The Sophist's Invisibility vs The Philosopher's Invisibility

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In this paper I will compare the sophist and the philosopher from the point of view of their visibility and invisibility. The paper has three parts: In the first part I will discuss a passage in the *Sophist* that associates the sophist with darkness and the philosopher with light; as will become clear, light is a metaphor for knowledge and being, while darkness is a metaphor for ignorance and non-being. In the second part I will consider a passage from the analogy of the cave in the *Politeia* where Sokrates compares the transition from light to darkness and the transition from darkness to light; I will suggest that the darkness of non-being in which the sophist dwells is similar to the darkness of the cave, while the light of being in which the philosopher dwells corresponds to the region outside the cave. In the third and last part I will adduce a couple of passages from other dialogues that deal with the difficulty of perceiving the philosopher as a philosopher (*Sophist* 216c, *Kratylos* 403a, *Phaidon* 81a, 64a, *Theaitetos* 149a, *Symposion* 215ab). The point I will try to make is that Platon describes both the sophist and the philosopher as being invisible but that their invisibility is due to different reasons.
light, being, philosopher, sophist

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1.

That visual perception is a central theme of the dialogue the *Sophist* is a point that doesn't need to be particularly stressed. Platon describes the sophist as a producer of empty images, a shameless impostor, and a master of deceit whose main competence is to delude unexperienced people. At

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234c–235a the sophist is called a magician or a wizard and his target public is said to be mainly made of people who are not familiar with truth and real being.[1] Magic, that is to say the skill of making empty images seem real or actual things seem mere images, is a dangerous weapon because it undermines the ontological difference between appearance and reality. Someone who can make things appear and disappear at will, the Guest from Elea says, seems to be able to do anything (πάντα ποιεῖν, *Sophist* 234b).[2] However, the ultimate trick by which any magician proves himself a magician is the act by which he makes *himself* disappear. Therefore, in Plato's dialogue the *Sophist* the difficulty to delineate, approach, and get hold of the protagonist is a direct consequence of his ability to disguise and dissimulate himself.

The starting point of my comparison between sophist and philosopher is the following passage, in which I emphasize the Greek expressions denoting sight, light, visibility and the opposite thereof:

> It is difficult to get a clear sight (χαλεπὸν ἐναργῶς ἰδεῖν) of the philosopher but this difficulty is of a different kind than the difficulty of [seeing] the sophist. [...] The sophist runs off into the darkness of non-being (εἰς τὴν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος σκοτεινότητα) because he is used to cultivating it, and he is difficult to spot (χαλεπὸς κατανοῆσαι) because of the obscurity of the place (διὰ τὸ σκοτεινὸν τοῦ τόπου). [...] The philosopher on the other hand, who in his thoughts is always concerned with the nature of being (τῇ τοῦ ὄντος ἰδέᾳ), is not at all easy to discern (ὀφθῆναι) either, though this is due rather to the brightness of the region (τὸ λαμπρὸν τῆς χώρας) [in which he dwells]; for the soul's eye of the crowd (τὰ τῆς τῶν πολλῶν ψυχῆς ὄμματα) cannot possibly bear to regard the divine (τὸ θεῖον ἀφορῶντα). (*Sph.* 254a)[3]

At first blush, these lines deal with eyesight and its limits, namely the failure to perceive a specific visual object due to either the lack of light or the excess of light. Plato's point is to indicate that, although the effect of too little or too much light upon the eye is roughly the same, it is not immaterial to know which of the two causes prevents the eye from perceiving. The reason is that the two 'objects' under consideration, namely the philosopher and the sophist, are not accidentally but essentially connected with light and

1 See also Mx. 235a; R. 598b–d; Plt. 291bc. On the meaning of γόης see Burkert, 1962, 41–3; on the sophist as a magician see also de Romilly, 1975, 27–32.
2 At Grg. 466bc the power of orators is compared to the omnipotence of the tyrant.
3 All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned.

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darkness, respectively: the philosopher dwells in the light, while the sophist dwells in darkness.

However, a closer look at these lines reveals that Plato is not interested here in eyesight and light *per se* but uses these terms rather ambiguously as metaphors for knowledge and being. To see the sophist means to recognize that he is not the wise man he pretends to be but an artful juggler, while to see the philosopher means to realise that someone who has access to the divine and the eternal is no ordinary man. In both cases, the danger of mistaking someone for someone else is acute.[4] The remedy against this kind of confusion is not the sensible eye, which makes no distinction between sophist, philosopher and anyone else, but the inner eye, or the eye of the soul (ὄμμα τῆς ψυχῆς). The invisible light that makes the soul's vision possible is the divine radiance of being. It is in the light of being that the soul's eye perceives the difference between appearance and reality and that the world of appearances in which the sophist dwells appears as darkness.

2.

The terms in which the sophist and the philosopher are compared in these lines recall the simile of the sun in the *Politeia*, a passage where the cognitive faculty of the soul is likened to the eye, the knowledge of ideas to eye perception, the ideas themselves to the sensible visual objects, and the idea of good to the sun. The parallels between the *Sophist* and the *Politeia* are well-known and I will not insist upon them – one may consider for instance the ontology of the image in Book 10.[5] What I would like to draw attention to, however, is a *Politeia* passage dealing with the same two kinds of visual impairment mentioned in the *Sophist*, caused by either the absence of light or the overabundance of light. In his comments on the analogy of the cave, Sokrates famously says:

> If a man were intelligent he would remember that there are two kinds of disturbances of the eyes (ὄμμασι), stemming from two sources – when they have been transferred from light to darkness (ἐκ φωτὸς εἰς σκότος) and when they have been transferred from darkness to light

4 Arist. Metaph. 1004b16–9: "dialecticians and sophists have the same appearance (τὸ αὐτὸ ὑποδύονται σχῆμα) as the philosophers; but sophistry is only apparent wisdom." On the similarities and differences between sophist and philosopher see also Derrida, 1972, 120–36; de Romilly, 1975, 36–7.

5 Else, 1972, 26–31; Notomi, 2011, 311–26; Zucchetti, 2020.

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> (ἐκ σκότους εἰς φῶς). And if he held that these same things happen to a soul too, whenever he saw (ἴδοι) one that is confused and unable to discern (ἀδυνατοῦσάν τι καθορᾶν), he wouldn't laugh without reasoning but would go on to consider (ἐπισκοποῖ) whether the soul comes from a brighter life (ἐκ φανοτέρου βίου) and is in darkness (ἐσκότωται) for want of being accustomed, or whether it goes from lack of learning to greater brightness (εἰς φανότερον) and is dazzled by the greater brilliance (ὑπὸ λαμπροτέρου μαρμαρυγῆς). (*R.* 518a)

Here, too, the soul's eye is likened to the sensible eye, and the transition from light to darkness is said to affect both visual perception and intellectual cognition in a similar way as the transition from darkness to light. Needless to say, the contrast between darkness and light is constitutive of the cave analogy, with the darkness of the cave representing the world of appearance and the outside sunlight representing the world of pure being.[6] It is worth noting that Plato is here eager to emphasize the same point as in the *Sophist* passage, namely that despite the two transitions between light and darkness having a similar effect on the visual and cognitive faculties it does make a difference whether one goes from darkness into light or from light into darkness. In the terms of the cave analogy, the condition of a prisoner who managed to escape from the cave and, seeing the daylight for the first time, is overwhelmed by the awareness of a superior ontological level is quite different from the condition of a free man who is well acquainted with real being and who, having decided to go back into the cave, must inevitably grope around in the dark and make a fool of himself among the cavemen.

Now, if we put together the two passages in the *Sophist* and the *Politeia* – and I think that the numerous points of contact between them entitle us to put them together – it follows that the darkness in which the sophist, in the former passage, is said to dwell is very similar to the darkness of the cave.[7] The sophist is invisible because he operates in the dark where he successfully deludes his fellow cavemen into believing that he knows everything and can do anything. The dialogue the *Sophist*, whose aim is to unmask the master of deceit, reads, therefore, like a descent into the cave: the Guest from Elea and his interlocutors, or rather Plato himself, decided to deal with the world of appearance and to explain to the uninitiated public the emptiness of the king of this world. From this point of view, the difficulty of the hunt for

6 On the so-called Lichtmetaphysik see Beierwaltes, 1957; Bremer, 1973.
7 This has also been suggested by Classen, 1959, 63–4.

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the sophist illustrated by the numerous successive definitions appears like a groping in the dark by someone used to dwell in the light of being.

But, if it's true that the sophist's invisibility is a constant theme in the dialogue devoted to the sophist, what about the philosopher's invisibility? Since there is no dialogue by Plato devoted to the philosopher in which to read about this, it may seem questionable to lay too much stress on a casual remark occasioned by the investigation of the sophist, even if this remark seems to echo such an important passage as the cave analogy in the *Politeia*.

3.

In the remainder of this paper I will, therefore, look for more hints regarding the difficulty of recognizing the philosopher as a philosopher and I will attempt to support the claim that the Platonic philosopher is, like the sophist but in a different way than him, invisible, too.

The first passage I would like to mention is the brief dialogue between Sokrates and Theodoros in the opening lines of the *Sophist*. Here, Theodoros introduces the Guest from Elea to Sokrates and praises him as a true lover of wisdom, or philosopher. Sokrates suggests, with no apparent reason, that the Guest could well be a god in disguise, to which Theodoros replies that his friend from Elea, albeit no god, is surely a divine man, as are all philosophers. Sokrates then continues:

> I'm afraid that philosophers, as a category, are not easier to make out (διακρίνειν) than gods; this is because these men – and I mean the true lovers of wisdom, not the fake ones – appear (φανταζόμενοι) 'in all sorts of shapes,' due to the ignorance of the others about them, when 'they come to the cities;' they look down (καθορῶντες) from above on the lives of those below and to some they seem to be worth nothing at all, while others appreciate them more than anything else. They appear (φαντάζονται) sometimes as statesmen, sometimes as sophists, and sometimes people believe that they are completely mad. (*Sph.* 216c)

The visit of a truly wise man to a city, for instance that of the Guest from Elea to Athens, reads here like a descent into the cave: coming from another dimension, namely the world of the divine, the philosopher 'looks down from above on the lives of those below'. In the darkness of the cave, he appears to the common eye as something else than what he really is. Unlike the sophist, who changes shape on purpose and takes advantage of his

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disguise,[8] the philosopher's true nature is not visible because – and I think these are the key words here – 'because of the ignorance of the others.' Let me note in passing that in most comments on the opening lines of the dialogue these words spoken by Sokrates are not given the importance they deserve.[9] In my opinion, the Guest from Elea alludes to this detail later on in the conversation between Sokrates and Theodoros when he says, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper (254a), that "the soul's eye of the crowd cannot possibly bear to regard the divine."[10] To believe that the philosopher is many-shaped in virtue of his nature is to commit the same mistake as those who believe that the god is many-shaped.[11] Both Sokrates and the Guest from Elea agree, therefore, that the reason why the philosopher is, as a philosopher, not visible to the others lies in the eye of the uninitiated.

Another passage where philosophy is directly connected with invisibility is the interpretation of the name 'Hades' in the *Kratylos*. The god of the netherworld is invisible (ἀ-ιδής), Sokrates says (403a). He explains that this is the origin of the fear of death because most people cling to the visible and the sensible, and, therefore, naturally loathe what they cannot perceive with the senses. Unlike them, the philosopher not only does not fear death but actually looks forward to the realm of invisibility because he knows that the other world is the only place where the souls, having laid off their material covers, can effectively pursue their pure love of wisdom. Moreover, Sokrates is convinced that Hades, the invisible master of the kingdom of invisibility, entertains the souls that visit him with lectures on virtue and describes him as a 'sophist', a 'benefactor of mankind', and a 'philosopher'. In the same line of thought, the *Phaidon* (81a) explains the love of wisdom, or philosophy, as

8 At Euthd. 288b Sokrates compares the sophists Euthydemos and Dionysodoros with the many-faced sea god Proteus – actually, he says that they imitate him (μιμεῖσθον) –, he points out that they bewitch (γοητεύοντε) their interlocutors and, moreover, calls Proteus a sophist (τὸν Αἰγύπτιον σοφιστήν).

9 Rosen, 1983, 65–6; Notomi, 1999, 23; Casadesús Bordoy, 2013, 16–8 (the latter provides a very useful discussion of the sophist's many-facedness).

10 See also the reference at Sph. 232c to the "divine things that are invisible to the many" (τὰ θεῖα, ὅσ' ἀφανῆ τοῖς πολλοῖς).

11 R. 380d: "Do you think that the god is a wizard who insidiously shows himself in various forms – be it that he himself changes his appearance and takes different aspects, be it that he just deceives us into believing such things about him – or is he simple, that is to say he is the last thing that would change his form?". For the constrast between (good) simplicity and (bad) multiplicity – which is nothing else than the ontological contrast between eternal idea and invididual things – see also R. 445c, 507b; Grg. 482a; Cra. 405c, Plt. 297c.

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a rehearsal of death (μελέτη θανάτου), that is to say a preparation for the moment when the soul will have direct access to that which is like itself: the immortal, the divine, and the invisible.[12]

The notion that philosophy is not just an aspiration to reach the invisible but is itself invisible is present in different forms in more than one dialogue. Let us take a look at the passage *Phaidon* 64a where Sokrates says, "I'm afraid that those who practise philosophy properly study unbeknownst to others (λεληθέναι τοὺς ἄλλους) nothing else than dying and being dead." The point is here that people who are not trained in philosophy do not really understand what philosophy is all about, that laymen do not really 'see' what philosophers are ultimately doing. Sokrates, the prototype of a Platonic philosopher, speaks these words in jail after having been mistaken for a sophist who corrupts the youth. He is therefore the most glaring example of invisibility. In the *Theaitetos*, the following dialogue between Sokrates and Theaitetos takes place:

> Sokrates: Have you not heard that I'm the son of a noble and burly midwife called Phainarete?
> Theaitetos: Yes, I have heard that.
> Sokrates: And have you also heard that I practise the same art?
> Theaitetos: No, never.
> Sokrates: But I assure you it's true; only do not tell on me to the others, for it isn't known (λέληθα) that I possess this art. Other people, since they do not know it (οὐκ εἰδότες), do not say this of me, but say that I am a most eccentric man and drive people to puzzlement (ἀπορεῖν). (*Tht.* 149a, transl. Fowler modified)

Sokrates' midwifery is invisible to the others in the same way the essence of philosophy is invisible to laymen. It is worth noting that Sokrates uses here the same verb λανθάνω as in *Phaidon* 64a. If we pick up the etymological connection between λανθάνω and ἀλήθεια we may conclude that the truth of philosophy (ἀλήθεια τῆς φιλοσοφίας) escapes (λανθάνει) most people. Like the philosophers who in the first lines of the *Sophist* appear to others as madmen, Sokrates appears to others as an eccentric man *because of their ignorance* (οὐκ εἰδότες).

In the *Symposion* (215ab), Alkibiades compares Sokrates with the statues of ugly sileni that bear inside beautiful images of gods. This is a metaphor for Sokrates' and Plato's philosophy which teaches the superiority of the unseen,

12 I have discussed these two passages in more detail in Enache, 2008.

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the divine, and the pure over the sensible, the vulgar, and the impure.[13] Just as Sokrates' invisible soul is more valuable than his unattractive visible aspect, so too invisible beauty is infinitely superior to everything the sensible eye can perceive. In contrast, sophistry dazzles the sensible eye with its garish appearance but all it has to offer is non-being. Commenting on these words of Alkibiades, Erasmus writes:

> This indeed is the nature of truly noble things: they keep hidden and concealed deep in themselves (*in intimis recondunt abduntque*) their most precious side while showing only their most worthless aspect to others; they keep their treasure enveloped in a cheap cover (*vili cortice dissimulant*) and do not allow indecent eyes (*profanis oculis*) to see it. The manner of common and shady things (*vulgarium et umbraticarum*) is however very different: they try to impress with their outer appearance (*summa specie blandiuntur*) and quickly show off (*obviis ostentant*) their most beautiful side; but if you look inside (*introspicias*) you will find nothing of what they pretend to be at first sight. (*Adagia* 3,3,1 771c)

I cannot continue this discussion here. My purpose was to show that the Platonic sophist and the Platonic philosopher represent two paradigms of invisibility and that their comparison bears on some of the most important motifs of Plato's philosophy.

13 Interestingly enough, when Alkibiades joins the party at Agathon's house he seats himself next to Sokrates but does not see him: ἐπίπροσθε τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἔχοντα, οὐ κατιδεῖν τὸν Σωκράτη "although he [sc. Alkibiades] had Sokrates before his eyes, he did not see him" (Smp. 213a).

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