How Socratic Is the "Noble Art of Sophistry"? Tracing the *Gennaia Sophistike* of the Sixth Diaeresis Back to Old Comedy

Alessandro Stavru
University of Verona

Several scholars agree in identifying the "sophistry" outlined in the 6th diaeresis of Plato's *Sophist* with the Socratic elenchus (see esp. Cornford 1935, 177-179). In fact, refuting someone "when (s)he thinks (s)he is saying something though (s)he is saying nothing" until (s)he feels ashamed for the opinions (s)he previously held (230c-d), is a kind of purification that strongly resembles Socrates' elenctic activity. According to Plato and other first-generation Socratics, the shame triggered by Socrates plays a pivotal role in transforming the unfounded pretense of knowledge of Socrates' interlocutors into an admission of ignorance. As Rosen has pointed out, the 6th diaeresis ends with a definition not of the sophist, but of "a hybrid of the sophist and the philosopher" (1983, 131). This is surprising, as one explicit aim Plato pursues very often (in the *Sophist* as well as in many other dialogues) is to distinguish between, in most cases even to counterpose, the sophist and the philosopher. This raises the question of what kind of sophistry Plato has in mind at 226B-231B. In this paper I claim that in the 6th diaeresis Plato points at a definition of the sophist that merges both the professional sophists and Socrates—a definition that can be traced back to Old Comedy. Here, the word *sophistes* encompasses "intellectuals" of various kinds (sophists, philosophers, *phusiologoi*, and even the initiates to mystery cults such as Orphism or the Eleusinian Mysteries) that were lampooned not only in Aristophanes's *Clouds*, but also in other comedies by playwrights who were active in the decade before 423 BC (such as Eupolis, Ameipsias, and Plato Comicus). In this paper, I show how Plato's account of sophistry at 226B-231B depends on a variety of comic motifs.
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A puzzling feature of the sixth diaeresis of Plato's *Sophist* is its conclusion. After having defined sophistry as a "purification" which is able to screen out the better from the worse, in a series of five diaereses, the Eleatic Stranger concludes that the sophist has the ability to "refute the empty belief in one's own wisdom", an ability which is "nothing other than a noble art of sophistry".[1]

Several scholars agree in identifying such "sophistry" as Socratic elenchus.[2] Indeed, refuting someone "when (s)he thinks (s)he is saying

1 Pl. *Sph.* 231b. All translations from *Sophist* are adapted from the translation by White 1996.

2 See esp. Cornford 1935, 177-179.

something though (s)he is saying nothing" until (s)he feels ashamed for the opinions (s)he previously held, as Plato says at the end of the passage, can be considered a kind of purification strongly reminiscent of Socrates' elenctic activity. According to Plato, as well as other first-generation Socratics, it is precisely the shame triggered by Socrates' elenctic activity which plays a pivotal role in quashing the unfounded pretense of knowledge held by Socrates' interlocutors and brings about their admission of ignorance.[3] As Stanley Rosen aptly pointed out, the sixth diaeresis ends with a definition not of the sophist but of "a hybrid of the sophist and the philosopher".[4] This is a surprising statement because in the *Sophist*, as well as in many other dialogues, Plato often pursues the explicit aim of distinguishing the sophist from the philosopher or, in many cases, even counterposing the former with the latter. This observation then raises the question: what kind of sophistry does Plato have in mind in this section of the *Sophist*?

My aim in this paper is to show that, in the sixth diaeresis, Plato hints at a definition of the sophist that is inclusive of both the professional sophists and Socrates, and thus criticizes the Socratic method and elenchus. Such a definition can be traced back to Old Comedy. Here, the word *sophistes* defines "intellectuals" of various kinds: not only the sophists but also the philosophers, *physiologoi*, the astronomers, and even the seers and initiates of mystery cults such as Orphism or the Eleusinian Mysteries. These intellectuals were lampooned not only in Aristophanes' *Clouds*[5] but also in other comedies by playwrights who were active in the decade before the rehearsal of *Clouds*. In fact, at least seven comedies rehearsed in the 430s and 420s deal with "education" (*paideia*) and those who teach and learn it, the "sophists" or "thinkers" (*sophistai* or *phrontistai*).[6]

As for the relationship between the sixth diaeresis of Plato's *Sophist* and Aristophanes, it is stunning to note that Aristophanes' Socrates seems to be aware of the diaeretic method. In *Clouds*, we see him ordering one of his pupils to "let your thinking become subtle and consider your affairs bit by bit, properly dividing them up and examining them".[7]

3 See, for instance, the Alcibiades speech of Plato's *Symposium* (esp. 216a-c and 217e-218a), Socrates' dialogue with Euthydemus in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.2 (esp. 4.2.39-40), and Aeschines' *Alcibiades* (esp. *SSR* VI A 51-54).

4 See esp. Rosen 1983, 131. See also Gooch 1971, 124-133; Hermann 1988, 109-117; Dorion 2000. Trevaskis 1955, 36-49.

5 Ar. *Nu.* 331-334 and 357-362.

6 See Bromberg 2018, 31-62.

7 Ar. *Nu.* 739-741.

It seems likely that Plato derives the notion of *diairesis* from Aristophanes, and develops it in a philosophical perspective. This applies especially to the sixth diaeresis of the *Sophist*, which clearly hints at a comic context. According to the Eleatic Stranger, "the method [of diaeresis]… tries to understand how all kinds of expertise belong to the same kind or not. And so for that it values them all equally *without thinking that some of them are more ridiculous than others*, as far as their similarity is concerned. And it doesn't consider a person haughtier because (s)he exemplifies hunting by military expertise rather than by killing vermin".[8] The example provided by Plato is clearly comic. In fact, Plato relates the method of diaeresis to several items typical of comedy: the first is that things should be valued per se, without reference to their comic value (their *geloion*); the second is that diaeresis should not consider whether a person is "haughty" (*semnos*), a quality distinctive of Socrates and other comic *sophistai*;[9] the third and most important item is that, according to Plato, such haughtiness derives from a very peculiar expertise: that of "killing vermin" (*phtheiristike*). This expertise is precisely what the protagonist of Aristophanes' *Clouds* – the old and dumb Strepsiades – lacks. For about ninety verses of *Clouds* (634-725), Strepsiades is plagued by bugs (and thus unable to properly follow Socrates' teachings) because he is unable to get rid of them.[10] Socrates and his pupils, on the contrary, are so used to dealing with insects, fleas in particular, that not only are they able to tame them, they can even craft waxen shoes for them and measure the distance of their jumps.[11]

It should be noted that in the aforementioned passage from the *Sophist*, techniques for killing vermin (*phtheiristike*) are listed as a subcategory of hunting. This is also coherent with a passage from the *Parmenides*, a dialogue written in the same period as the *Sophist*, where a similar ability is attributed to the young Socrates. Here, the Eleatic philosopher Zeno reproaches a young Socrates for not being able to grasp the content of his book, yet he also remarks that Socrates is very good at "chasing down arguments as young female Spartan hunting hounds do".[12] It seems clear that the analogy with the Laconian hounds conveys both negative and positive qualities of the young Socrates: on the one hand, he is not yet mature enough for philosophical reasoning; on the other, he knows how to track

8 Pl. *Sph.* 227a-b.
9 See, for example, Ar. *Nu.* 361-363.
10 See esp. *Nu.* 627-634 and 693-699.
11 See *Nu.* 144-152.
12 Pl. *Prm.* 128b-c.

arguments and correct his path when he misses the philosophical truth. Thus, it seems that the hunting metaphor the Eleatic Stranger puts forward in the *Sophist* is related to the image of the hunting Socrates mentioned by the Eleatic philosopher Zeno in the *Parmenides*. The comic context of the passage of the *Sophist* suggests that Plato's Socrates knows how to hunt because – as Aristophanes' *Clouds* also shows – he and his pupils know how to tame and kill vermin.

Several scholars have noted that the infestation of the *phrontisterion* in *Clouds* with bugs and fleas likely points to the poor personal hygiene of Socrates and his pupils, a feature that is clearly hinted at in *Birds*.[13] The passage from the *Sophist* deals with issues related to personal hygiene in a similarly playful fashion: here the Eleatic Stranger tackles *katharsis*, that is, the purification of bodies: "fulling and all kinds of furbishing take care of the purification of nonliving bodies, but they have lots of specialized and ridiculous-seeming names".[14] Plato seems to imply that the purification of the body is ridiculous, since the body constitutes man's insignificant exterior. Therefore, *katharsis* should be applied not to the body but to the soul. But what is the link between such purification and the aforementioned example of hunting and killing vermin? Scholars have used these examples to show that all such skills, military expertise as much as killing vermin, belong to the same overall category of expertise, that is, hunting.[15] I think that these examples should be understood in the light of the comic context of the passage. Once again, Aristophanes' *Clouds* proves to be a useful reference. In fact, considering the plot of *Clouds*, we are faced with a paradox. At the beginning of the play, we see that the Socratics do not care about their personal hygiene, and are, therefore, plagued by insects; yet, towards the end of the play, in the famous contest between the Stronger and the Weaker Argument, we see that the latter recommends warm baths, where youths should exercise their eristic abilities.[16] As noted by several scholars, it is indeed difficult to match the filthy Socratics of the first part of *Clouds* with the bathing youths of this section of the play;[17] what is obviously common to both, however, is rhetorical skill. Despite all differences between the two

13 Ar. *Av.* 1280-1283.

14 Pl. *Sph.* 227a.

15 In *Sph.*, Plato employs 78 terms designating a variety of human activities. For a complete survey of them, see Shukhoshvili 2009, 262-267, esp. 266-267. It is difficult to think that Plato is genuinely interested in these activities; such detailed account of them should be taken as highly ironical, and pointing at their devaluation.

16 Ar. *Nu.* 1052-1054.

17 See, e.g., Dover 1968, lxii.

lifestyles, the Socratics and the followers of the Weaker Argument are both *sophistai*, that is, "intellectuals" who master the art of speech and propound a new idea of *paideia*.

It seems that the sixth definition of the *Sophist* encompasses both kinds of *sophistai* displayed in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. In fact, not only does the Eleatic Stranger deal with the technique of killing vermin (*phtheiristike*), but he also refers to the technique of bathing (*balaneutike*). The former reminds us of the insects that infest the *phrontisterion*, whereas the latter recalls the description of "warm baths" delivered by the Weaker Argument. Plato's argument is clear. A proper *katharsis* must purify the soul, not the body. Therefore, all kinds of purification that aim to cleanse the body – such as those implied in Aristophanes' *Clouds* – can only be conceived as insufficient, and, therefore, ridiculous.

The same comic context can be surmised for 228c-d. Here, the Eleatic Stranger deals with the notions of *symmetria* and *ametria*, and relates both to the problem of knowledge. Knowledge occurs in the soul. And it occurs in a very specific way: it is either present or absent. As the Eleatic stranger notes, the process leading to the acquisition of knowledge is similar to something that tries to strike a target: in the case that the target is hit, knowledge is acquired; but if it is missed, then no knowledge is gained. This entails that the soul *always strives for the truth*: it misses the truth not because it does not want to hit it, but because "it swerves aside from understanding and so is beside itself". This implies that a lack of knowledge is simply the result of unwanted error. It never happens willingly, since *everyone always pursues knowledge*.

This intellectualistic pattern is common in Plato. Much earlier instances than those in the *Sophist* can be found, namely in *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, where similar claims are made.[18] Scholars commonly agree in identifying intellectualism as a Socratic motif.[19] This also applies to the sixth diaeresis of the *Sophist*. This passage has, however, a peculiar feature, one which is absent from the other passages of the Platonic corpus dealing with intellectualism. In the *Sophist*, symmetry corresponds to knowledge, whereas the lack of symmetry corresponds to the lack of knowledge; although this is rather strange, as the knowledge Plato has in mind here is knowledge of the immaterial soul, whereas symmetry and the lack of it are physical features that can only apply to bodily things. It is difficult to think that an ignorant

18 See *Prt.* 352b1-c7 and *Grg.* 509e5-7.
19 See e.g., Weiss 2018, 277-317.

soul is "out of proportion", as the Eleatic Stranger claims at the end of the passage.

A way out of this difficulty is suggested by the same comic context we looked at previously. In the abovementioned verses of *Clouds* (144-152), we see that Aristophanes' joke about the insects infesting the *phrontisterion* has a meaning that goes beyond a simple reference to the Socratics' lack of hygiene. Socrates' pupils are busy at performing a complicated task, that of measuring the distance of flea jumps. It is important to note that the verbs used by Aristophanes, *diametrein* and *anametrein*, hint at a kind of measurement that implies a *unit of measurement*. This explains why Socrates' pupils craft a measuring device, namely waxen shoes, by dipping the feet of the fleas into melted wax. It is only thanks to these shoes that the measurement will eventually be carried out using flea feet as the unit of measure.

It seems obvious that Aristophanes is joking here about the Pythagorean notion of symmetry, which entails the idea of harmony derived from a specific number that serves as a unit of measure. Aristophanes is blatantly mocking this idea of symmetry, and, more importantly, he is indirectly attributing it to Socrates. Furthermore, it should be noted that the measurement of flea jumps is the first activity that Aristophanes reports about the Socratics. This fact, in itself, appears to suggest – at least in Aristophanes' eyes – that techniques of measurement relying on a unity of measure were indeed characteristic of Socrates' teachings.

A passage from Vitruvius' *De Architectura* helps us get a broader picture: Vitruvius tells us that the Greeks, in order to achieve symmetry (*symmetrias… quaerentes*), "measured a man's footprint and compared it with his height. When they discovered a man's foot to be one-sixth of his height, they then applied this same ratio to the column, and whatever diameter they selected for the base of the column shaft, they carried its shaft, including the capital, to a height six times that amount. Thus, the Doric column came to exhibit the proportion, soundness, and attractiveness of the male body". Then "they applied the same ratio based on footprints (*speciem isdem vestigiis*) to a woman's slenderness, and began making the diameter of the columns measure one eighth their height, so that their appearance would be more lofty".[20]

Here, it seems clear that Vitruvius is dwelling on a notion of symmetry that reminds of Aristophanes' derisive description of the measurement of flea jumps. *Symmetria* has to do with bodies and parts of them, both male and female. Given the comic context of Plato's sixth definition, it is possible that

20 Vitr. 4.1.6-7. Trans. Rowland, adapted.

his reference to *symmetria* and *ametria* points towards the same idea. *Symmetria* and *ametria* are features of corporeal things. Their connection with the soul is impossible – and, therefore, ridiculous – as the soul cannot be measured. Aristophanes had already shown in *Clouds* that measurement is a typical feature of Socratic teaching. Plato very likely draws on this motif and merges it with the motif of the involuntariness of ignorance. The outcome is an ironical – and very likely a critical – account of intellectualism: as knowledge is in the soul, symmetry cannot be a valid criterion for deciding about its correctness.

Similarly, the absence of symmetry cannot be taken as a benchmark for ignorance. Hence the need to provide other definitions of ignorance: in the subsequent lines of the passage, the Eleatic Stranger points out that there are two kinds of deficiency in the soul: one is the lack of virtue that leads to cowardice, licentiousness and injustice, the other is the absolute lack of knowledge in all sorts of things (*polle kai pantodape agnoia*). Eventually, the Eleatic Stranger comes to investigate whether a diaeresis of *agnoia* itself is possible.[21] It turns out that there is a sub-form of *agnoia* which is particularly vicious, as it is the cause of all the mistakes one makes whilst thinking. This sub-form is *amathia*, that is, the ignorance that goes with an unfounded pretense of knowledge. In *Laws*, Plato clarifies this idea.[22] Here, we see that *amathia* has a specific drawback, namely it lets us "think we know everything when we are almost totally ignorant". This error arises from the fact that due to an excessive love of themselves (*to sphodra philein hauton*) the *amatheis* always believe themselves to be wise – even when they are completely ignorant. For this very reason, they are unable to learn anything: therefore, they will discard every knowledge that is not their own. This leads the Eleatic Stranger to conclude that the *amatheis* should not be educated through *paideia*, but through elenchus: not by imparting knowledge to them, but by refuting their pretense of being wise.

The description of the *amatheis* provided here, and the necessity to deal with them by using elenchus, obviously brings Socrates to mind: in fact, we know from *Apology* that Socrates' activity specifically consisted in dealing with fellow citizens who were famous for their wisdom, while he himself was conscious of his absolute lack of knowledge.[23] Socrates approaches

21 Pl. *Sph.* 229c-d.

22 Pl. *Lg.* 5.731e-732b. On the distinction between *agnoia* and *amathia*, see Cusinato 2023, 256–263.

23 See Pl. *Ap.* 20d-e and 21b-22a.

those who "appear wise" *but are not wise*.[24] It is important to note that the expression *dokein einai sophos* occurs thrice within just a few lines,[25] thereby highlighting the pretense of knowledge of Socrates' interlocutors. Socrates' elenchus exposes this pretense by showing them that *they think they are wise but are not*. The result is that most of Socrates' interlocutors come to dislike or even to hate Socrates.

It is important to note the emotional setting of Socrates' elenctic activity: by refuting the pretense of knowledge in his dialogue partners, Socrates makes them feel ashamed and angry at themselves. This can also be observed in *Sophist*, where Socrates' interlocutors "lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves" and thus undergo epistemic transformation. Elenchus turns out to be a sort of *katharsis* since it uses emotions to "remove the opinions that interfere with learning". Thus, elenchus leads to a purified soul. Its eventual result is that the interlocutors of Socrates believe "that they know only those things that they do know, and nothing more".[26]

Conclusion.

The sixth diaeresis imparts a highly accurate account of the Socratic method. The passages we have examined shed light on a variety of typical Socratic topics such as intellectualism, the distinction between *agnoia* and *amathia*, Socrates' lack of wisdom and his interlocutors' pretense of knowledge, and the purifying effect of elenchus. Nevertheless, Plato does not mention Socrates in the sixth diaeresis, nor does he use Socrates as a *dramatis persona*. On the contrary, through the words of the Eleatic Stranger he provides an account of sophistry which depends on a variety of comic motifs. We have seen that several of these motifs explicitly or implicitly recall Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comedy that lashed out violently at Socrates and his associates. In *Apology*, Plato recalls that this comedy was indirectly responsible for the hatred that led the Athenians to prosecute Socrates in 399. It is telling that in *Sophist* Plato uses motifs drawn from this very comedy: this sole fact suggests that the portrait of Socratic elenchus provided in the passage should not be considered as eulogistic, but, on the contrary, as an ironical and highly refined critique of the flaws of the Socratic method – the most evident of which being its relation to an impossible symmetry of the soul.

24 Pl. *Ap.* 21b.
25 Pl. *Ap.* b9, c6 and 21d8.
26 Pl. *Sph.* 230b-d.

This explains why Plato merges Socrates' activity with that of the sophists: both are representatives of a *gennaia sophistike*, a "noble sophistry" that Plato heavily criticizes for its inconsistencies.