

*Blackwell Companions  
to Philosophy*  
A Companion to  
Ancient Philosophy

*Edited by*  
Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin

# The Sophistic Movement

RACHEL BARNEY

## Introduction

"I know few characters in history who have been so hardly dealt with as these so-called Sophists", says an indignant George Grote in his monumental *History of Greece* (Grote, 1872, p. 43). The sophists he refers to are an influential group of teachers, intellectuals, and authors of fifth-century (BCE) Greece; the "so-called" registers a protest against what Grote argues is an unfairly pejorative label. Though associated with the words for wisdom (*sophia*) and wise man (*sophos*), and originally meaning simply an expert or teacher, *sophistēs* had begun to take on connotations of intellectual deviousness already in the fifth century – a trend powerfully reinforced by Plato's largely unsympathetic portrayal (cf. Guthrie, 1969, pp. 27–34). For our purposes, "the sophists" will simply pick out a group of fifth-century teachers and thinkers who were so labeled in antiquity, and whose practices and ideas seem to overlap in important ways; they include Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, and Antiphon, and, in some respects, Socrates.<sup>1</sup> Since our concern is with their ideas, the group will also include the unidentifiable authors of some kindred anonymous texts (the *Dissoi Logoi*, the *Anonymus Iamblichī*); and light can also be shed on sophistic ideas by passages in other contemporary authors such as Democritus, Euripides and Thucydides. In fact, there may be little point in trying to separate off sophistic ideas from the broader intellectual currents of their era – the "Fifth-Century Enlightenment", as it has suggestively been called. Perhaps that is the hallmark of a successful intellectual movement.

1. Besides Socrates, of whom more later, the most questionable name here is Gorgias, who was first and foremost a *rhētorikos*, a rhetorician or teacher of public speaking. I here assume that "rhetorician" and "sophist" are overlapping categories (cf. Plato, *Grg.* 465c, 520a–b). Both professed public speaking: the difference would perhaps be that a sophist taught rhetorical skills not simply as such, but in the context of theorizing about language, ethics, and politics. The division of labor might be epitomized by the fact that Gorgias served as an ambassador to Athens from his home city of Leontini (DK 82A4), while Protagoras drafted laws for the colony of Thurii (DK 80A1). On the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that Gorgias as a rhetorician lacked theoretical interests, in light of his *On Not Being* (discussed below). The strongest argument for excluding Gorgias is that in Plato's *Meno*, he is said *not* to undertake to make men virtuous, a standard feature of sophistic teaching, and to scoff at those who do (95c; but cf. DK 82A8b).

That the sophists have been deprived of their due is a truism oddly undisturbed by scholarly progress and the passage of time: it can be found in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1840) and in George Kerferd's *The Sophistic Movement* (1981a), which begins by asking why the significance of the sophists "has been so underrated up to now" (p. 3). The reason is perhaps that every defender of the sophists has sought to rehabilitate something different. For Grote, they are above all professional teachers, adding progressive insights to the mainstream morality of the day. Nietzsche, denouncing Grote's reading as a whitewash, presents them as subversive moral critics after his own heart: "they postulate the first truth that a 'morality-in-itself', a 'good-in-itself' do not exist, that it is a swindle to talk of 'truth' in this field" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 233). If there is any consensus to be found among their defenders (and their enemies as well), it is the constantly mutating view that *the sophists are our contemporaries* – whether that makes them Enlightenment rationalists, eminent Victorians, cynical *fin de siècle* perspectivists, analytic moral philosophers, or, most recently of all, postmodernists.<sup>2</sup>

This Rorschach quality is unlikely ever to disappear, for there are special barriers to an authentically historical grasp of the sophistic movement. One is the looming shadow of Plato. Plato depicts sophists memorably in a number of dialogues, including the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major* and *Minor*, *Republic* and *Euthydemus*, and he devotes the *Sophist* to defining the beast. But all of this testimony is problematic – not only because of Plato's notorious hostility to the sophists, which has sometimes been overstated by scholars (cf. Grote, 1872 and 1865; and Irwin, 1995), but because his evidence is inconsistent. For instance, the sophists of the *Sophist* and *Euthydemus* are specialists in question-and-answer refutation, those of the *Protagoras* in long speeches. Moreover, the dialogue form, with its reliance on individual characters, makes the extrapolation of general claims problematic in any case: if Hippias is consistently represented by Plato as a nitwit, does that tell us something about the sophistic movement, or just about Hippias? Is Callicles in the *Gorgias* a canonical representative of sophistic thought, as Nietzsche clearly assumed; or is he just a feral (and quite possibly fictional) politician who happens to be friends with Gorgias?

Our other evidence for sophistic thought is scattered and uneven. A few brief but complete sophistic texts have survived – though alas nothing by Protagoras, the senior and most celebrated member of the profession – including several by Gorgias. So have a number of informative "fragments": the term is standardly used for any reliable-looking quotation found in a later author, but we also have some actual scraps of papyrus containing substantial passages from Antiphon's book *On Truth*. However, much of this direct evidence is obscure or hard to interpret; and taken as a whole, our evidence raises two central puzzles. One is what I will call the problem of *theory*: to what extent were the sophists engaged in offering what would later be termed *dogmata*, i.e., doctrines or theories? Scholars have often spoken of "sophistic ethics", taking the sophists to have offered overlapping if not identical positions on questions such as relativism, the nature of justice and whether virtue can be taught. But the

2. The first three are somewhat caricatured references to the readings of Hegel, Grote, and Nietzsche respectively. For the sophists as (again to oversimplify) analytic moral philosophers, see Barnes (1982); for postmodernists, Fish (1989) and Jarratt (1991).

attribution of *dogmata* to the sophists can be a slippery business. For instance, when Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* claims that "Justice is the advantage of the stronger" (339a), is he giving a revisionist definition of justice, or merely debunking justice as commonly understood? And in any case, does he mean what he says? Pressed by Socrates, he responds, "What difference does it make to you, whether I believe it or not? Aren't you refuting my account?" (*Rep.* I, 349a).<sup>3</sup> The sophist's claims are, it seems, offered not to express conviction, but for the sake of professional display – and for money (337d). Of our surviving texts, Gorgias' *On Not Being* presents a deadpan systematic argument that nothing exists; the anonymous *Dissoi Logoi* argues on both sides of various topics. One way or another, a startlingly high proportion of sophistic texts elude confident interpretation as *dogmata*: I will consider later on what we might make of this fact.

A second puzzle raised by our evidence is the question of *unity*. Did the sophists really share a common intellectual project, with distinctive projects and positions? The shared label "sophist" is no guarantee of a common nature. Recent scholarship has largely followed Grote in insisting on the diversity of sophistic thought; and Richard Bett has argued that the commonality revealed by our texts is really just one of attitude: "What unites the Sophists in the area of ethics, I suggest, is not so much any particular views they hold . . . but rather a certain type of attitude or approach. . . . This attitude or approach we might call 'naturalistic', or perhaps, more ambitiously, 'social scientific'" (2002, pp. 254–5; cf. Guthrie's "empiricism," 1969, pp. 8–9, 47). The sophists were collectively interested in the human and social realm; their ideas were supported by observation of the phenomena and by rational argument, rather than tradition, inspiration or authority; but in content those ideas were enormously diverse.

I will try to make the case for two somewhat stronger kinds of unity. First, sophistic thought is marked not merely by a common intellectual approach but by a shared agenda or set of problems. Whether the topic is justice, religion, or grammar, the sophists are concerned to disentangle the contribution of the subjective and the socially constructed from the natural or objective, and to work out the implications of that analysis. At the same time – and this is the second point – this shared project does not entail shared *dogmata*; if anything, sophistic philosophizing tends to mean philosophizing in a critical, self-undermining, or otherwise less than dogmatic way.

After a brief sketch of sophistic interests and methods, I will discuss three central and overlapping themes: the distinction between nature and convention, particularly as applied to justice; variability, relativity, and qualified truth in ethics; and the relation of language to reality. This will not add up to a comprehensive overview of sophistic thought, and readers are referred to the longer treatments of Kerferd (1981a, b) and Guthrie (1969) for fuller and more historically detailed accounts. Readers are also warned that few if any general claims about the sophists, or readings of particular sophistic texts, are uncontroversial, and I cannot here document all the points at which scholarly opinion differs. My aim is merely to bring out the range and liveliness of sophistic debate, and the complexities of some still-underappreciated texts.

3. Quotations from Plato are from the versions by various translators in Cooper (1997), often with some revisions.

## Sophistic Thought: Scope and Methods

A standard definition of a sophist, both in antiquity and among modern scholars, is as a professional teacher of virtue or excellence (*aretē*) (cf. Plato, *Ap.* 19d–20c); but just what this involves is not so obvious. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Protagoras claims to teach "good judgment" and the successful management of both domestic and public affairs (318e–319a). Meno, apparently following Gorgias, says in Plato's *Meno* that a man's virtue is to manage public affairs so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies (71e); or, in sum, "to rule over people" (73c–d). And Meno insists that the virtue of a woman is different, as is that of a boy or slave. So *aretē* evidently consists in the skills and aptitudes that enable someone to fulfill his or her social role. This "functional" conception of virtue is a deeply traditional one: the *aretē* of the Homeric warrior consisted in traits such as strength, courage, and intelligence, which made a man excel in deliberations and on the battlefield. In the later world of democratic Athens, where the primary arena of competition for ambitious gentlemen is not war but politics, *aretē* functionally understood comes to consist above all in the art of public speaking. For it is the ability to persuade one's fellow citizens, gathered *en masse* in the Assembly or courts, that enables a man to successfully wield political power.

But this is only one strand of the complex moral tradition which the sophists inherit. Even in Homer's world, self-restraint, reverence, and an acceptance of one's limitations are important norms of character; and Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the other pillar of early Greek moral thought, centers on the virtue of justice, understood in terms of honesty, fair dealing, and refraining from what belongs to others. Much of the liveliness of fifth- and fourth-century moral thought comes from the attempts of various Greek thinkers to reconcile or negotiate between the functional and the Hesiodic conceptions of virtue (cf. Adkins, 1960). The elite political skills taught by the sophists generally sound much more like the former; but whether the claims of the Hesiodic virtues could be denied or reinterpreted was a question they could not afford to ignore.

The other ingredients of a sophistic education were variable. Traditionally, the sophists have been seen as specialists in ethics and politics, contrasted with the "pre-Socratic" philosophers who investigated the nature and origins of the cosmos. But the evidence against this stereotyped contrast is strong. Sophists like Antiphon and Hippias had views on mathematics and natural science, while "pre-Socratics" like Democritus wrote works of ethics and literary criticism (cf. Kerferd, 1981a, pp. 38–41). Plato's Protagoras snipes at competitors like Hippias for dragging young men "into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school," including arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music (*Prt.* 318e). So sophistic interests were broad, and curriculum design a matter of debate. Diversity was also characteristic of sophistic intellectual practices, and breadth itself was highly valued. Hippias was a famous polymath (Plato, *Hp. Ma.* 285b–286b, *Hp. Mi.* 368b–d), and Gorgias boasted of being able to answer any question impromptu (Plato, *Grg.* 447d–448a). Plato's dialogues present vivid depictions of the sophists as traveling polymaths and pundits, earning their keep not only with private lessons but through public displays of memorization and moralistic oratory, brilliant flights of literary interpretation, and combative refutations at house parties.

Three terms recur in our sources in relation to sophistic discourse: eristic, *makrologia*, and *antilogikē*.<sup>4</sup> Eristic (from *erizein*, “strive” or “quarrel”) is a pejorative term for what we might more neutrally call sophistic refutation. Its practice is depicted in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, and is central to his definition of the profession in the *Sophist* (268b–d); it is also analyzed by Aristotle in his *Sophistical Refutations*. It is a sort of intellectual martial art for two players, who take on well-defined roles of questioner and respondent. The respondent affirms some thesis; the questioner attempts to lead him into affirming its contradictory. Fallacious inferences (or at any rate what we, and Aristotle, would regard as such) run rampant, and the questioner sometimes uses tactics to which the respondent objects (*Euthd.* 295bff., *Prt.* 331c–e, 334e–335a) – eristic seems to have been one of those games in which wrangling about the rules is part of the fun. For Plato, the orientation of eristic to victory at all costs, rather than the truth, is morally repellent, and represents a deep division between Socrates and the sophists: but as a practice of question-and-answer refutation through contradiction, eristic is formally indistinguishable from the *elenchus*, Socrates’ standard mode of argument in Plato’s early dialogues. According to Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras was the first to introduce “Socratic-style” argument (DK 80A1); and Plato’s *Protagoras* shows Protagoras producing an elegant *elenchus* of the younger Socrates (339b–e). So Socrates’ *elenchus* was likely an adaptation of sophistic, and perhaps specifically Protagorean practice. To modern readers, ancient references to Socrates as a sophist seem bizarre, given Plato’s insistence on his distinctive moral mission, his commitment to the truth, and his refusal to teach for money.<sup>5</sup> But like Protagoras and the others, Socrates occupied himself by discoursing on virtue and practising the art of refutation; his distinctive features might well have been less visible to his fellow citizens. The extent to which the sophists might, like Socrates, have used their techniques of refutation for serious philosophical purposes is now impossible to gauge.

*Makrologia*, which simply means speaking at length, is said by Socrates in the *Protagoras* to be distinctive of Protagoras and beyond his own capacities (334d–336b). In fact the *Protagoras* itself shows Socrates making a long speech on Simonides, but certainly the set-piece speech is a characteristic sophistic mode. Examples which have survived would include Prodicus’ *Choice of Heracles* (DK 84B2), Protagoras’ “Great Speech” in the *Protagoras*, and Gorgias’ *Helen*, *Defense of Palamedes*, *On Not Being* and *Funeral Oration*. Gorgias’ texts are usually classed as rhetorical *epideixis* or display pieces; whether and how we should distinguish between sophistic *makrologia* and rhetorical *epideixis* is unclear.

The third genre, *antilogikē*, “opposed argument,” is one with deep roots in Greek culture. Antithetical arguments can be found in the *Iliad* and in Greek tragedy; they were of course standard in the Assembly and law courts, and are satirized by Aristophanes – most notably in his *Clouds*, in the combat of the Just and the Unjust Speech. As a sophistic speciality, *antilogikē* is particularly associated with Protagoras,

4. The meanings of these terms are all contested; I carve up the sophistic genres somewhat differently from either Kerferd (1981a, pp. 59–67) or Nehamas (1990).

5. Socrates is of course depicted as sophist (and *phusikos*) *par excellence* in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (see Morrison, SOCRATES, in this volume); cf. the orator Aeschines (*In Tim.* 173) and Kerferd (1981a, pp. 55–7).

who was said to have written books of *Antilogiai* (DK 80A1) and to have been the first to claim that on every question there are two arguments opposed to each other (DK 80B6; cf. *Sph.* 232d–e). The *Dissoi Logoi* (“Double Arguments”) puts into practice this Protagorean principle; so do the *Tetralogies* of Antiphon, which argue both sides of three hypothetical legal cases. As with eristic, much remains to be understood about how “antilogic” is supposed to function: in particular, whether it should be seen as purely a gymnastic exercise or something more, and whether it depends on particular views about the nature of truth. A further question is whether we should view *antilogikē* as a genre in itself or as something which might take a number of forms. Eristic refutation performed on both sides of a question would presumably count as *antilogikē*; so perhaps should *epideixeis* such as Gorgias’ *Helen* and *On Not Being*, defenses of the patently indefensible for which the obvious other side of the case can be left unspoken.

These different sophistic practices have some common features. All are verbal in nature, and involve prose rather than verse; most (and most obviously eristic) seem to have been originally and primarily oral rather than written genres. All are explicitly or implicitly agonistic or competitive. Scholars since Burckhardt and Nietzsche have noted the pervasively agonistic style of ancient Greek culture: the sophists belonged to a world in which intellectuals, poets, and politicians were as much competitive public performers as the Olympic athletes (cf. Guthrie, 1969, pp. 41–4). Finally, and in part as a result of this agonistic stance, the characteristic sophistic genres all have an uneasy relation to truth and belief. *Antilogikē* and eristic are both indifferent to the content of the thesis under discussion. Long speeches *can* express conviction, of course, but the recognition of *makrologia* or *epideixis* as a mode of competitive display should warn us against any assumption that sophistic speeches will do so. This is one of the reasons it will be easier to extract themes and arguments than *dogmata* from sophistic texts.

## Justice, Nature, and Convention

Our most important surviving text for understanding sophistic moral thought is probably Antiphon’s *On Truth*. Three substantial papyrus fragments have come down to us, each making an important argument; their order, unfortunately, cannot be known.<sup>6</sup>

One brief fragment claims that ethnocentric bias misleads us: “[the laws of nearby communities] we know and respect, but those of communities far away we neither know nor respect. In this we have become barbarous to each other, when by nature (*phusis*) we are all at birth in all respects equally adapted to being either barbarians or Greeks” (F44(b), II.1–15): Greek and barbarian (i.e., literally, non-Greek speaker,

6. See Pendrick (2002, pp. 315–18). Antiphon’s fragments are cited by Pendrick’s numeration. Translations are based on both Pendrick and Gagarin and Woodruff (1995), with revisions; translations of other sophistic texts are from the latter, with revisions, unless otherwise noted. There has been much scholarly debate over how many Antiphons there were, and in particular whether the sophist who wrote *On Truth* is to be identified with the oligarchic Athenian politician Antiphon of Rhamnus: see Pendrick (2002, pp. 1–26).

though the term is often pejorative) share a universal nature: "For we all breathe the air through our mouth and nostrils, and we laugh when we are pleased and weep when we are pained" (II.27–III.3). Note the apparently self-undermining form of the argument: the accusation that "we have become barbarous" relies on the pejorative connotations of "barbarian" which the argument itself undermines. Presumably the point is to startle us into reflection on how, if at all, the term "barbarian" *should* be used.

This contrast between the given and the artificial receives fuller development in the longest fragment of *On Truth* (F44(a)), which applies it to justice. The passage begins with an affirmation of conventionalism about justice (not itself an uncommon or threatening view, cf. Socrates in Xenophon *Mem.* 4.4.12). "Thus justice (*dikaiosunē*) is not violating the rules (*nomima*) of the city in which one is a citizen" (F44(a), I.5–11). The upshot immediately follows: "Thus a person would best use justice to his own advantage if he considered the laws (*nomoi*) important when witnesses are present, but the consequences of nature (*phusis*) important in the absence of witnesses" (I.12–23). For, Antiphon explains, legal requirements are merely a matter of agreement, and violations of them may go unpunished; "but the requirements of nature are necessary" (I.25–27), and actions against them are self-defeating. And the two are not just distinct but opposed: "most things that are just according to law are inimical to nature" (II.26–30). The things advantageous to nature turn out to include life itself and pleasure; the natural, equated as in F44(b) with the physiologically and psychologically given, points us towards a simple hedonism.

The conception of human nature here assumed can plausibly be filled out from some kindred sources, including Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon in Plato, and certain speeches in Thucydides.<sup>7</sup> Human nature is egoistic and *pleonectic*: we by nature strive to have more (*pleon echein*) of the good, understood as wealth and power and the pleasures they can provide. Natural human behavior is thus red in tooth and claw; but since unbridled *pleonexia* would do most of us more harm than good, each community has adopted *nomoi*, laws and moral conventions, to restrain and punish it. (*Nomos* means both "law" and social and moral "convention"; indeed, as we will see, in some texts it extends more widely, to the whole realm of human subjectivity.) This social contract is construed in various ways: as a self-interested compact by all parties (Glaucon), a conspiracy of the many against the naturally dominant few (Callicles), and a self-serving imposition by the regime in power (Thrasymachus). In any case the upshot is often an "immoralist" stance: the demands of *nomos* and conventional justice are something to be seen through, and anyone who can violate them with impunity has no reason not to. As the Unjust Speech says in Aristophanes' *Clouds*: "Keeping company with me, use [your] nature, leap, laugh, consider nothing shameful!" (1077–1078).

However, Antiphon's discussion of justice does not end here; and in F44(c), he argues *against* the conventionalist understanding of justice so far assumed. Suppose, Antiphon says, that I am called as a witness in a legal dispute; according to convention, for me to give true testimony is just. But suppose that by testifying truly I will

7. Plato, *Grg.* 483a–484c, *Rep.* I, 338c–348d and II, 357b–362c, Thucydides I.75–77, V.84–114.



harm someone who has not harmed me. Conventional justice also includes the notion that for me to harm someone who has never done me harm is *unjust*, which results in a contradiction: these two things “cannot both be just” (II.17–21). This is a classic *elenchus*, and, as when used by Socrates, it effectively refutes a claim to authority: the conventional understanding of justice cannot be right. This apparent inconsistency between the two fragments is puzzling,<sup>8</sup> and perhaps we should simply read Antiphon’s discussion of justice as an exercise in *antilogikē*; but it seems more plausible to read both fragments as objections to conventionalism. In that case the point of F44(a) too must be, implicitly, that conventional justice does not deserve the name of justice at all – perhaps because it is essential to the concept of justice that it is worth pursuing.

On this reading, all three arguments have some resemblance to another important fragment of Antiphon (also from *On Truth*), reported by Aristotle in his *Physics*. This is a bizarre scientific thought-experiment: “if one were to bury a bed and the putrefaction were to get the power to send up a shoot, it would not be a bed but wood, since the one – the arrangement in accordance with convention (*kata nomon*) and the artistic form – exists accidentally, whereas the essence is that which persists, continuously undergoing these modifications” (*Phys.* II.1, 193a12–17 = F15(b), Pendrick trans.). The Greek word “nature” (*phusis*) is closely connected to the verb “grow” (*phuō*): the sophists and pre-Socratic natural scientists share a deep assumption, rooted in the Greek language itself, that the nature of something is revealed in its origins and generative powers. That nature consists, Antiphon claims, not in the superficial identity established by human agency and represented in the names we use for things, but in the underlying material on which we act.<sup>9</sup> As this odd argument brings out, the nature/convention dichotomy has its origins in the search of pre-Socratic natural scientists for the basic principles of the cosmos.<sup>10</sup> In particular, it presses on a contrast which pervades pre-Socratic thought from Parmenides onward, between a misleading, mind-dependent realm of appearance and enduring, underlying realities.

So it is perhaps no surprise that the contrast between nature and convention comes to be applied in a wide range of contexts. Democritus, for instance, is said to have argued that names are a matter of convention rather than nature (DK 68B26: cf. the section on “Names and things” below); and his atomism was summed up in the slogan that perceptual qualities are merely by convention (*nomōi*: i.e., presumably, subjective or mind-dependent), while only atoms and the void are real (DK 68B9, B125 etc.).<sup>11</sup> But the principal arena of the contrast was in ethics and politics. Indeed, the appeal to nature as a source for ethical norms is undoubtedly the sophistic movement’s most powerful legacy to philosophy. That appeal took various forms. For Antiphon, “nature” seems to mean human nature, represented by our common physiology. In the *Gorgias*

8. Cf. Furley (1981); Pendrick is agnostic (2002, pp. 368–9), and Bett relegates F44(c) to a footnote (2002, p. 250 n. 28).

9. Cf. Morrison (1963, pp. 40–6).

10. Indeed, in his attack on irreligion in Book X of the *Laws*, Plato treats atheism, the *nomos/phusis* distinction as applied to values, and pre-Socratic-style naturalistic explanations of the origins of the cosmos as a single, threatening intellectual position (885c–907d).

11. Quotations from “pre-Socratic” philosophers are by Richard McKirahan in Curd (1996), with revisions.

Callicles draws on animal behavior and the aggression of states to argue that there is a “natural justice” according to which the strong should have more than the weak (*Grg.* 483a–484c; cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1427–1429). Socrates’ response is not to reject the appeal to nature but to redefine it: what really characterizes the natural world, and invites our emulation, is “partnership and friendship, orderliness, self-control, and justice,” particularly as displayed in the orderly motions of the heavenly bodies (*Grg.* 508a, cf. *Ti.* 47a–e). So Callicles errs not because there is anything invalid about deriving ethical norms from the observation of nature (as David Hume would later argue), but because he has got nature wrong; and later philosophers such as the Stoics and Epicureans also find fuel for their conceptions of the good in competing appeals to the observation of nature.

The question raised by these analyses is how the diagnosis of something as conventional should affect our attitude to it. When Democritus says that color is a matter of convention, his agenda seems to be eliminativist: no such thing really exists, and color-phenomena can be reduced to the interactions of colorless atoms and void. At the other end of the spectrum, that language is conventional hardly seems to make it unreal or invalid. An interesting case study is provided by two surviving sophistic texts on the origins of religion.<sup>12</sup> According to a fragment of the play *Sisyphus*, belief in the gods originated as a clever device to reinforce the social order.<sup>13</sup> At first, human life, like that of animals, was ruled by force; then men enacted laws and punishments, establishing justice “as a tyrant (*tyrannos*)” (DK 88B25.6). But this could not prevent wrongdoing in secret: so “some shrewd, intelligent man invented fear of the gods for mortals, so that the wicked would have something to fear even if their deeds or words or thoughts were secret” (B25.12–15). By contrast, a fragment of Prodicus asserts a different relation between worship and social utility: “The sun and the moon and rivers and springs and in general all things that benefit our lives were recognized as (*enomisan*) gods by the ancients because of their benefits. . . . for this reason bread was worshipped as (*nomisthēnai*) Demeter, wine as Dionysus, water as Poseidon, fire as Hephaestus, and so on with everything of service to us” (DK 84B5).<sup>14</sup>

It is easy to see from these texts both why some sophists came to be accused of atheism (as did the pre-Socratic natural scientists, cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 365ff. and Plato, *Ap.* 18b–d), and why some at least might have disputed the charge.<sup>15</sup> Prodicus

12. Sophistic analysis of conventions often takes the form of storytelling about the origins of society, following the traditional Greek genre of “anthropology”: see Cole (1990), and still, Lovejoy and Boas (1935).

13. The *Sisyphus* fragment is attributed to both Critias and Euripides: see Bett (2002, p. 251 n. 30).

14. Cf. also Philodemus *de Pietate*, which adds a second stage in which human inventors of beneficial arts were deified (DK 84B5 = Philod. *De Piet.* PHerc. 1428 col. 3.12–13 Henrichs).

15. Protagoras, interestingly, was evidently a thoroughgoing agnostic: “Concerning the gods, I am not in a position to know either that they exist or that they do not, nor can I know what they look like, for many things prevent our knowing – the subject is obscure and human life is short” (DK 80B4). Just how this relates to his thesis that “Man is the measure of all things,” and how if at all it should inform our reading of the myth in the “Great Speech,” are difficult questions.

could argue that his explanation presents a legitimate basis for an enlightened worship, freed from primitive anthropomorphism. On the other hand, this might be seen by traditionalists as little better than atheism; and Prodicus' account could also be read as, like the *Sisyphus*, explaining how men came to worship non-existent beings. As for the *Sisyphus*, its import is paradoxical, for it points out the social utility of religion in a way which must nullify the hold of religion on its audience.

So the revelation that something is a matter of convention can support a wide range of responses. Returning to the central case of justice, Antiphon's diagnosis of justice contrasts with that of an anonymous but almost certainly contemporary text, the *Anonymus Iamblichii*. The *Anon. Iamb.* argues that human beings are by nature less than self-sufficient, and we cannot live together without law: "because of all these constraints law and justice are made king (*ton te nomon kai to dikaion embasileuein*) among human beings, and will never be displaced; for their strength is ingrained by nature (*phusei*)" (6.1). So, paradoxically, nothing is more natural to us than the moral conventions which make possible civil society. A similar response is expressed, as I read it, in the "Great Speech" of Protagoras in the *Protagoras* (320c–328d).<sup>16</sup> The "Great Speech" depicts in mythic terms the claim, presented as the key assumption behind Athenian participatory democracy, that all human beings in society possess some measure of justice. At first, as per the *Sisyphus*, human life was lawless: humans "wronged each other, because they did not possess the craft of politics (*politikē technē*)" (322b7–8), and so were unable to form sustainable societies. So Zeus and Hermes bestowed justice and shame upon mankind. This notion that the virtues are crafts, *technai*, or something like them, may be an important sophistic contribution to moral thought, though it is usually associated with Plato's Socrates. Protagoras' point here, however, is that while the virtues are craft-like, they are unlike the specialized crafts in being open to achievement by all; indeed they are continually taught by all of us to each other. The mythic genre does not allow for explicit use of the contrast between nature and convention; and Protagoras' emphasis on the original feral condition of humanity, and on the importance of social conditioning, can be read as implying that justice is conventional. On the other hand, to say that justice is a divine gift, universally shared, sounds like the mythic way of saying that it is a part of human nature. In that case, Protagoras' position is the same as that of the *Anon. Iamb.*, and restates that of Hesiod in the *Works and Days*: "This was the *nomos* Zeus established for human beings: for fish and beasts and flying birds he allowed that one may eat another, since

16. How close the "Great Speech" comes to an accurate representation of Protagoras' views is impossible to say; and it is philosophically incompatible with the relativism attributed to Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Still, both can be seen as developments of a position which, by triangulation, we might suspect to have been that of the historical Protagoras, viz. a simple endorsement of all existing moral conventions. (As Kahn drily notes, this is "an extraordinarily convenient view for a moral philosopher who earns his living by travelling on a lecture circuit from one city to another" (1981, p. 106).) The *Protagoras* grounds that endorsement of *nomos* in functionalist anthropology: all societies are just because without justice (assumed to be a real and independently specifiable virtue, along "Hesiodic" lines) they could not survive. The *Theaetetus* takes the alternative route of relativism: all communities' *nomoi* count as just because they determine what justice is.

there is no justice among them; but to human beings he gave justice, which turns out to be much better" (276–280, Gagarin and Woodruff, 1995, trans.).

This debate about justice suggests a general division of sophistic thinkers into two wings: call them subversives and reaffirmers. For the subversives (Antiphon, the *Sisyphus*, Callicles), our norms and institutions conflict with our pleonectic human nature, and so cannot withstand transparency. For the reaffirmer, conventions are legitimately authoritative and even natural to us. Some sophistic texts fall into an ambiguous middle ground: we might count Prodicus on religion as neither a reaffirmer nor a subversive but a reinterpreter of tradition. To complete the taxonomy, a fourth stance would be one of selective reform or critique: some conventions conform to nature better than others, and those which do not should be corrected (cf. Protagoras on language in the section on "Names and things").<sup>17</sup>

Among other enduring issues, this sophistic debate raises a puzzle about where authentic human nature is to be observed. Look, says the subversive, to behavior *freed from constraint*: study animals, tyrants or empires, or imagine an agent endowed with superpowers (*Anon. Iamb.* 6.2–4; Plato *Rep.* II, 359c–360d), and you will see us as we really are. The reaffirmer turns instead to what is *distinctive* about human beings. For Aristotle, the reaffirmer *par excellence*, that will turn out to be rationality itself (cf. the "function argument" of *EN* I.7); for the rhetorician Isocrates, it is the discursive capacity which makes persuasion and with it civil society possible (*Antidosis* 253–257); for Protagoras, it seems to be sociability and the rule of law itself.

### Relativity, Variability, and Qualified Truth

The sophists have often been collectively labeled "relativists"; but the evidence for this is surprisingly thin (cf. Bett, 1989). The principal text is the theory attributed to Protagoras in Plato's *Theaetetus*; but the interpretation of this is enormously controversial, and how much of it is authentically Protagorean cannot be known. We can be fairly sure that its starting-point, the famous "Measure Thesis," is a quotation from Protagoras: "A human being is the measure of all things, of those things that are, that they are, and of those things that are not, that they are not" (DK 80B1).<sup>18</sup> This is

17. Many scholars have seen a generational progression in sophistic thought towards increasing radicalism, from reaffirmers like Protagoras to subversives like Antiphon and Critias; the evidence for this seems to me inconclusive. Cf. Kahn (1981, pp. 106–8) and Wallace (1998, pp. 214–22).

18. It has been much debated how we are to understand such early philosophical uses of the verb "to be" (*einai*: note that there is no distinct Greek verb for "exist"), in terms of modern distinctions between existential, predicative, and other uses. Does Protagoras mean that we are each the measure of *whether* each thing exists, or of *how* each thing "is", i.e., what properties should be predicated of it? The short answer, I take it, is both. The standard (and perfectly reasonable) Greek tendency is to view existential uses of "to be" as short for predicative ones: to say that something exists implies that we can predicate some properties of it, and to predicate properties of something is to imply or presuppose some sort of existential claim about it. Cf. DK 80B4, *Dissoi Logoi* 5.15, the Hippocratic *On the Art* (2), and Kerferd (1981a, pp. 94–5).

glossed by Plato as a validation of conflicting perceptions: if the wind seems cold to me and warm to you, it is cold for me and warm for you. Our opinions or “appearances” are all true – for ourselves (*Tht.* 152a–c). But does that mean that the wind itself is really both warm and cold (so that the world is, as Heraclitus argued, a contradictory place); or that it is neither; or perhaps even that there is no “wind itself” at all? (These are only a few of our interpretive options.)<sup>19</sup> Moreover, rather late in Plato’s discussion the thesis is complicated by two important addenda. First, though all opinions are equally true, some are still *better* than others, by being more subjectively satisfying and functional for those who hold them. So there is still a role for the expert or wise man, such as Protagoras himself, namely replacing dysfunctional opinions with better ones (*Tht.* 166a–167d). (So Protagoras here would belong to the “reformer” camp in the typology above.) Second, on ethical matters at least, Protagoras’ validation of opinion extends to communities as well as individuals: “Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself” (*Tht.* 167c, cf. 168b, 177dff.). One can imagine the historical Protagoras taking this endorsement of *nomos* as his starting point and developing an epistemology to suit; but it is hard to see how both cities *and* individuals can be ethically infallible, and harder still to reconcile all this with the politics of the “Great Speech” (cf. n. 16).

The only other sophistic text which discusses relativity at length is the *Dissoi Logoi*. This anonymous, undatable and enigmatic work is often dismissed as philosophically crude and confused: this is, I think, a serious underestimation.<sup>20</sup> The *DL* is a rare surviving exercise in Protagorean *antilogikē*, “opposed argument,” arguing successively on both sides of five parallel theses (and then, in a concluding section I will not discuss, unraveling into miscellaneous reflections on a variety of topics). It argues that the good and the bad are the same and that they are different; and likewise with the fine and the shameful, the just and the unjust, the true and the false, and whether the mad and the wise say the same things or different ones. The text begins: “Concerning the good and bad, contrasting arguments are put forward in Greece by intellectuals (*tōn philosophoutōn*)” (*DL* 1.1);<sup>21</sup> there is no reason to attribute either side of any of the arguments to the author *in propria persona*.

Cultural relativity enters the picture in support of the claim that the fine (*kalon*) and shameful (*aischron*) are the same: “The Spartans think it fine for girls to do athletics and go around with bare arms and without tunics, but Ionians think it shameful. . . . The Massagetai cut up their parents and eat them, and they think the finest tomb is to be buried inside one’s children, but in Greece if someone did these things, he would be driven out of Greece” (*DL* 2.9–14). And the same goes for pre-marital sex, tattoos,

19. For explanation of the issues here, cf. Woodruff (1999, pp. 302–4), Gibert (2003, pp. 39–44), Kerferd (1981a, pp. 85–93), and Barnes (1982, pp. 541–53).

20. See Robinson (1979, 2001). Gratuitous abuse of the author goes back to Diels’ “talentlose” (1951–2, vol. 2, p. 405); cf. Burnyeat “feeble” (1998, p. 106) and Barnes “the more interesting in that it reflects a feeble layman’s apprehension of things” (1982, p. 517).

21. Translations from the *DL* are based on Robinson (1979) and Gagarin and Woodruff (1995) with revisions.

incest, scalping, and moistening flour with one's feet. This survey of diversity follows a series of arguments appealing to "relativity" of other kinds: "to have intercourse with one's husband in private is fine . . . but outside is shameful, where someone will see them . . . to adorn oneself and put on makeup and wear gold jewelry is shameful for a man but fine for a woman," and so on (*DL* 2.5–6). The *DL*'s arguments for the "Same" position on the other theses also invoke relativity or contextual variation. Death is bad for those who die but good for the gravediggers; and there are situations in which the use of force or fraud may be just.

Thus the *DL*'s relativity arguments are just a subset of arguments from *variability* (cf. Bett, 2002, pp. 238–44). A preoccupation with ethical variability recurs in other sophistic texts: Bett cites Protagoras in Plato's *Protagoras* (some things are good for humans and others for horses, 334a–c) and Meno's enumeration of different virtues in his *Meno* (71e–72a). We might also note the position of the unnamed "lovers of sights and sounds" against whom Socrates argues in *Republic* V. They deny the unity of each Form, refusing to allow "that the fine itself is one or that the just is one or any of the rest" (479a, cf. 475e–476a), but agree that any particular fine thing is also shameful, and anything just also unjust (479a). In sum, our evidence suggests that a number of sophists held what we might call *the variability thesis*: whatever is good in some qualified way is also bad in some other way, and so on for some central range of contrary predicates.

The *DL*'s arguments for the "Same" position, with their wearisome enumeration of opposed predications, look like arguments by induction for the variability thesis. But that thesis does nothing to support the "Same" position without two further assumptions. One is that we can legitimately infer an unqualified thesis from a qualified one: if death is good for the gravediggers or shameful to the Persians, then death is good or shameful *tout court*. (This would follow from the reasonable-sounding assumption that, as Socrates puts it in Plato's *Cratylus* (385c), a true statement or account must be composed of true parts.) The other assumption is that the meaning of a concept is its extension: if "fine" and "shameful" denote the same set of things, the fine and the shameful *are* the same thing. The "Different" arguments then proceed by *reductio*, relying on the further assumption that terms which are "the same" can be substituted for each other: for instance, if the proponents of the "Same" thesis claim to have done anything fine, they must agree that it was also shameful (*DL* 2.21). The effect is to show that the assumptions relied upon by the "Same" arguments, taken together with the variability thesis, lead to absurd results. And this paradoxical dialectic could, incidentally, be put in terms of our familiar contrast. The *Dissoi Logoi* shows that by *nomos* – including all our habitual evaluations of particular things as good and bad – the good and bad turn out to be the same thing; but surely by *phusis* they are different?

The author's solution to this puzzle emerges only rather shyly at the end of the opposed arguments – it is rather as if the ostension of puzzles is assumed to be more interesting than their solution. In the course of arguing that the mad and the wise do *not* say the same things, the author notes that proponents of the "Same" thesis will admit "that the two groups say the same things, only the wise say them at the right moment and the mad at moments when it is not proper" (*DL* 5.9). But this qualification, he notes, makes all the difference: "they seem to me to have added the small phrases 'when it is proper' and 'when it is not proper', with the result that it is no

longer the same thing" (*DL* 5.10). In other words, where the "Same" arguments went wrong was in fallaciously assuming qualification-dropping to preserve truth (a diagnosis repeated by Aristotle, *SE* 5, 166b37–167a21).

The legitimacy of qualification-dropping may look like a minor question of logical procedure; in fact, it is bound up with some of the deepest and most urgently debated philosophical puzzles of the age – ones often discussed by scholars under other headings, such as the "unity of opposites" and "conflicting appearances." These puzzles can all be seen as offspring of the variability thesis, combined with a dilemma about qualification. If some *x* is both good and bad – or hot and cold, or large and small, or existent and non-existent – in different qualified ways, what are we to say of *x* as such? Does it follow that *x* is also good *simpliciter* and bad *simpliciter*, or neither? To allow qualification-dropping across the board leads immediately to contradictions, absurdities, and a world of indeterminacy in which nothing is by nature any more good than bad. But prohibiting all such inferences leads, paradoxically, to much the same result, for it entails that for the same range of cases *x* as such is once again no more the one thing than the other.

The *DL* leaves that problem standing, and with it the question of how meaning relates to denotation. If everything fine is also shameful in some way, in what sense are "fine" and "shameful" opposites that exclude each other? For any opposition to be left, it seems there must be something more to "the fine" than the set of particular fine things: but what? This is, strikingly, one of the central problems that Plato's theory of Forms is engineered to solve. Plato accepts the variability thesis; but he denies, in spectacular fashion, the assumption that their denotation of sensible particular individuals is what gives our words their meanings. The names of things refer in the first instance not to the particular things around us, which are indeed susceptible only of qualified truth, but to essences or natures – the Forms – which are "separate" from them, and unmixed with their opposites, and which can therefore serve as subjects of unqualified truth and knowledge (Plato, *Phd.* 74a–75a, *Hp. Ma.* 288d–292e, *Symp.* 211a–212a, *Rep.* V, 479a–e, *Prm.* 129a–130a).

So the problems over which the *DL* puzzles are also those that motivate Plato. And the *DL* shows that for the sophists, as for Plato, arguments about ethics are simultaneously vehicles for exploring important problems about language and reality – problems about what we might call the gap between names and things. In the next section I turn to texts that confront this gap directly.

## Names and Things

Many texts testify to sophistic fascination with the workings of language: they range from discussions of rhetoric and literary criticism to what would nowadays count as linguistics, grammar, and the philosophy of language. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Protagoras declares that "the greatest part of education" is to be able to analyze and evaluate the words of the poets (339a). Protagoras goes on to subject Socrates to an *elenchus* by getting him to endorse an ode of Simonides, which is then shown to contain a contradiction (339b–e). As a mode of education, such sparring would have involved at once a lesson in the art of eristic, the honing of literary and critical skills, and reflection

on a serious ethical question (here, the relation of "becoming good" to "being good") about which the poet might have something valuable to say.

Protagoras evidently adopted a similarly critical stance towards the Greek language itself, claiming that the words "wrath" and "helmet" (both grammatically feminine) are masculine (DK 80A28; cf. the parody by Aristophanes at *Clouds* 659–691).<sup>22</sup> We have no evidence that Protagoras was a serious campaigner for linguistic reform, but he clearly counts, on this front at least, as a "reformer" in terms of the typology suggested above, holding conventions up for correction in the light of nature. Other sophistic texts show a similar mix of analysis and prescription. Prodicus is portrayed by Plato as a specialist in the "correctness of names," and in particular the drawing of fine distinctions between words of similar meaning (*Prt.* 337a–b, 358a–b, *Chrm.* 163d, *Cra.* 384b, *La.* 197d, *Meno* 75e, cf. Classen, 1981, pp. 230–8). Plato's attitude seems to be one of half-respectful amusement: Prodicus is wrong to think that any wisdom is to be gained by such exercises in lexicography, but it is the job of the philosopher to distinguish meanings correctly, through dialectic. Like eristic and *antilogikē*, Prodician linguistic analysis is a simulacrum of, and perhaps a prolegomenon to, real philosophical method. Plato's *Cratylus* discusses the "correctness of names" rather differently, in terms of the dichotomy of nature and convention. Names bear the twin hallmarks of social construction, since they vary from place to place and are subject to change at will (cf. Democritus DK 68B26). At the same time, their functioning somehow outruns convention: different languages can say the same thing, and the truth or falsity of what we say depends not only on our conventions but on how things are. For Plato, a natural correctness of names would mean that names could be judged according to whether they correspond to the natures of the things they name (*Cra.* 391d–427d) – another version of a "reformist" stance towards language. This idea of "natural correctness," which the *Cratylus* spells out in terms of etymology and phonetic "likeness," is very alien to modern thought about language; it becomes more intelligible if we reflect that for Plato, and for the sophists as well, concerns about language were also driven by high ethical and political stakes. Thucydides famously discusses the ways in which moral terminology comes to be abused and corrupted in times of civil war (Thuc. III.82–83), and Plato's early dialogues testify to the sharply different ways in which terms like "virtue" and "justice" might be applied. It is not so easy to determine where linguistic conventions end and ethical and political ones begin.

The *Cratylus* also testifies to intense contemporary puzzlement over truth and reference.<sup>23</sup> Our evidence on this topic is rather confusing, much of it consisting of paradoxical slogans and unattributed arguments.<sup>24</sup> The most notorious pair of slogans assert the impossibility of contradiction and false statement.<sup>25</sup> Just who is likely to

22. Cf. also the criticism of Homer at DK 80A2. Protagoras' analyses of gender (DK 80A27), the tenses of verbs (DK 80A1) and modes of speech (DK 80A1) were presumably used to provide ammunition for such criticisms of the poets.

23. On the treatment of language in the *Cratylus*, see also Modrak's PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE in this volume.

24. See Guthrie (1969, pp. 204–19), Classen (1981), and Denyer (1991) for discussion.

25. Plato, *Euthd.* 283e–286d, *Cra.* 429c–430a; cf. D.L. 10.53, Isoc. *Helen* 1; Kerferd (1981a, pp. 88–90), and Guthrie (1969, pp. 218–19).



have asserted either is uncertain (the Socratic Antisthenes is a leading candidate), and a sophistic origin would be puzzling given that both *antilogikē* and eristic seem to require contradiction. Still, the paradoxes might have been generated by two sophistic ideas. One is the "Measure" thesis. If the wind can be at once warm for you and cold for me, then our descriptions of it do not exclude each other after all; so there is a lot less contradiction about than we might think – perhaps, if Protagoras can give an intelligible relativization of *all* our claims, none at all. The other source of the paradoxes is a set of puzzles about truth and reference. Parmenides had already argued that one cannot say or think what is not: for it is not there to be picked out by language (DK 28B2, B6, B7). A true statement says "what is"; a false one "what is not." But "what is not" is *nothing*, so speech which says "what is not" says nothing at all (Plato, *Cra.* 429c–430a). (Or, in slightly different terms: to be meaningful a statement must be "of" or "about" something. But a falsehood would have to say something other than that thing, and so would really be "of" something else; and for two statements to contradict each other, by saying different things about the same thing, is impossible (Plato, *Euthd.* 283e–284a, 285d–286b).) Plato struggles with these puzzles in several dialogues; his eventual solution in the *Sophist* depends on a long and complex excursus into the metaphysics of what is and is not. I cannot discuss his solution fully, but its central strategic move is, roughly, to distinguish between reference and assertion: false statement says "what is, but not *as it is*" (*Sph.* 262e–263d).

Our most important sophistic text on language, Gorgias' *On Not Being*, argues for the still more unnerving thesis that we cannot communicate what is *true*. In fact, this enigmatic *tour de force* argues for three startling conclusions. First, nothing "is" or exists; second, even if something did exist, we could not think or comprehend it; and third, even if we could think it, we could not communicate it.<sup>26</sup> Interpreters have long debated in what spirit these arguments should be read (cf. Caston, 2002, pp. 205–8). The *ONB* is certainly an exercise in rhetorical technique: it is, after all, hard to think of a more convincing test case for the ability to "make the weaker argument the stronger." But it is also plausibly a parody, at once playful and seriously critical, of contemporary philosophy, and Parmenides in particular. The first part of the argument looks like a *reductio* of Parmenides' proof that only Being exists; and as Kerferd notes, the argument taken as a whole amounts to "pulling apart and separating three things which Parmenides had identified," namely being, thought, and speech (1981a, p. 99; cf. DK 28B2, B3, B6, B8.34–36).

The oddly recessive structure of the *ONB* means that it can also be taken as collectively arguing, through a series of fall-back positions, for its final conclusion: *even if* there were things (which there aren't), and *even if* they could be known (which they can't), we could not communicate them.<sup>27</sup> And these latter stages of the argument have the look of a non-parodic philosophical agenda. In the second part of the *ONB*,

26. Two quite different versions of the *ONB*, neither of which can be taken as Gorgias' *ipsissima verba*, have come down to us (S.E. *M* 7.65–87 and [Aristotle], *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia* (79a11–80b21)). I will be free in extracting and amalgamating what seem to me the main points.

27. This *recessive* strategy also structures Gorgias' *Defense of Palamedes* (DK 82B11(a)).

Gorgias argues for a chasm between objects and our thoughts about them. "For if things that are thought of, says Gorgias, are not things that are, then what is is not thought of" (S.E. M 7.77).<sup>28</sup> And indeed things that are thought of are *not* things that are. After all, "if someone thinks of a person flying or chariots racing in the sea, it is not the case that forthwith a person is flying or chariots racing in the sea" (S.E. M 7.79). Of course, the fact that a sea-chariot is not both thought of and existent hardly proves that nothing can be both; but it does show that intentional entities such as mental representations constitute an order of being quite distinct from ordinary "things that are," including any which we might claim to be thinking of. It is unclear whether Gorgias takes himself to have established only this reasonable claim, or also the outrageous one that nothing can be both existent and an object to which thought refers: perhaps we should read the text as systematically ambiguous, between a strong thesis which offends common sense and a weaker one which controverts only Parmenidean philosophers. (The first part of the *ONB* could perhaps also be read this way, as denying existence either to the everyday things of common sense or only to Parmenidean Being.) The third part of the argument, on the impossibility of communication, largely follows the model of the second. Another "categorical gulf" (Mourelatos, 1987, p. 139) separates speech (*logos*) from the objects we might hope to signify: "it is not the case that we communicate things that are to our neighbours, but *logos*, which is different from the objects" (S.E. M 7.84). Just as sight has the visible as its object, and not the audible, so too when a speaker speaks, what he says is *logos* rather than a colour or a thing or a thought. Moreover, it is impossible for the same thought to exist in two people; and there is no reason even to expect their thoughts to be qualitatively similar.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever we make of his intentions, these arguments display Gorgias at work on real and intractable philosophical puzzles: how is it possible to refer to non-existent objects? If a thought is a different kind of thing from an object in world, how can it communicate that object? A reading of his conclusions as both radical and seriously intended gains some confirmation from Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* (DK 82B11). In this epideictic speech, Gorgias argues that Helen's decision to go with Paris to Troy must have been caused by one of four factors: fate and divine will, force, persuasive speech (*logos*), or love. Whichever it is, he argues, she is not to blame; for each of these causes really counts as a kind of force, rendering her action involuntary. The general intent of Gorgias' work is once again opaque,<sup>30</sup> but the agenda of the *Helen* does seem to come clear in its extended praise of *logos*, described as a "mighty master" (DK 82B11.8) which works on the soul as drugs do on the body (14). The power of *logos*

28. Translations from the *ONB* are from Richard McKirahan in Curd (1996), with revisions.

29. Cf. also the cryptic Antiphon DK 87B1.

30. The *Helen* is often read as a "paradigm case" argument that no one is responsible for any action. But at the close of the *Helen* Gorgias refers to it as a "plaything for myself" (DK 82B11.21), effectively calling into question any reading of it as ethical dogma. This self-undermining should, I think, be read as a tease and a challenge: We must decide for ourselves whether the *Helen* should count as serious moral philosophy, and what it proves if so.

derives from its sway over fallible human opinion (*doxa*): "For if all men on all subjects had memory of the past, [understanding] of the present, and foresight into the future, speech would not be the same in the same way . . . but as it is . . . most men on most subjects make opinion an adviser to their minds" (11).<sup>31</sup> As Mourelatos has argued, the arguments of the *Helen* and the *ONB* on language are complementary (1987). The *ONB* shows what language *cannot* be: either a means of communicating the objective natures of things or of representing our ideas of them. The *Helen* expounds the alternative which remains, namely that language is simply a tool for manipulating behavior.

It is difficult to ascribe a full and coherent metaphysics and epistemology to Gorgias – or, all the more obviously, to the sophists as a group. Scholars have sometimes spoken in a general way of the sophists as collectively "empiricists," "skeptics," and "relativists" without adequately noting that these are distinct theories with little if anything in common (e.g., Guthrie, 1969, pp. 9–11, 49–51). Sophistic thought on reality and our epistemic access to it only forms a genuine unity to the extent that it is seen as fundamentally negative and critical, exploring various strategies for denying the pretensions to knowledge of a Parmenides, Empedocles, or, proleptically, Plato. From that angle, Gorgias and Protagoras can plausibly be seen as forming a united front of deflationary anti-realism: against metaphysicians like Parmenides, they argue that there is no point in speculating about, or even any intelligible way of thinking and talking about, a Being which transcends our experience. There is no reality beyond appearance, and no hope for any knowledge which would be different in kind from our fallible opinions. If this is a fair reading, then sophistic discussion of language and thought revolves even more closely around the question we saw raised by their ethical inquiries: how far our customary ways of thinking and talking are grounded in anything beyond themselves.

## Conclusions

At the start I noted two questions we face in interpreting the sophists: did they expound philosophical *dogmata*, and were they engaged in a common project at all? Unsurprisingly, the texts we have examined provide no snappy answers. On the question of unity, we have encountered a few shared positions, but much more common ground in the sophists' conceptual framework and modes of argument. The sophistic movement has what we might call *dialectical* unity: the unity of a debate or tradition, with both the commonality and the diversity, indeed conflict, it implies. More controversially, I have argued that we can see much if not all of sophistic thought as driven by a single (albeit broad) philosophical agenda. The decomposition of institutions and values into natural and conventional; the fascination with variability and

31. Cf. another important, but puzzling dictum attributed to Gorgias: "Being (*to einai*) is obscure when it does not encounter opinion (*tou dokein*); opinion is weak when it does not encounter being" (DK 82B26).

qualified truth in ethics; the subversion of easy assumptions about meaning and communication: all make manifest a preoccupation with measuring the gap between our words and the realities – if any – to which they may or may not conform.

This project had a profound influence on later thought, and it is hard to see any grounds for denying the sophists a place in books on “pre-Socratic Philosophy.” On the other hand, much sophistic argument is not like philosophical argument as we usually understand it – that is, I take it, as involving the best arguments one can muster for conclusions in which one believes. The sophists are more interested in fallacies and puzzles than in proofs and solutions, more comfortable with paradox and satire than with dogmatic assertion. This may in part express a subversive relation to their philosophical rivals, as in the case of the *On Not Being* and Parmenides. So arguably the sophists are less the ancestors of philosophy in general than of subsequent attempts to cure or debunk it; and it is no accident that deflationary movements such as ancient skepticism, modern pragmatism, and postmodernism have looked back to them for inspiration.<sup>32</sup> Yet, paradoxically, the sophists’ methodological slipperiness can also be seen as a crucial first step towards later philosophical norms of objective rationality. Pre-Socratics such as Parmenides and Empedocles combine appeals to the reader’s rationality with claims to supernatural authority (DK 28B1, B7; DK 31B23, B110, B112), but the arguments of a text like the *Dissoi Logoi* or Antiphon’s *On Truth* are detached from any authority at all; in sophistic writings, the authorial first person is either absent or is a strikingly unhelpful and unreliable narrator. If we could ask Gorgias, “But do you really *mean* that nothing exists?” he might well shrug his shoulders and answer, deadpan, “Can you refute me?” Sophistic texts are challenges, inviting us to judge their arguments for ourselves.

This should sound familiar; for the same can be said of Plato, who is notoriously absent from his works and whose Socrates emphasizes that *logoi* must be judged on their own merits. And the other commonalities between the sophists and Plato are striking. Socratic *elenchus* is formally indistinguishable from Protagorean eristic; and a number of Plato’s dialogues are, in whole or part, exercises in *antilogikē*, including the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, arguably the *Parmenides* and rather lopsidedly the *Republic* (on which cf. the disquieting DK 80B5: according to some ancient historians of philosophy, the *Republic* was largely a rip-off of Protagorean arguments). On questions like the correctness of names (the *Cratylus*) and the normative standing of justice (*Gorgias*, *Republic*), Plato can be seen as concerned with the analysis of nature and convention, and as fitting into a “reformer-reaffirmer” niche. Above all, we can see the theory of Forms as Plato’s solution to sophistic puzzles about variability and qualified truth. Given the state of our evidence, the sophists are likely to continue to resist confident interpretation; but we may come to understand them better if we can learn to read Plato as the flowering of the sophistic tradition rather than – or as well as – its nemesis.

32. The *Dissoi Logoi* has come down to us attached to MSS of Sextus Empiricus, presumably because *Antilogikē* was seen as the ancestor of skeptical “equipollent argument.” For pragmatism, cf. Mailloux (1995, pp. 8–14), for postmodernism, Fish (1989) and Jarratt (1991).

## Bibliography

## Works Cited

- Adkins, A. W. H. (1960). *Merit and Responsibility*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barnes, J. (1982). *The Presocratic Philosophers*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bett, R. (1989). "The Sophists and Relativism." *Phronesis*, 34, 139–69.
- . (2002). "Is There a Sophistic Ethics?" *Ancient Philosophy*, 22, 235–62.
- Burnyeat, M. F. (1998). "Dissoi Logoi." In E. Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (vol 3, pp. 106–7). London: Routledge.
- Caston, V. (2002). "Gorgias on Thought and its Objects." In V. Caston and D. W. Graham (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy*. (Festschrift for A. P. D. Mourelatos) (pp. 205–32). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Classen, C. J. (1981). "The Study of Language amongst Socrates' Contemporaries." In G. B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and their Legacy* (pp. 215–47). Wiesbaden: Steiner. (Original work published 1959.)
- Cole, T. (1990). *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*. Atlanta: Scholars Press. (Original work published 1967.)
- Cooper, J. M. (ed.) and Hutchinson, D. S. (assoc. ed.). (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Curd, P. (ed.). (1996). *A Presocratics Reader*. (Translations by R. McKirahan.) Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Denyer, N. (1991). *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Diels, H. (1951–2). (Cited as DK). *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. (3 vols.). 6th edn. revised by W. Kranz and often reprinted. Berlin: Weidmann. (Original work published 1903.)
- Fish, S. (1989). "Rhetoric." In S. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (pp. 471–502). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Furley, D. J. (1981). "Antiphon's Case against Justice." In G. B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and their Legacy* (pp. 81–91). Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Gagarin, M. and Woodruff, P. (eds.). (1995). *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibert, J. (2003). "The Sophists." In C. Shields (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy* (pp. 27–50). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grote, G. (1865). *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*. (3 vols.). London: John Murray.
- . (1872). *A History of Greece*. (10 vols., vol. 7). 4th edn. London: Murray.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. (1969). *A History of Greek Philosophy* (vol. 3): *The Fifth-Century Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1995). *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (trans. E. S. Haldane). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 1840.)
- Irwin, T. H. (1995). "Plato's Objections to the Sophists." In C. A. Powell (ed.), *The Greek World* (pp. 568–87). London: Routledge.
- Jarratt, S. (1991). *Rereading the Sophists*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kahn, C. (1981). "The Origins of Social Contract Theory in the Fifth Century B.C." In G. B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and their Legacy* (pp. 92–108). Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Kerferd, G. B. (1981a). *The Sophistic Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerferd, G. B. (ed.). (1981b). *The Sophists and their Legacy*. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Long, A. A. (ed.). (1999). *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lovejoy, A. O. and Boas, G. (1935). *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Greek Antiquity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Mailloux, S. (ed.). (1995). *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrison, J. S. (1963). "The Truth of Antiphon." *Phronesis*, 8, 35–49.
- Mourelatos, A. P. D. (1987). "Gorgias on the Function of Language." *Philosophical Topics*, 15, 135–70.
- Nehamas, A. (1990). "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry." *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7, 3–16.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968). *The Will to Power* (trans. W. Kaufman). New York: Random House. (Original work published 1901.)
- Pendrick, G. (ed.). (2002). *Antiphon the Sophist: The Fragments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Preus, A. (ed.). (2001). *Before Plato: Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy VI*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Robinson, T. M. (ed.). (1979). *Contrasting Arguments: An Edition of the Dissoi Logoi*. New York: Arno Press.
- . (2001). "The Dissoi Logoi and early Greek Scepticism." In A. Preus (ed.), *Before Plato: Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy VI* (pp. 187–197). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Wallace, R. W. (1998). "The Sophists in Athens." In D. Boedeker and K. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (pp. 203–22). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Woodruff, P. (1999). "Rhetoric and Relativism: Protagoras and Gorgias." In A. A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (pp. 290–310). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Further Readings

- Detienne, M. (1996). *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* (trans. J. Lloyd). New York: Zone Books. (Original work published 1967.)
- Dover, K. (1974). *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lee, M. (2000). "The Secret Doctrine: Plato's Defence of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 19, 47–86.
- Pfeiffer, R. (1968). *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Schiappa, E. (1991). *Protagoras and Logos*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Striker, G. (1996). "Methods of Sophistry." In G. Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (pp. 3–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.