III. Eleatic Stranger and Noble Sophist

Philosophical *paideia* in Plato's *Sophist*

Jan Szaif
University of California, Davis

The sixth division in Plato's *Sophist* (226a-231b) describes a type of apparent sophistry that practices refutation (*elenchus*) in a manner superficially resembling sophistic disputation, yet in pursuit of the therapeutic goal of dispelling the interlocutor's illusion of knowledge that stands in the way of achieving true excellence through genuine philosophizing. It equates this "noble" kind of sophistry with *paideia* (roughly, personality-forming education and culture), in opposition to instruction in specialized skills. So far, little attention has been given to this text as a source for Plato's views on *paideia*. This essay analyzes the conception of *paideia* in the sixth division and shows why it is not easy to reconcile with Plato's views on philosophical education in other dialogues or with the Visitor's own practice in the *Sophist*. To provide a basis for a correct assessment of the pedagogical function of "noble sophistry", the second part of this essay comments on what distinguishes personal, ignorance-revealing elenctic, serving as protreptic, from proposal-testing elenctic employed by the progressing philosopher. Philosophical *paideia* starts with the protreptic use of elenctic techniques, but then repurposes these techniques as an indispensable tool of constructive philosophical research.
education, elenchus, sophistry, protreptic, dialectic

The Sixth Division in the *Sophist* (226a-231b) claims to describe a type of sophistry that is "noble" since it practices refutation not for gain or victory but with a therapeutic goal. The Visitor characterizes this practice as *paideia* —a term designating personality-forming education and culture. Yet little attention has been given to this text as a source for Plato's views on *paideia*. My essay aims to address it as an account of *paideia* and show why it is not easy to reconcile this account with Plato's views on philosophical education in other dialogues or with the Visitor's own practice in the *Sophist*. To resolve this issue and enable a correct assessment of the pedagogical function of "noble sophistry", the second part of this essay will distinguish between two stages of philosophical formation and the different roles for refutation during these two stages.

1

The sixth division begins with an act of collection that introduces the generic kind of *separative* expertise (διακριτική) (226bc), which is then divided into two kinds: one tasked with separating similar items from each other, the other concerned with separating what is worse from what is better, casting off what is bad. This second kind is called "cleansing" or "purification". The Visitor observes that purification can relate to bodies or souls. He then explores what it means to purify a soul. Since cleansing serves to remove what is bad, the analysis of psychic cleansing has to start from a consideration of the kinds of badness (κακία) in the soul (227d-228e). The Visitor distinguishes moral badness (πονηρία) from ignorance (ἄγνοια) or erroneous and illusory thinking (παραφροσύνη). He compares these forms of psychic badness to two analogous kinds of badness in the body, viz., to illness caused by conflict (στάσις) and to ugliness caused by a lack of measuredness or good proportion:

badness in the body	badness in the soul
illness (νόσος = στάσις ἐν τῷ σώματι)	moral badness (πονηρία)
ugliness (αἶσχος = ἀμετρία ἐν τῷ σώματι)	cognitive deficiency (ἄγνοια/παραφροσύνη)

The use of the political notion of *stasis* in connection with moral badness is easy to understand if we recall how the *Republic* described κακία as a condition of στάσις in the tripartite soul. The alleged analogy between ignorance and ugliness is much less compelling. The Visitor's justification combines two ideas: He appeals, first, to the common Greek notion that beauty and ugliness are a matter of right or wrong proportions (συμμετρία//ἀμετρία, 228a10-1). Secondly, he describes the mental act of judging as an attempt that aims at the truth but can go awry and miss the target, resulting in false belief.[1] If an archer aims to hit a target but misses it, this is because of a lack of balance or proper coordination in the archer's posture and bodily motion —a case of ἀμετρία. The Visitor claims that false judgment is likewise a result of an imbalance or disproportion in our cognitive apparatus, resulting in παραφροσύνη—a composite term that can denote a condition of derange-

---

1 228c10-d2: Τό γε μὴν ἀγνοεῖν ἐστιν <u>ἐπ' ἀλήθειαν ὁρμωμένης</u> ψυχῆς, <u>παραφόρου</u> <u>συνέσεως γιγνομένης</u>, οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν <u>παραφροσύνη</u>; cf. *Phlb.* 38d5-10, *Cra.* 420b7-9, *Tht.* 189c3; Szaif 1996, 367-69.

ment, but literally means "thinking that goes awry". He also emphasizes that such failing thought is always involuntary (ἄκουσα, 228c7). Nobody wants to be ignorant and make mistakes.

The next step is to specify what methods of purification (καθαρμός) correspond to these types of badness in body and soul (228e-229a). The main point here is the distinction between *discipline* as the cure for moral badness and *instruction* as the cure for cognitive deficiency.[2] The branch of "instruction" (διδασκαλία) is further divided according to two types of ignorance. One can be ignorant of, and receive instruction in, specialized practical or technical skills (δημιουργικαὶ διδασκαλίαι). Yet the more fundamental kind of ignorance occurs when we lack knowledge but think of ourselves as having knowledge (τὸ μὴ κατειδότα τι δοκεῖν εἰδέναι). The Visitor calls this kind of illusion the root cause of all error (229c5-6). He and Theaetetus agree that the name for it is ἀμαθία (roughly: stupidity, lack of learning), whereas the word for its removal is *paideia* (229c8-d4). The linguistic background here is that this word, in contrast to mundane but socially useful competences that can be left to specialists (cf. *Prt.* 312a7-b4, 322a-d), connotes the kind of formation and culture (*Bildung*) that is indispensable for whoever aims at excellence and *eudaimonia* (230d9-e3).[3] Conceit of knowledge prevents progress toward true excellence.

Next, the Visitor distinguishes two different ways of disabusing others of their conceit of knowledge: First, there is the rough, old-fashioned and paternalistic method of "admonition" (νουθετητική), which can take the form of "rebuke" (χαλεπαίνειν) or of encouragement (παραμυθεῖσθαι) (229e4-230a4). Yet a "smoother" (229e2) and more promising path is also available, a path that exploits the fact that no one errs willingly. The Visitor's description of it reminds us of the elenctic method practiced by Socrates in his refutational dialogues, especially in those that put the interlocutor in

---

2 Theaetetus refers to the claim that moral badness is cured by κολαστική as a popular "opinion", which might signal some reservations on Plato's part (cf. Rowe 2015b, 241f). However, while Plato surely thinks that true virtue cannot come from external restrictions and punishment alone but requires intellectual growth and paideia, he also holds that most people won't attain a moral identity grounded in intellectual enlightenment. Thus he still sees a social need for restraining discipline.

3 παιδεία and τροφὴ, or their cognates, are often used together, but παιδεία emphasizes the idea of imparting culture and values (οἱ πεπαιδευμένοι = cultivated people); cf. Chantraine 1968-80, 849b.

a state of puzzlement (*aporia*).[4] He highlights the following aspects of this method (230a-d): Its creators realized that ignorance (ἀμαθία) is involuntary but that people will remain unwilling to learn as long as they believe that they are already compentent (σοφός). Since admonition (νουθετητική) is rather ineffectual as a way to unsettle someone's illusion of competence, they developed a method of questioning that relies on the fact that a person who is still ignorant and confused about a subject-matter cannot maintain a consistent position under skilled cross-examination. The statements proffered or conceded by the interlocutor will lead to some contradiction or absurdity and thus result in refutation. Yet the interlocutors will blame themselves, not the questioner. They will, supposedly,[5] accept it as a most pleasant cure, realizing that it rids them of a deep-seated misconception about themselves (230a4-c4). Only a mind thus cleansed of its "idle conceit of knowledge" (μάταιος δοξοσοφία, 231b6) will be able to benefit from positive instruction (ἕξειν τῶν προσφερομένων μαθημάτων ὄνησιν, 230c9-d1). The Visitor and Theaetetus agree that this practice stands in sharp contrast to how sophists deal with their students. While the appearances are similar since sophists too make their interlocutors contradict themselves (cf. 268b3-5),[6] its underlying motivation differs just as much as that of a protective dog differs from its predatory look-alike, the ferocious wolf (231a6-b1). Accordingly, if the label "sophistic" is to be applied at all, one should call it sophistic "of a noble lineage (γένει γενναία)" (231b8).

The first four divisions in the *Sophist* put much emphasis on the harm caused by sophistic teaching, characterizing it as a practice that "captures" rich youths with the promise of education in "excellence" (*aretê*) and sells knowledge like a commodity (223a4-5, 224c1-2, d1-2). The Seventh Division is going to claim that the sophists use their refutational skills so as to appear wise, motivated by profit. While such education is phony (δοξοπαιδευτική 223b4), the *paideia* conveyed by "noble sophistry" provides a real cure for the most harmful form of ignorance. The *ethos* behind the Socratic type of refutational practice accounts for its "nobility".

---

4 Cf. Zaks 2018, 372-79, for a recent defense of this reading. The text does not mention the word *aporia*, but the full realization of one's μάταιος δοξοσοφία (231b6) is clearly linked to an aporetic state.

5 In Plato's earlier Socratic dialogues, we see that repeated refutation often triggers animosity rather than a change of heart. The 6th Division talks about the *ideal* outcome of therapeutic refutation (cf. *Tht.* 167e-168c).

6 Cf. Taylor 2006 on how not only the 6th division but also the other divisions repeatedly mention aspects of sophistic practice that could also be attributed to Socrates.

The apparent identification of intellectual culture (παιδεία) required for *eudaimonia* with a practice of disabusing interlocutors of their illusion of knowledge could suggest the philosophical program of a skeptic. However, the Visitor also affirms that this critical practice will pave the way for the acquisition of knowledge (μαθήματα 230c8). Moreover, the dialogue *Sophist* as a whole demonstrates the Visitor's commitment to problem-solving. He instructs his interlocutors (and the readers) in constructive methods, such as the method of division and the modes of combination among certain foundational kinds (μέγιστα γένη). In a segment of the *Politicus* that refers back to the *Sophist* (*Plt.* 284b, 286b), he explains that both dialogues have the educational purpose of rendering us διαλεκτικώτεροι (285d6, 287a3), i.e., of honing our dialectical skills so that we may become "more capable of discovering accounts that clarify the things that are" (287a3-4). The Visitor, hence, explicitly aims for a constructive kind of dialectic, seeking to advance our understanding of the forms or kinds. But why then does his twofold division of the genus *instruction* fail to leave room for it? After all, constructive dialectic couldn't be classified as instruction in productive "crafts" (δημιουργική), and it also transcends the merely cathartic *paideia* of "noble sophistry".

Restricting philosophical *paideia* to an ignorance-revealing role would also be at odds with statements in two of Plato's other mature works. In the *Republic*, *paideia* encompasses the entire formation of character and intellect from infancy all the way to the highest forms of knowledge. The discussion of the various forms of knowledge and skill in the *Philebus* distinguishes, just like the *Sophist*, between mundane crafts and skills (τὸ δημιουργικὸν [μόριον]) on the one hand and *paideia* on the other (*Phlb.* 55d). But *paideia* now seems to include all the sciences that are practiced with a philosophical intention, viz., whenever someone pursues pure forms of knowledge without any consideration for practical utility (*Phlb.* 56d-59d). The *Philebus* points to dialectic and theoretical mathematics as such philosophical sciences. This is in fundamental agreement with the scientific curriculum in the *Republic*, which is designed for future philosopher-rulers whereas the mundane crafts belong to the producing class. The restrictive conception of *paideia* in the Sixth Division is, hence, an outlier. It recalls the plea in the *Apology* for a type of "human wisdom" that guides us to the realization of the limits of what we know, but it seems a poor fit for a dialogue that so vigorously promotes constructive, problem-solving procedures of dialectic.

2

This interim result makes it all the more urgent that we explore how the Visitor's constructive methods relate to the cathartic method described in the Sixth Division and what place, if any, "noble sophistry" has in Plato's broader conception of philosophical *paideia*.

Given the close connection with Socratic protreptic, a first option would be to attribute the "noble" use of elenctic techniques to a preparatory stage, as a means to raise awareness of their need for philosophy among those who are still in the grip of phony certainties. We could compare the elenctic καθαρμός especially to those early refutational dialogues that end in *aporia*. We could also cite how Socrates describes the benefits of refutation and puzzlement in *Meno* 84a-c. Since Socratic refutations don't shy away from dubious arguments, his practice is liable to be misperceived as malevolent sophistry, and this is why it is included among the "apparent" manifestations of sophistry but also sharply distinguished from sophistry proper.[7]

A second option would be to argue that for Plato elenctic testing remains an essential tool also for constructive philosophical research and the corresponding form of philosophical education. By way of a brief sketch, I am going to argue for something like this second option, yet with the crucial qualification that elenctic practice in the context of constructive philosophical dialectic differs substantially from the cathartic *ad hominem* refutations directed at those who haven't yet been initiated into philosophy.

We could begin by pointing to a passage in the *Republic*, 534b-d, where Socrates concludes his description of dialectic and emphasizes the need for elenctic testing as part of the cognitive ascent to the highest principle. Any tentative solution regarding the question of the principle would have to be tested, and only if it can withstand all objections "without a fall (ἀπτῶτι τῷ λόγῳ)" should it count as valid.[8] This investigative process can involve others, but it is also a dialogue of the investigator with himself (λόγον

---

7 Cf. Robinson 1953, 84-88. A different way in which this practice can appear as sophistry is highlighted in *R.* 537e-539d: Young people, not discerning its correct motive, mistake it for, and *imitate* it as, a pleasure-seeking refutational knack (cf. Dorion 2016 and *Sph.* 225c-d on the ἀδολεσχικόν branch of eristic).

8 Dialectic is about grasping "the definition of the essence of each thing" and "giving an account (λόγον διδόναι)" to oneself and others (534b3-6). Applying these criteria to the grasp of the form of the Good as ultimate principle (b8-c5), he mentions the act of defining and the process of elenctic testing. These elenctic tests take the form of objections that aim to show that one cannot maintain a consistent position on the basis of the proposed formulation of the principle (Szaif 1996, 222-99).

αὐτῷ τε καὶ ἄλλῳ διδόναι). While the language here is still evocative of the personal elenchus of the earlier dialogues, the focus has shifted from *testing another person* to *testing a proposal*, and this can take place as an internalized dialogue and with respect to proposals entertained merely hypothetically.

The Visitor's practice in the *Sophist* likewise demonstrates that proposal-targeting refutation is an essential part of constructive, problem-solving dialectic. Not only is the Visitor introduced as potentially "some god of testing and refutation" (θεός τις ἐλεγκτικός, 216a5-b6),[9] but the whole central part of the *Sophist* from 242 till 259 is also set up as a refutation (ἔλεγχος), targeting Parmenides' metaphysical principle (λόγος, 241d5, 242a2, b1) that being and not-being can never be combined—a principle that was itself introduced into the dialogue with the help of refutations that revealed the deeply aporetic character of any reference to non-being (ὁ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἔλεγχος, 239b2, cf. 237b-239a). Although this principle is attributed to "father" Parmenides, its refutation cannot have the character of a personal examination since Parmenides is not present. (In fact, he is no longer alive at the dramatic date of the dialogue.) Therapeutic, ignorance-revealing elenctic would require the actual presence of the person to be tested, just as a doctor cannot diagnose and treat a patient whose presence is merely imagined.[10] The noun ἔλεγχος and its cognate ἐλέγχειν are used five times in the passage that formulates the refutational task (241c-242b). But the refutation will be attained through a demonstration (ἀπόδειξις, 242b4) of why, and in what sense, it is correct to say that that-which-is-not is and that-which-is is not.[11] The fact that the refutation does not resort to cross-examination but to a systematic analysis of the necessary combinations between being and not-being shows how the center of gravity has moved to constructive conceptual analysis and ontology. Yet when the Visitor, at the end of this long trajectory, insists that one should either accept the result or try to refute it (259a2*f*), he thus also

---

9 Theodorus' rejection of this characterization has been taken as an indication that the Visitor is not a practitioner of the elenctic method (e.g., Cornford 1935, 169; Frede 2004, 138). But Theodorus naively equates elenctic with the practice of the ἐριστικοί (216b8), a mistake to be corrected in the 6th Division.

10 Here I part ways with Zaks 2018, who argues that the personal elenchus is still a characteristic feature of the *Sophist*.

11 At 241e1, Rowe 2015a, n. 61, rejects the lection ἐλεχθέντων in T adopted by previous editors, but it is clearly preferable not only as a *lectio difficilior* but also because the μήτε ἐλεχθέντων μήτε ὁμολογηθέντων harks back to the analogous dual action in 241d5-7: ἐλεχθέντων takes up the claim that Parmenides' logos needs to be "painfully interrogated", "assailed", and "refuted" (241d6, 242a1, 8, b1); ὁμολογηθέντων refers to the resulting agreement that being and not-being combine (241d6-7, 242b4).

acknowledges that any constructive argument and proposal may still be in need of further refutational testing.

In comparison with personal, ignorance-revealing elenctic, the following general characteristics of proposal-testing elenctic as part of constructive dialectic emerge:

1) In proposal-testing elenctic, the proposal may have been introduced merely hypothetically, without an actual participant committed to the proposal, unlike the situation in a personal *elenchus* that needs to be based on what the interlocutor believes.
2) The refutation of a proposal can now take the form of an *a priori* demonstration of why its contradictory is true, without substantial involvement of the interlocutor. Consistency remains a key requirement for a theory's ability to survive elenctic testing (cf. Szaif 2000), but the main concern is with the truth-value of the theory, not with the cognitive state of an interlocutor.
3) Accordingly, the person of the interlocutor has become exchangeable and even dispensable for the development of the argument, as we can also tell from how the Visitor comments on alternative styles of exposition at his disposal and on how to pick a receptive interlocutor (217c-218b; cf. M. Frede 1996, 138-9).
4) The puzzles (*aporiai*) no longer have the character of a psychological state that arises in an interlocutor as the result of an elenctic examination by Socrates. They are philosophical puzzles or challenges serving as the starting-point for a constructive investigation and resolved at the end of the conversation.[12]

As a result, we can retain that the *elenchus* belongs to two stages of philosophical *paideia*, but its character changes substantially: As personal, ignorance-revealing elenctic it defines the initial cathartic and protreptic stage, when the interlocutors still need to be won over for serious engagement with philosophy; as proposal-testing elenctic, it assumes an essential role in constructive dialectic, serving to test possible solutions and remove misleading assumptions.

We still have reason to wonder why the Sixth Division fails to include instruction in the mathematical and philosophical sciences as a distinct, and

---

12 Cf. L. Brown 2018 on the use of *aporia* in the *Sophist*; Politis 2006a, 89, on kathartic versus zetetic *aporia*; Szaif 2018 and 2022 on the development of the aporetic method away from *ad hominem* argumentation.

higher, branch of *paideia*. These sciences are central to his conception of *paideia* in other dialogues. To be sure, the cathartic phase is said to prepare the ground for some unspecified positive learning (230c9-d1), but there is no node in the division of instruction that would relate to these sciences. This has to do, I surmise, with Plato's authorial strategy. Introducing the philosophical sciences already here, in the Sixth Division, would go beyond the scope of the discussion of appearances of sophistry. Plato waits until the central metaphysical part of the dialogue to grant us a glimpse at the true dialectician (253a-254b).[13]

---

13   This essay has benefited from critical comments by Fiona Leigh.