

Erōs-Hunter in the *Sophist*: who chases whom, how and where?

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This paper aims at a global study of the main metaphor of the *Sophist*, namely hunting, in order to solve the problem of the identity of the Stranger from Elea, by defining what kind of hunter he is. To do so, we distinguish successively three kinds of hunters emerging from the text: the dialectician, the sophist, and the lover, with their respective prey, means, and hunting grounds. First, the Stranger and Theaetetus appear to be dialectically hunting the sophist as a beast incessantly fleeing into the dark and indefinite realm of non-being. This is because the sophist himself primarily appears to be rhetorically hunting young men, just as a lover hunting his beloved, governed as he is by the *epithumetic*, monstrous, and irrational part of his soul. A comparison with the *Phaedrus* shows finally that in trying to define and catch the sophist, by means of the best divisions and collections they can, the two protagonists reveal themselves as being a divine dialectician leading the young mathematician towards philosophy and contemplation of the beauty of the intelligible realm. By displaying such a complex hunt, led by a mysterious Stranger trying to catch the most elusive sophist, Plato the writer was at pains to make the reader himself participate in the hunt, believing that only through this agonistic and erotic process he will both overcome the sophist and become the philosopher.

erōs, hunting, philosophy, sophistry, dialectic.

Prologue: *erōs*, *thēra* and *paideia*

In Plato's time, whether in Sparta, Crete, or Athens, hunting (*thēra*) was closely linked to education (*paideia*). It aimed at developing the courage of young men and training them for the defense of the city during war¹. By fostering contact between young men and adult men, hunting was also the terrain and the common metaphor for *paiderastia*². Witness the rich iconography representing hunting itself, the return from the hunt, the gift of the quarry, and erotic hunting³.

1 *Lg.* I 632e-633b, VII 823b-824b. *Lg.* I 627c8-9, II 654e3-4: the whole dialogue is a hunt. See Louis 1945: 53-55.

2 *Ly.* 206a-b: Hippothales hunting Lysis; *Prt.* 309a: Socrates hunting Alcibiades. See Dover 1978, II, C, 4.

3 See Schnapp 1984 and 1997 who distinguishes between the "hunting-chase" (*thēra*), the "hunting-tracking" (*ikhneuo*), and the "hunting-catch" (*agra*) (1997, 102). Hence, the *Sophist* will be a total hunt.

In Plato's dialogues, the metaphor of hunting gains further extension and abstraction. Not only do we hunt there animate beings, be they wild or tame, including men themselves, but also inanimate beings, such as words, opinions, knowledge, Being and the Good itself⁴. It is because their main character, Socrates, is a skilled hunter (*thereutēs deinos*) like *Erōs*, whether he is a philosopher or a sophist⁵.

But in Plato's *Sophist*, the dramatic context obliges Socrates, who is precisely accused of being a "sophist", to silence, and gives floor to a Stranger from Elea, who is "a comrade (ἐταῖρον) of the circle of Parmenides and Zeno, and a man very much a philosopher"⁶ according to the mathematician Theodorus. During the night, the central metaphor has thus shifted from Socrates' midwifery of knowledge in Theaetetus' soul to the Stranger's hunting of the sophist together with Theaetetus⁷. But who chases whom in the *Sophist* actually? Indeed, the sophist himself will first appear as a hunter directly compared to a lover, and progressively revealing himself as the negative of the philosopher. So the hunter is significantly hunted⁸. Hence three types of hunting emerge at different levels of the dialogue: the dialectical chase of the Stranger hunting the sophist; the sophistic chase of the sophist hunting young men as a lover; and the true erotic chase of Socrates constantly lurking in the background. We propose to compare these three great types of hunters, namely the dialectician, the sophist, and the lover, by distinguishing their respective prey, means, and hunting ground. To what kind of hunters will the Stranger and Theaetetus finally belong: the lazy, slavish, and deceptive ones or the courageous, free, and true ones?

I. The dialectical chase

The Stranger (ξένος) accepts to proceed through questions (δι' ἐρωτήσεων, 217c4) in order to gratify (χαρίζεσθαι, 217e5) Socrates and everyone else and not to appear somewhat inhospitable and savage (ἄξενόν τι...καὶ ἄγριον,

4 *Ly.* 218b-c: Socrates hunting the *prōton philon*; *Grg.* 500d: Socrates hunting the Good contrary to the sophists hunting words (489b and 490a) and by words (*Euthd.* 295d cf. 290b-291b). See the "Diairesis of *θηρεύειν*" in Classen 1960, 65 and Schnapp 1997, 139.

5 *Smp.* 203d4-8. See Da Motta 2019 and Notomi 1999, 16-17 and 71.

6 *Sph.* 216a3-4; tr. Benardete 1984 *contra* Cordero 1993: ἔτερον.

7 Despite *Tht.* 197b-200d: hunting knowledges as birds cf. *Lg.* VII 823e6: slavish *erōs* for hunting birds.

8 See Rosen 1983, 84-109; Wolff in Aubenque 1991, 17-52; and Mouze 2020.

217e6-218a1)⁹. He then invites Theaetetus, under Socrates' recommendation, to begin distinguishing the sophist, the statesman and the philosopher, beginning with the first one, who on the contrary will reveal himself to be a most savage beast (ἀγριώτατον, 231a6).

Firstly, foreseeing that the genus of the sophist will be hard to hunt down (δυσθήρευτον, 218d3), the Stranger proposes to train on a simpler example. Just as the angler can be defined as a hunter of aquatic animals using bottom-up hooking aiming at the head and the mouth of the prey (219a4-221c4), so too the sophist will first appear as a hunter of wealthy and prominent young (221c5-223b8). But after four or five different appearances, our dialectical hunters will declare him to be a complex beast (ποικίλον... θηρίον) to be caught with both hands by tracking his trail (ἵχνος) on the other side (226a6-226b2). But the risk is then he will be confused with the philosopher, as the wolf with the dog, the most savage animal with the most tame... (226b2-231b9). So, exploring hunting is an opportunity for both a summary of the sophist's many appearances as well as a warning against his confusion with the philosopher (231c8-232a7).

Then, to explain how the sophist can appear a knower of many things, the paradigm shifts from the angler to the painter as an imitator of the things which are (233d3-235a9). Still, the hunters' order not to let the beast escape, to encompass him in a kind of net (ἐν ἀμφιβληστροικῶ τινι), and finally to declare the catch (ἄγρα, 235a10-c7) falls short in front of the sophist's relentless escape, first into a trackless species (εἰς ἄπορον εἶδος, 236c9-d4), then into a trackless region (εἰς ἄπορον τόπον, 239c4-7). So the hunters hold a council: are they to give up in front of the potentially infinite difficulties (241b4-c6)? They do not soften, even if the beast escapes for the *third* time into the darkness of non-being (254a4-7 referred to at 260c11-d3).

Finally, the paradigm seems to shift from the painter to the weaver, as they are eager to account for speech as a weaving together of the species (254b6-259e7). Getting closer and closer to their prey, the hunters find themselves fighting (διεμαχόμεθα) the sophist who could counterattack (διαμάχοιτο) by pretending that falsehood is impossible (260d5-e3). The Stranger orders therefore to track down (διερευνητέον) speech, opinion, and appearance, to prove falsehood possible and bind the sophist to it (ἐνδύσωμεν) or release him (260e3-261a3). But now Theaetetus' worry echoes the Stranger's prediction: the beast is so hard to hunt down

9 See Gordon 2012, 53-85: "Questioning" for the essential correlation between *erōs* and *erōtēsis*.

(δυσθήρευτον) that the chase might seem without limit (πέρας) (261a4-b4). Twice the Stranger needs to exhort the boy to remain courageous in front of the problems of falsehood and appearance (261b5-c4 and 264b9-c2) before inviting him, for the *third* time, to try again the dialectical method and exhibit (ἐπιδείξωμεν) the sophist's nature (264d10-265a2)¹⁰. And so the hunters seem ultimately to catch their prey, to bind it (συνδήσομεν) and to weave it (σμπλέξαντες) in the final definition of the sophist as “an imitator of the wise” (268c5-268d5).

Throughout this omnipresent metaphor, the Stranger and Theaetetus are dialectically hunting the indefinite sophist¹¹. Indeed, the dialectical method of division and collection is presented as an infallible way to catch the genus of anything, at least for those dialecticians able to pursue all things in particular and in general (235b8-c6). But is really this method so infallible and has the sophist been totally caught? We can doubt it, especially when we recognize retrospectively the failures and mistakes in the *Sophist*, which the Stranger himself seems to acknowledge in the *Statesman* by warning us against haste and feeling of completeness¹², though only after having proved falsehood possible. Still, is not this dialectical incompleteness precisely the sign of the sophist's very elusive nature? Being described as: “a fugitive (ἀποδιδράσκων) into the darkness of ‘that which is not’, to which he attaches himself by a knack (τριβῆ), and on account of the darkness of the region, he's hard to get an understanding of”¹³. Maybe the sophist is not even an expert, but at least his deception has been exposed and his multiple heads successively cut off.

II. The sophistic chase

While the Stranger and Theaetetus hunt the sophist as a beast (θηρίον) throughout the whole dialogue, the sophist, on the other hand, appears first and foremost as a hunter, thought paradoxically not of wild beasts (θηρία) but of tame animals (ἡμέρα ζῶα):

– Is there really a kind of hunting of the tame (τις θήρα τῶν ἡμέρων)?

10 See Gordon 2012, 86-124: “Courage”.

11 This main metaphor is closely related to fighting (260a-261a) and even to war (261b-c); the enemy being always the sophist to be chased, captured, and eventually killed.

12 Compare *Sph.* 268d5: Παντάπασι μὲν οὖν (Theaetetus) with *Plt.* 267c4: Παντάπασι μὲν οὖν (young Socrates).

13 *Sph.* 254a4-7; tr. Benardete.

– Yes, provided, that is, (a) human being is a tame animal (ἡμερον ζῷον). But set it down however you please. Either suppose that nothing is tame, or something else is tame, but the human being is savage (ἄγριον); or you mean, on the other hand, the human being is tame, but you believe there’s no hunting of human beings. Whichever of these remarks you believe to be to your liking, make it this distinction for us.

– Well, stranger, just as I believe we are a tame animal (ἡμερον ζῷον), so I say there is a hunting of human beings (θήραν τε ἀνθρώπων). (*Sph.* 222b6-c2; tr. Benardete)

Theaetetus’ wonder is not surprising, since the activity of “hunting” (θήρα) seems to have as its natural object the very “beast fit to be hunted” (θηρίον). What is more surprising, is the Stranger’s narrow alternative presupposing that there *must* be a hunting of the tame *if* human being is a tame animal. Not only is the condition far from being certain – are we so sure that human being *is and always is* a tame animal? – but even if it were so, it does not necessarily imply a hunting of tame animals. So why does the Stranger force Theaetetus’ hand here by a radical opposition between both beasts and men, savage and tame, which he will himself reject in the *Statesman*¹⁴? Because he knows that Theaetetus, who eventually became tamer (ἡμερώτερος) the previous day¹⁵, will never reduce men to savage beasts, and because he anticipates the first account of sophistry as “the hunting of the wealthy and prominent young”¹⁶. Actually, this seems to have been the most common appearance of and opinion about the sophists in Plato’s time, witness Xenophon¹⁷ as well as the Pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*¹⁸. Indeed, Socrates himself is under Meletus’ indictment who precisely pretends that he corrupts the young¹⁹, and thus confounds him with the sophist, who though being a man is also the most savage beast (ἀγριώτατον, 231a6). But this savage beast is said to hunt tame animals in private for money:

– And isn’t it the case that of the art of private-hunting (ἰδιοθηρευτικῆς) there is the earning of a wage (μισθαρνητικόν) and there is the giving of gifts (δωροφορικόν).

– I don’t understand.

14 *Plt.* 263c2-264b4 and 309e. See also *Lg.* VII 823b1-cl.

15 *Tht.* 210c3.

16 *Sph.* 223b5-6.

17 *Cyn.* 13. 9. 3-5.

18 *Def.* 415c9.

19 *Tht.* 210d2-3 and *Ap.* 24b-26b.

- You do not yet, it seems, pay attention to the hunting of lovers (τῇ τῶν ἐρώντων θήρᾳ).
- About what?
- That they offer the hunted gifts in addition.
- What you say is most true.
- Well, then, let this be a species of an erotic art (ἐρωτικῆς τέχνης).
- Certainly. (*Sph.* 222d7-e4; tr. Benardete)

Again, the division is imperfect if not fallacious, not only because there is a pecuniary erotic art, namely prostitution, but also because the sophist needs a great deal of seduction to persuade the young that he can educate them in exchange for money. Hence the sophist was described as a “prostitute of wisdom” by Socrates according to Xenophon²⁰. Even if the sophist is distinguished from those other beastly hunters, namely the flatterer, the courtesan, and the bad lover²¹, he nevertheless shares with them his savagery, yearning mostly after wealth and pleasure. He is compared to a wolf but also to a many-headed beast (ὁ πολυκέφαλος σοφιστής, 240c4), which are two famous Platonic metaphors for the *epithumetic* part of the soul, significantly imaged by Socrates as a complex and many-headed beast (θηρίον ποικίλον καὶ πολυκέφαλον)²². The sophist then, just as the *epithumētikon*, has many faces...

III. The Socratic chase

How are we then to distinguish the sophist from the philosopher, the wolf from the dog, the savage beast from the divine lover? It takes for sure a great deal of thinking and speaking, that is, to try to distinguish what is truly different and assimilate what is truly the same. This is precisely the activity assigned by Socrates – the very man who claims to know only the art of love (ἐρωτικὴ τέχνη)²³ – to the so-called “dialecticians”, those whom he pursues (διώκω) just as gods because he is “a lover of these divisions and collections” (ἐραστής...τῶν διαίρέσεων καὶ συναγωγῶν)²⁴.

20 *Mem.* 1. 6. 13 see Dorion in Brisson and Renaut 2017, 116-119.

21 *Phdr.* 240a9-c1 and 241c6-d1: the bad lover as a wolf.

22 *R.* IX 588c7-10 announced by 580d11: the epithumetic part is polymorphous (πολυειδία).

23 *Phdr.* 257a7-8.

24 *Phdr.* 266b3-c1.

Now according to Meletus, Socrates is not only guilty of “corrupting the young” but also of “not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new divinities” (δαιμόνια καινά)²⁵. This refers primarily, of course, to Socrates’ divine sign. But in the face of this judicial context, is it not mostly appropriate that the *Sophist* begins with a dialogue between Socrates and Theodorus about the very nature of the Stranger²⁶? Is he “very much a philosopher” (μάλα δὲ ἄνδρα φιλόσοφον), “a kind of god” (τινα θεόν), or rather “a divine man” (θεῖος ἀνὴρ)? Socrates warns Theodorus, and us, that the genus of the philosopher is not much easier to discern than that of the god, for he can manifest himself in all sorts of apparitions including statesmen, sophists, and complete madmen (μανικῶς)²⁷. This *third* appearance is nevertheless pre-eminent, as it is substituted by the philosopher itself, in Socrates’ initial question to the Stranger about the sophist, the statesman, and the philosopher. But does the Stranger belong to this *third* type? He may himself hint at it, when he asks Theaetetus for a *third* favor: to not think that he is mad (μανικός)²⁸. Yet, what would be his madness? Since he is welcomed under the protection of the god of strangers, showing absolutely no ill will (οὐδεὶς φθόνος)²⁹, and reveals himself to be another great lover of divisions and collections, constantly exhorting Theaetetus to courage in the search for the truth (τάληθές ζητοῦμεν)³⁰, is he not inspired by this very divine erotic madness that possesses the chorus of the philosophers tracking (ἰχνεύοντες) Zeus³¹? Indeed, he acts as a divine lover towards Theaetetus, initiating him the best he can to philosophical dialectics, and thus elevating his soul from the sensible beauty (in which Theodorus seems to be stuck) to the intelligible beauty of Being itself (the dialogue is significantly punctuated at crucial moments by the adverb καλῶς, “beautifully”³²). The Stranger, tracking Zeus in company of Theaetetus, would thus be one of these “dialecticians” that Socrates is most eager to pursue, for the sake of knowledge of himself and true education of the young.

25 Ap. 24b9-c1.

26 See Gill 2021.

27 Sph. 216a-d2.

28 Sph. 242a-b.

29 Sph. 217a-b. See Brisson 2016: the absence of jealousy characterises the philosopher aspiring to the divine.

30 Sph. 246d9.

31 Phdr. 252e1-253a8.

32 See Sph. 216c2, 218c8, 219a3, 222c8, 231c7, 247e7, 251a4, 251e6, 254b6, 259a3, 261c5 and 265d5.

Human being is not already a perfectly tame animal, but he seems to be in-between (μεταξύ) the most savage beast (to which the sophist resembles) and the most divine being (to which the philosopher aspires)³³. That is why he needs to be educated and guided, in order to free himself from the monster in him and assimilate himself, as far as possible, to the god³⁴.

Epilogue: The reader's chase

The reader of so complex a dialogue as the *Sophist*, who is nevertheless eager to persevere and continue the hunting of political science in the *Statesman* under the guidance of the Stranger³⁵, is immediately confronted with Socrates' mysterious recognition (γνώρισις) of both Theaetetus and the Stranger³⁶. For what precisely is Socrates grateful and what knowledge has he exactly gained in listening to the Stranger's dialogue with Theaetetus? Plato has so neatly woven his trilogy, namely the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman*, that everything seems to be done to engage the reader to ask himself the questions about the *Sophist* that Socrates would have certainly asked if it were not for Euclides' reductionist rewriting and Meletos' sophistic indictment. Thus, the reader is also on the hunt, trying the best he can to collect dramatic clues, solve unsolved perplexities, and explain philosophical digressions, in order to become himself a philosopher, according to Plato's own acknowledgment of his main purpose in writing³⁷. Just as the divine lover is looking for a beautiful beloved tracking the same god as him – namely Zeus, the Intellect – so too the divine writer is looking for a philosophical reader himself tracking the beautiful, the true, and the good – namely us, readers of Plato. And has not the Stranger appeared to us precisely as this mad divine lover, offering Theaetetus the dialectical method as a very “gift from god” (θεός-δῶρον)³⁸, which will lead him both

33 *Phdr.* 230a3-7.

34 *Tht.* 176b.

35 *Plt.* 264a5-6; 285d4-9; and 301e3-4.

36 *Plt.* 257a1-2.

37 *Phdr.* 276d1-d5: “for anyone following the same track (παντὶ τῷ ταῦτὸν ἵχνος μετιόντι)”.

38 *Sph.* 222d7-e4: the erotic art linked to gift-giving (δωροφορικόν) cf. *Smp.* 218e-219a (epithumetic exchange); *Phdr.* 256b7-e2 (philotimic exchange); *Phdr.* 244a6-8 (philosophical madness as a divine gift); *Phlb.* 16c5-7 (dialectic as a divine gift).

to overcome the sophist in him and to become the true philosopher he is³⁹? The Stranger would then be a true philosopher and the best spokesperson of Plato⁴⁰.

39 *Tht.* 173e-174b (the philosopher's flight); *Sph.* 263a-b (Theaetetus' flight); and *Phdr.* 252b-c (Erōs-Pterōs).

40 See Delcomminette 2014 *contra* Rosen 1983. I thank Francesca Pentassuglio, Justin Vlasits, and Christoph Poetsch for their questions and remarks.

