work would be meaningless.

I believe that it is this problem of finding a distinguishing mark that is being treated when the ES introduces the household activities. To begin with we are told that such activities can be divided into two groups:

- on the one hand we have filtering, straining, winnowing and separation
- on the other carding, spinning, weaving and such activities

All of these activities can be said to deal with division (*diairesis*, 226c3), and they can therefore be brought together under one generic name, namely the separating art (*technē diakritikē*).

The first five descriptions were all arrived at through a kind of division (often referred to as the *diairesis*-method in the literature) that focused on one generic term (hunt) and then proceeded to divide this art schematically, until supposedly satisfying ‘definitions’ of the sophist were reached. This procedure has not led to any satisfying results. When the first generic term, hunting, was introduced, the ES referred to it as an example (*paradeigma*, 218d9) that should guide them in their search for the sophist. Now, when the household activities are introduced, Theaitetos also refers to them as examples. I suggest that the function of this new example or paradigm is to show why the kind of divisions practiced in the first part of the dialogue weren’t able to show the difference between sophist and philosopher; it is thus not a new paradigm for the sophist, but rather for the ‘method’ by which he is to be defined.

This is reflected in the division of the separating art that follows. As the two groups of examples show, separation can be undertaken in two different ways: you can either separate like (*homoios*) from like, which is what i.e. spinning does, or you can separate worse (*cheiros*) from better (*beltios*), which is what i.e. straining does. This last kind of separation, which is identified as a kind of purification (*katharmosis*), is what the ES is after. The other kind, the one that separates like from like, is, I believe, the one that has been practiced so far¹⁰.

If this is correct, the problem the foregoing descriptions have been facing is that it is impossible to differentiate sophist from philosopher if one only pays attention to their ‘looks’; if the sophist appears to be a philosopher (intentionally or not), a division that focuses on likeness is simply not able to provide us with a ‘mesh’ that is fine enough to catch the sophist. To see the difference between the two it is necessary to divide according to a normative criterion.

IV

This reading, however, stands in direct contrast to a widespread opinion, namely that Plato changed his understanding of philosophy radically in the late dialogues towards a more technical or analytic conception. According to one very influential interpreter, Julius Stenzel, the main difference between the early dialogues and the late ones is a change in Plato’s ontological position; whereas the early dialogues are characterised by Plato’s ethical considerations and by the fact that the notion of ideas is intimately connected to the notion of aretē and the idea of the good¹¹, the latter dialogues are marked by a much more ‘scientific’ interest, where dialectical reasoning is no longer connected to the idea of the good, but instead can be seen as a logic completely freed from the earlier normative outlook¹². According to Stenzel, dialectic is for Plato in the later dialogues the same as the dividing method used in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, and this method is to be understood as a non-normative procedure that reveals the ontological foundation of the phenomenal world. Stenzel finds support for this interpretation in the passage 227b¹³.

This, I believe, is fundamentally wrong. The passage 227b can only be seen as support of Stenzel’s view if one neglects its context. Let us therefore look closely at it. When it has been established that there are two types of division, the ES suggests to Theaitetos that the one they classified as purification can be divided in two, but Theaitetos is not able to follow him. To explain what he means, the ES claims that the many forms of purification that deals with the body (sōmata) can be given one name. Bodily purification can roughly be divided into two major groups, the one concerned with living creatures, the other with artefacts. Concerning the purification of artefacts, the ES points out, there are many specialised ‘arts’ with many different names, some of which seem rather ridiculous. When Theaitetos replies that this is the case, the ES answers:

“Of course, Theaitetos. Only the method through speech (tē tōn logōn methodō) doesn’t care any more about washing with a sponge than about the intake of medicine, even though the one should do us the least, the other the greatest good through its cleansing. In order to acquire knowledge it investigates all arts to see whether they are of the same kind or not, seeing their value in relation to this, according to the likeness of each, and doesn’t hold any of them to be more ridiculous than another in so far as the are like.”

If one reads this passage by itself, it sure looks as if Stenzel is right. The ES clearly seems to be indicating that a philosopher should not care about the value of what he investigates; any part of reality is as good as any other¹⁴. This is a misunderstanding, I believe, that arises when one does not take into consideration the context of the passage. What the passage is meant to illustrate is that all kinds of bodily purification can be summarised under one name; it is only in this respect that they can all be said to be equal. That this is the point in question is confirmed in the last part of the answer:

“And so now, the very thing that you asked about, what name we should give to all these abilities (dynamais) that happens to purify bodies, either living (empsychon) or

dead (apsychon); it makes little difference to it (i.e. the method) which name would seem most fitting. It only has to separate (chōris) the cleansing of the soul in binding all the other kinds of cleansing together. It was the cleansing of thought (dianoia) that now had to be separated from all others, that is, if we understand what it (i.e. the method) wanted.”

We see, then, that the function of this passage is to point out the difference between bodily and psychic purification, which is exactly the opposite of showing that every part of reality is as good as any other; first of all, if one speaks of psychic purification it surely means that one acknowledges a normative differentiation between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ souls. Moreover, the difference between body and psyche can be said to be the main normative distinction in the so-called early dialogues, a distinction on which Plato’s moral reflections are founded. For Plato the psyche is a distinct part of reality, and, as will be made clear in the following, we will only be able to show the difference between philosophy and sophistry insofar as we acknowledge this.

That the acknowledgement of psyche as a distinct part of reality is important is textually supported by the fact that the ES compliments Theaitetos (pantōn kallista) for the first time since the beginning of the dialogue (218b6) when he declares that now he understands, what it is the ES wanted to make clear, namely that there are these two kinds of purification. Psyche has not been dealt with explicitly in any of the previous descriptions¹⁵.

V

What is meant by “psychic purification” is made clear when the ES next distinguishes between wickedness (ponēria) and virtue (arētē) in the soul; in so far as purification is the process of throwing out bad elements to leave the good ones behind, an activity that removes evil (kakia)¹⁶ from the soul is what we are looking for. Interestingly, we are now told that evil in the soul can be divided into two parts¹⁷:

- one is like bodily disease, i.e. something internal
- the other is like bodily ugliness, i.e. something external

The importance of this differentiation is emphasized by Theaitetos’ difficulty in understanding what the ES means. The ES’s explanation that sickness (nosos) in a way is a kind of dissension (stasis) does not help Theaitetos very much at first.

Therefore, dissension is now defined as a kind of corruption (diaphthoras) that arises from a disagreement (diphoras) between elements that by nature are of the same kind (syngenos)¹⁸. More precisely dissension in the soul can be seen as the disagreement between belief (doxa) and desires (epithymiai), spirit (thymos) and pleasures (hēdonai), and reason (logos) and pains (lypai) in people of a poor or simple (pflauros) condition.

At first glance, this appears to be a reflection of the dissension in the soul that we know from the Republic¹⁹. Nevertheless, the point in this passage seems to me to be different. If one stresses the fact that on each ‘level’ of the described conflict there is one function in the soul that is set over against a plurality of elements that can all be seen as functions of the soul as incarnate, one can say that the conflict here is about what ‘principle’ should be ruling *on each level*, not, as in the *Republic*, about whether reason, spirit or pleasure should be the ruling principle. The situation described here is then an utterly chaotic one, where every part of the soul is in conflict with every other. If this is true, the sickness in the soul can be described as a kind of madness²⁰; curing it does not make the person morally good, only morally accountable. It is worth to note that both ‘analogies’ used to describe this evil in the soul are, at least in the perspective of Antiquity, unnatural; sickness as well as dissension are results of a disturbed balance.

Let us now turn to the psychic malady that corresponds to ugliness. As we shall see, its clarification will give us new criterion by which to separate sophist from philosopher. If one has thought that the point of the differentiation between sickness and ugliness was to show that there are two kinds of psychic maladies, one serious and internal (i.e. sickness), the other external and thus superficial, one is in for a surprise. The ‘definition’ of psychic ugliness begins as follows:

“If things, that have motion (*hosa kinēseōs metaschonta*) and have set (*themena*) themselves a goal, which they are trying to hit, by every attempt to hit it misses it and are carried away: should we say that this is due to their symmetrical relation to one another or their asymmetrical relation? - Obviously due to asymmetry.”

The passage at first looks like a purely formal description of movement in general, and it is rarely commented on in the literature. However, when the ES next states that all ignorance (*agnoia*) is involuntary and goes on to explain what ignorance is, we see that this ‘principle of movement’ concerns the soul and is in fact an essential aspect of the platonic philosophy. If ignorance is to be understood as the soul’s movement towards truth (*alētheia*) where the soul wanders away (*paraphoros*) from it and thereby becomes unbalanced (*paraphrosynē*), the goal spoken of in the passage must be truth, and the thing possessing movement the soul. The passage is thus a description of the soul’s teleological relation to truth.

This leaves us with the question of which elements it is that stand in an asymmetrical relation. There are two possibilities: either the elements are soul and truth, or they are different ‘parts’ of the soul. As far as I can see, the text is underdetermined in this regard. If we remember, however, that the psychic purification was said to relate to the soul as thinking (*dianoia*, cf. 227c3), it seems reasonable to claim that the asymmetry must be between the soul and the goal, truth. Ignorance can then be seen as a mismatch between the (false) conception of truth that the soul has and truth itself. What the ES is claiming is then, I believe, that the soul in itself is in movement towards a goal: it has a natural ‘teleological’ structure directed towards attaining truth, but that this movement can misdirected due to a false conception of the truth. Because of this teleological structure a soul that misses its goal can be said to be unbalanced or besides itself (*paraphrosynē*)²¹.

Does this mean that the soul, according to the ES, under normal circumstances would reach its goal and that the movement which leads away from it is unnatural? No. It is worth emphasising that ignorance was said to be analogous to ugliness. Ugliness, contrary to sickness, is not unnatural. Whereas sickness is a disturbance which is cured through medical treatment, ugliness is only to be countered through gymnastic exercise (cf. 229a1). Medicine reestablishes a previous harmonious condition, whereas gymnastics creates a harmonious condition through training.

The clarification of the two kinds of psychic maladies are followed by a short summary (228d6-11) to which we should pay close attention:

One kind of evil (*kakia*) is called wickedness (*poneria*) by the many (*hypo tōn pollōn*), but is in reality a sickness

The other kind they (i.e. the many) call ignorance, though they are not willing to call it an evil if it only occurs in a person’s soul

This at first seems a bit odd. What does it mean that the many will not consider ignorance an evil as long as it only occurs in the soul? According to R. Bluck “only in the soul” must be understood to indicate that the ignorance is of such a kind that it does not result in any evident perversion²². I find this to be a plausible explanation, but that still does not explain what point there is in focusing on what the many will – and namely will not – consider an evil.

I believe that a reasonable explanation can be given if we take a brief look at the notion of *sofrosynē*, i.e. self-control, sound-mindedness or moderation, as it was used by the ‘ordinary’ Greek and by the platonic Socrates²³. Self-control was normally understood as being concerned with prescriptions for how to conduct oneself. To be “sound-minded” meant to know one’s limitations

and hence committing hubris by believing oneself all-powerful²⁴, whereas “moderation” was understood as meaning to be in control of one’s desires, restraining them and following reason. The traditional notion of *sōphrosynē* thus had two aspects. The one implicated a sort of self-knowledge, a knowledge concerning one’s ‘position’ or ‘place’: this can be seen as an intellectual aspect, the possession of which more or less amounted to a kind of cleverness. The other implicated a self-restraint that ensured temperance and sobriety: this can be seen as the moral aspect of this virtue²⁵. As Greek society changed with the new polis-ideal of the fifth century, moving away from the old aristocratic notions of virtue, *sōphrosynē* became a central virtue in so far as self-restraint was a necessary prerequisite if the polis was to survive.

It was generally held that any man of good upbringing could realise this virtue²⁶; it was not the result of any ‘technical’ training or education. In the Platonic corpus we find this view embodied in two of Socrates’ accusers, Meletos and Anytos. As P. M. Steiner expresses it, their basic view is that “every good citizen can make any other able to live a good life in the Polis, when the other is only willing to follow, and so it has always been”²⁷. The implication is that virtuous conduct is basically a question of imitating good people’s behaviour and of submitting oneself to the ruling norm. This can be seen as one of the main reasons why so many Greeks resented the sophistic movement: the sophists saw themselves as the educators of Greece, and they believed they had the ‘technical’ knowledge that according to them was required in order to make people virtuous. Their educational ‘program’ was thus a frontal attack on the “*kalakagathos*”-view, which in essence held that virtue is either something you are born with or something you simply ‘learn’ through imitation.

The Socratic view of virtue can be said to follow the gist of the sophistic view in this regard: Virtue is not simply something that comes from ‘good upbringing’, a noble spirit or a readiness to submit oneself to authority. To become virtuous requires intellectual work. One must take care of the soul (*epimeleia tēs psychēs*, cf. *Apo.* 30b1-2, and 29e) in order to become virtuous and this amounts to a demand for self-knowledge. In this sense Socrates can claim that his way of questioning people is a way of serving the God (Apollo) in so far as his activities force people to live in accordance with the Delphic commandment “know thyself” (*gnōthi sauton*, cf. *Apo.* 29 d ff., *Phdr.* 229e5-230a1). This demand for self-knowledge thus seems to be in accordance with the traditional notion of *sōphrosynē*. The kind of self-knowledge Socrates is asking for is, however, radically different from the traditionally prescribed “know your place and limitations”.

To Socrates self-knowledge, and thereby *sōphrosynē*, is only obtainable through a rather painful process: the Socratic elenctic method, also referred to as the “maieutic” method (cf. *Theait.* 149aff.), is namely a way to force people to realise their own lack of knowledge (cf. *Theait.* 210c4 ff., also *Apo.* 20d7). Under ideal circumstances (that is, with a good-natured interlocutor) this process will establish a self-reflective attitude, where the person examined will realise his own ignorance, thereby becoming modest and more open-minded for further education²⁸. This state of soul *sōphrōn*, modest and sound-minded, and it is a necessary precondition for any philosophical inquiry, as only a person who realises his own lack of wisdom will be eager to try to *obtain* wisdom (cf. *Symp.* 204a). The Socratic notion of *sōphrosyne* is thus in accordance with the ‘traditional’ notion in so far as both are connected with self-knowledge. It is, however, much more ‘intellectual’ or ‘existential’ (I leave the moral aspect of this virtue out here because a treatment of the relationship between *sōphrosyne* and Plato’s conception of harmony and *kosmos* would take us too far; the moral aspect of it is anyway not the dominating aspect in the Sophist). The realisation of one’s own ignorance that Socrates is requiring of his fellow citizens is not the same as the knowledge of where one belongs in society or *kosmos*.

With this in mind a natural reading of the above-mentioned summary presents itself. Whereas “the many” would regard a total lack of self-control (i.e. hybriatic madness) as moral wickedness, they would not acknowledge that ignorance, when it is only in the soul and thus not connected with any outward action or behaviour, can be described as a moral evil. The radical implication of the Socratic notion of virtue, namely that wickedness is not essentially connected to any external action but is basically a profound ignorance, is simply not in accordance with the popular view. On the

other hand, the ‘gentleman’ who knows how to behave and who would thus be regarded as virtuous by the many²⁹, could very well, according to Socrates, be a most wicked person.

This notion of *sōphrosynē* implies a certain anthropological thesis, namely that man isn’t good by nature (*fysis*), but must learn how to become virtuous: that is why the ideal Polis sketched in the Republic is in essence a “city of upbringing”³⁰. Furthermore, it is exactly because the Socratic notion of virtue is different from the ordinary Greek conception in so far as virtue for Socrates essentially is connected to the learning process that the soul undergoes, that Socrates for the ordinary Greek would appear to be just as any other sophist. To be able to differentiate philosophy as Socrates understood it from sophistry, it is necessary to know something about the human soul and how it is educated. Hence, the treatment of the “purification of souls” that is given in our passage can hardly be said to be a digression that serves no purpose in the dialogue as such. On the contrary, it serves a very important function in that it pinpoints the criterion by which philosophy and sophistry can be separated: namely the way in which the two affects the soul.

VI

How the purification of the soul affects its ‘patients’ is elaborated in the last part of our passage. Here it becomes clear beyond any doubt that the purification that treats the ‘ugliness’ of the soul is identical with the Socratic philosophy.

As there are two kinds of ‘art’ that treat the defects of the body, namely medical treatment and gymnastics, so, according to the ES, there are two kinds of treatment for the psyche. Hubris, injustice and cowardice, he claims, are best dealt with by the punishing art, which comes closest to justice (*dikē*). Interestingly, Theaitetos is not entirely convinced. He admits that it seems so, at least according to human opinion (*kata tēn anthrōpinēn doxan*). This is an indication that common opinion about justice does not necessarily coincide with the nature of justice, as Plato sees it: punishment is not the essence of justice, although it might be a necessary means to ensure the ‘taming’ of the punished person, as we know from the Republic (591). I shall not follow this any further, however, as the other kind of purification is much more important for the understanding of the Sophist. The goal of the purification that corresponds to gymnastics is to ‘remedy’ ignorance and it can therefore be called teaching (*didaskalikē*).

Now, to lack a positive knowledge (i.e. how to make a chair) is something entirely different from the ignorance that consists in not knowing that one doesn’t know. This last kind of ignorance, dubbed lack of culture or refinement (*amathia*) by the ES, is claimed to be the reason for all the mistakes we make when we think. Therefore, teaching can be divided into teaching the way craftsmen do (*dēmiourgikas didaskalias*) on the one hand, where positive knowledge is passed on to the student, and real education or cultivation (*paideia*) on the other.

The latter kind of teaching is the one that Diotima (Symp. 204a) describes as a necessary prerequisite for philosophical activity, as mentioned above, for the unlearned man (*hoi amatheis*) does not desire wisdom, exactly because his lack of culture consists in his belief in being beautiful, good³¹ and wise, although he isn’t. The person afflicted with this kind of ignorance is, therefore, unbearable (*chalepos*) to be in company with.

The clarification of the meaning of *paideia* means that we are beginning to see how one can differentiate between philosophy and sophistry. If sophists that claim they are educators they must live up to the standard that the ES is sketching here. In other words, in order to be true education, sophistry must have a certain influence on the soul of the pupil, establishing a condition that enables him to draw real benefit from any positive knowledge that he might obtain. If it does not have this effect, it can at best be said to be a kind of teaching corresponding to that performed by craftsmen, at worst (and this, of course, is the gist of the following part of the dialogue) it is a mere imitation of philosophical education.

This educational aspect of philosophy, as Socrates practises it, is different from education in the traditional sense, the kind of education practiced by the pater familias, namely admonition (vou-thetētikēn), as the ES points out. The problem about admonition is that it isn't really going to help a person who already believes himself knowledgeable: If one does not take the state of the 'pupil's' soul into consideration it is highly probable that the 'good advice' offered is not appreciated. It is exactly this problem that the Socratic kind of education addresses. The practitioners³² of this education, who believes that lack of education is always involuntary, have a special way to proceed when they seek to expel false belief (doxa) from their 'pupils'.

Such a procedure is an idealized version of the procedure in a Socratic dialogue. The practitioner of elenctic dialectic, according to the ES, questions his interlocutor about a subject matter that he believes to be knowledgeable about, and then gathers his wandering beliefs (planōmenōn tas doxas) about it together so that they are brought to stand next to one another. Thereby it becomes evident that the beliefs are in conflict about the same matter in the same respect. In this way the interlocutor is relieved from his false self-conception and becomes angry with himself and kinder towards others³³. This fits neatly with the picture Socrates gives of his way of questioning young men at the end of the dialogue that takes place the day before the Sophist, cf. Theait. 210c³⁴. Like Socrates the day before, Theaitetos now points out that the effect is to produce the best and most modest condition of mind (beltistē ... kai sōphronestatē tōn hexeōn) in the purified person.

That Plato does not hold this kind of purification to be simply as good as any other kind of purification, as Stenzel would have us believe, becomes clear when the ES declares that it is the most important one and that even the great king would have to be regarded as unclean, if he had not undergone it. The tone does indeed become eloquent towards the end, as Cornford says³⁵.

Whereas the last description given of the sophist before our passage, namely the sophist as an eristic, as an antilogikos, can be said to incorporate the activity of abstract negation, i.e. the negative ability to gainsay anything, the Socratic elenchus as described by the ES, on the other hand, can be said to be (at least ideally) a determinate negation, i.e. a negation that as a result gives the refuted person a broader horizon. This experience is the first step on the road to philosophical insight. Plato is thus not distancing himself from the Socratic inspiration; on the contrary he is showing why the Socratic demand for self-scrutiny is the necessary starting point for all philosophical activity³⁶. Moreover, the establishment of this self-reflective attitude, which includes an awareness of the 'self' as soul that needs 'tending' (epimeleia) is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the difference between philosophy and sophistry. Thus the Socratic philosophy in itself turns out to be the criterion we are looking for in order to 'define' the sophist.

VII

We can now turn to the end of the passage, the part wherein it is discussed whether this kind of purification should be called sophistry or not. The ES begins by declaring that he is hesitant to call the practitioners hereof sophists, but Theaitetos does not follow him:

“Tht: Why? - So that we should not ascribe them too much honour. - But what was just said resembles such a one pretty much!”

Now, it's been a matter of some dispute to whom it is the ES is afraid to attribute too much honour. Cornford believes, in accordance with Taylor and Burnet, that Plato – ironically – does not want to attribute to great an 'honour' to Socrates, because he is a philo-sopher, a wisdom lover, and not a sophist, a “wise” man³⁷. Kerferd, Trevaskis and Bluck on the other hand believes it to be the sophists that Plato does not want to ascribe too much honour; according to them there is no indication of the passage being ironic³⁸.

I believe Cornford is right that the persons referred to as “they” are the practitioners of the elenctic kind of education. There is, however, more at stake than mere ironic ‘playfulness’. The whole problem posed by Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue is how one should distinguish sophist from philosopher. As the five first descriptions of the sophist have made abundantly clear, it is not as easy to answer this question as we, being ‘heirs’ of Plato and Aristotle and their derogatory use of the word “sophist”, might believe. At the *dramatic level* of the text at least Theaitetos is not yet able to differentiate between philosopher and sophist. That, I believe, is the point of the confusion about whether they should call the practitioners sophists or not. Let us look at the first time the ES brings the sophist up for consideration. In the passage where the ES proposes that they should try to ‘discover’ what a sophist is in the same way that they sought out the angler, we read the following (221c8-d3):

“This was our first question, if we should claim (theteton) that the angler was a layman (idiōtēn) or had some kind of skill (technē) – yes – So now, shall we claim that he (the sophist; JKL) is a layman, Theaitetos, or that he is in all manners truly wise (alēthōs sophistēn)? – In no way a layman; then I understand what you say, that it is necessary that he is such a one (i.e. a truly wise man; JKL) having this name (onoma).”

This passage has two interesting points. First of all we may note that the two disjunctions in the ES’s questions are not the same – to be a skilled man is not necessarily the same as being a truly wise man (just think about Socrates’ critique of the craftsmen in the *Apology*). I believe this to be a deliberate ‘confusion’ and that a good part of the *Sophist* is intended to show why neither philosopher nor sophist can be seen as *technites*, though I cannot argue this point here. The second point in the passage, however, is important for the above mentioned problem: the reason that Theaitetos does not want to identify a sophist with a layman is that his *name* implies that he has a certain kind of knowledge, namely knowledge about ‘wise things’³⁹.

Now, at the beginning of the dialogue the ES emphasised that they had to carry out a minute investigation of the nature of the sophist because they only had a name in common (218c2). As I pointed out above, the five first ‘definitions’ of the sophist didn’t give us - or, on the dramatic level, Theaitetos - any criterion by which to differentiate between philosophy and sophistry. This implies that Theaitetos still holds a sophist to be a wise man. If this is true, a natural reading of the text could be that Theaitetos does not see why they shouldn’t call the practitioner of elenchus a sophist, because he regards him as a wise man.

I find support for this reading in the answer the ES gives Theaitetos when the latter claims that the described practitioner resembles a sophist. Again, however, the interpretation of the answer is a matter of controversy:

“The wolf also (resembles; JKL) the dog, the wildest and the tamest (animal; JKL). But it is necessary for the cautious man to show the greatest care concerning similarities (homoiotētas): it is a kind (genos) most hard to get a hold on (holisthēraton)”

Who is it that is supposed to resemble whom what is this analogy supposed to illustrate? According to Kerferd the purpose of the analogy, if read literally, has to be that the practitioner described is analogous to the wolf and the sophist to the dog⁴⁰. As he finds this absurd, he assumes (against Cornford, who identifies the dog with Socrates and the wolf with the sophist) that the only purpose of the analogy is to point out that one should be careful about similarities. One could argue this⁴¹. But when Kerferd claims that the reference to the cautious man is meant to be read as Plato’s criticism of Speusippos, because Speusippos wrongly divided all animals into “wild” and “tame”,

whereas Plato would regard wolf and dog as essentially the same, although they look different, his reading becomes rather farfetched. Trevaskis rightfully maintains that the only sensible reading of the passage is that dog and wolf are different, although they might look alike⁴². Moreover, it is hardly necessary to look for someone *outside* the dialogue to find a person who has a problem with the difference between wild and tame: in the first description of the sophist, when the ES suggested that he might be a hunter of tame animals, in so far as human beings could be described as tame (222b5ff.), Theaitetos had great difficulties in understanding what the ES meant⁴³. Consequently, the natural reading of the passage would be to warn Theaitetos (and thus the reader) not to draw conclusions based on mere similarity.

Now, if this reading is correct, it gives support to my general thesis, namely that the entire passage can be seen as a methodological reflection. The problem with the first five descriptions of the sophist is that they were all based on exterior characteristics whereby they might as well be said to be (possible) descriptions of a philosopher: at first sight, a sophist and a philosopher *do* look alike. Let us now look at the last section of the ES' warning: it is a kind most hard to get a hold on. This is normally understood as referring to "similarities". I find it much more plausible, however, that the reference is to the sophists, i.e. to the "such a one" from 231a4. The sophist is so hard to get hold of because he can appear as almost anything (his 'art' is very diverse, 223c, and he himself is like a wild animal that can't be caught with one hand, 226a). That is why "likeness" is a bad criterion to use if one wants to capture the sophist.

In spite of this warning the ES accepts that the practitioner of elenctic may be called a sophist, the reason he states being that he does not believe the dispute will be about small boundaries if only one is enough on ones guard. I admit that this last remark is not so easy to understand but I believe what is meant is that what *name* one should apply is of minor importance in comparison to real subject matter of the controversy, namely if there is a difference between the *practice* the philosopher and the sophist carries out respectively Therefore it is a little importance if one should *call* the practitioner of elenctic a sophist.

Now, as with the five preceding descriptions, the passage is summed up by the ES. When the summary reaches the division of education (paideutikē) a semicolon is introduced, then follows a new determination of the kind of education that Socrates executes: it is the kind of education that consist in a refutation of empty pseudo-wisdom (tēn mataion doxosophian). At an earlier passage in the dialogue the technē of the sophist was characterised as a pseudo-education (doxopaideutikēs; 223b3-4) whereby the sophist could make the impression of passing on virtue to his pupils. The Socratic education is thus the exact opposite, in that it removes this false wisdom⁴⁴. It is thus only natural that the ES calls this kind of 'sophist' "the sophist of noble lineage".

VIII

In this paper I have argued two things. First of all that the passage often described as the sixth definition of the sophist in reality is a methodological reflection, the purpose of which is to show us why the first five descriptions of the sophist have not been able to differentiate the sophist from the philosopher. Secondly that this methodological reflection shows us that Plato did not give up the 'Socratic impulse' in his late dialogues, as some commentators believes, but in a very fundamental way stayed true to the Socratic demand for 'taking care of the soul' (epimeleia tēs psychēs). As a matter of fact, this methodological reflection can be said to *be* the Socratic conception of philosophy, in so far as its purpose was to show that the difference between philosophy and sophistry must be sought in the effect the two have on the soul. It is only with this criterion in mind that the real difference between the two can be shown.

I believe that this new 'level' of inquiry is the basis for the rest of the dialogue. Philosophy is a certain kind of education and education is necessarily carried out through speech (logos, cf. 229d10). Philosophy is thus a certain kind of imitation of reality. The problem is that the sophist is

also an imitator albeit his imitation is (according to Plato) false. To show more specifically how the soul can be affected through speeches and what differentiates false from true speech is therefore a natural continuation of the argument in our passage. The central passages of the *Sophist* (241b-264b) is thus not an ontological treatise that has little or no connection with the question about philosophy and sophistry, but rather the complex unfolding of this initial question. To show how the complicated arguments in this part of the dialogue can be seen as centred round the question of the soul is, however, a task I cannot undertake here.

Notes

- 1 I follow the traditional ordering of the dialogues
- 2 This is Cornfords translation of "en tō nyn logō parapanenti" (231b8); F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, Dover Philosophical Classics, 2003
- 3 Cornford, 180-81
- 4 G. B. Kerferd: „Plato's Noble Art of Sophistry“, in *Classical Quarterly*, 1954, p. 84.
- 5 Kerferd, 88-89, Kerferd maintains this in his later book *The Sophistic Movement*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 4-5.
- 6 Kerferd, 85
- 7 J. R. Trevaskis: "The Sophist of Noble Lineage" in *Phronesis*, 1955, delivers a convincing critique of Kerferd's standpoint
- 8 Trevaskis, 48, acknowledges this as the main challenge that Kerferd poses. His own answer is, however, hardly any better than Cornford's. He believes that Plato's reason to include a description of Socrates among those of the Sophist was merely to point out the radical difference between them; this has the unfortunate consequence that the passage doesn't have a real function for the development of the dialogue as a whole. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 5, Cambridge University Press, 2001. pp. 128-29, is basically of the same opinion as Trevaskis.
- 9 Many commentators have noted that the last bipartition of the fifth description (the "babbling" who doesn't earn any money vs. the professional "controversialist") reminds us of Socrates, cf. Friedländer, *Platon III*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1960, 235 and Guthrie, 127-28
- 10 Cf. S. Rosen, *Plato's Sophist*, Yale University Press, 1983, 119-20, and S. Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful*, The University of Chicago Press, II, 92 for a similar view.
- 11 J. Stenzel, *Studien zur Entwicklung der Platonischen Dialektik*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Darmstadt, 1961 6 ff.
- 12 Stenzel, 38
- 13 Stenzel, 28

- 14 According to Stenzel, 27, the same view is expressed in the Parmenides when the old Parmenides rebukes the young Socrates for not accepting ideas for such things as mud and hair (Prm 130e). I do not believe that this is the point in the passage, but cannot argue the case in this paper.
- 15 Psyche is mentioned at 219e5-6 and 223e1-5. I cannot argue the point here but I believe these passages, together with 222b1-4 and 222d9-12, are meant to show that Theaitetos does not have an adequate understanding of the human soul. Until this problem is solved he will not be able to see the difference between sophist and philosopher.
- 16 The ES changes between ponēria and kakia, but I don't believe this terminological change has any philosophical relevance. Most likely it is an example of Plato's general dislike of fixed terminology, cf. Polit. 261e5-8
- 17 Some commentators have seen this as an indication of a change in Plato's conception of evil, so that he no longer believes in the "Socratic" identification of knowledge and virtue. I do not agree, as will become clear below.
- 18 I follow manuscripts B and T. The change in W to "ek tinos diaphoras diaphoras" seems to destroy the meaning in the analogy; if dissension in the soul should be a disagreement that arises from a corruption, we lack an explanation as to why this corruption arises. It is easier to understand that a corruption arises because the elements in the soul disagree. This is also in accordance with the specification we get at 228 b 2-4.
- 19 Rep. 435 ff.; both Cornford, 179, and Steiner, Psyche bei Platon, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1992, 188, emphasises the parallel.
- 20 In Greek drama and in Homer "nosos" often meant madness as opposed to being "sound of mind" (sōphrōn), cf. Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon and H. North, Sophrosyne, Cornell University Press, 1966, p. 61, n. 69
- 21 Para-phroneō means to be beside oneself whereas para-phrōn means to wander from reason. As I shall argue below, the goal of the psychic purification corresponding to gymnastics - i.e. the one that cures 'ugliness' - is to establish sōphrosynē.
- 22 Bluck, Plato's Sophist, Manchester University Press, 1975, 45
- 23 This is, of course, a simplified presentation. A detailed analysis of the development of the notion of sōphrosynē can be found in North
- 24 A good representative of this view is Herodot; cf. North, p. 28
- 25 Sōphrosyne (from sozō and phrēn) literally means "to save the reason", cf. Steiner, 25 and North, x
- 26 For the gentleman-ideal expressed in the Greek term kalokagathos (i.e. beautiful and good), see W. K. C. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy, vol. 3/1, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 25.
- 27 „Jeder gute Bürger kann jeden anderen tauglich machen für ein gutes Leben in der Polis, wenn einer nur folgen will und so sei es immer gewesen“ Steiner, 17, cf. Apo. 24d7 ff. and Meno 92e1 ff.. In Plato's presentation, Protagoras is likewise a spokesman for this view, Prot. 322c-323a.
- 28 A very good treatment of the relation between self-knowledge, Socratic questioning and sōphrosyne is Steiner, 17-47.
- 29 The common notion and its connection with mere appearance is criticised in Republic (389d-e) and Phaidon (82a)
- 30 Cf. Gadamer's article: "Platos Staat der Erziehung" in Gesammelte Werke, vol. 5

- 31 That many a Greek gentleman considered himself both beautiful and good (kalakagathos) without being it according to Socrates need hardly be mentioned.
- 32 That “the practitioners” are in plural is, according to Kerferd, 88, a proof that Plato can’t be thinking of Socratic katharsis. I agree with Trevaskis, 39, that this is a bad argument. On the contrary I find it most fitting that the plural is used, since, on the textual level, both the ES and Theaitetos commit themselves to this particular conception of education.
- 33 It is this aspect which makes the description an idealized one. As Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 5, 129 writes, the picture is “idealized because, unfortunately, in real life the adult and opinionated grew angry with him (i.e Socrates, JKL) instead of themselves”.
- 34 Socrates touches on this function of education both in the Charmides (155 e ff.) and the Protagoras (313 c ff.). That the ES can be seen as a proponent for this kind of education is textually supported by the way the ES addresses Theaitetos when he describes how this process can be seen as a preliminary to any other kind of learning, in so far as it removes any false beliefs that stand in the way for the right use of any gained insight: my dear boy (ō pai phile). This is like an echo of the way Socrates speaks to young people whom he takes an interest in
- 35 Cornford, 177
- 36 I cannot agree with Rosen that the function of the ES is to accuse Socrates of being a sophist due to a lack of positive doctrine, Rosen 24 & 126-29. Rosen follows the young Kierkegaards view of Sokrates as a “romantic ironic”.
- 37 Cornford, 180, n. 2
- 38 N. White in his translation of the Sophist follows this: “So that we don’t pay sophists too high an honour”
- 39 Cf. the answer Hippokrates gives to Socrates’ question, what a sophist is (Prtg. 312c5-7).
- 40 Kerferd, 85
- 41 Rosen, 104 and 131, in contrast, doesn’t see any problem in identifying Socrates with a wolf. Aside from the refreshing impertinence in his reading (most commentators have a tendency to see Socrates as a saint-like figure) there is in fact a good point in claiming that Socrates, as a political figure, is far more dangerous than the sophists, who anyway had a tendency to simply say what people wanted to hear.
- 42 Trevaskis, 38
- 43 The passage is rather amusing. The ES gives Theaitetos three propositions, 1) there no tame animals, 2) there are tame animals, but man isn’t tame or 3) man is tame but there no hunt for man, and Theaitetos, without hesitation, opts for a fourth possibility, namely that man is tame and that there is a special type of hunt for him. The types of hunt mentioned by the ES (robbery, slave-capturing, tyranny and warfare) immediately cast shadows of doubt over the tameness of mankind.
- 44 This is noted by Cornford, 193