

Ἀληθῆς δόξα in the *Sophist* between *Theaetetus* and *Seventh Letter*

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The problem of defining and distinguishing true and false speech is a central concern of the *Sophist*. But the problem of discerning true and false opinion (δόξα) is closely related. In this respect, the *Sophist* takes up issues raised in the *Theaetetus*, where ἀληθῆς δόξα plays a central role in the search for a definition of knowledge. The *Sophist* sets out to resolve problems left open in the *Theaetetus* by providing a more advanced concept of λόγος as a combination of nouns and verbs, and by developing criteria for truth and falsity by the establishment of the five “most important classes” and the inclusion therein of Otherness (τὸ ἕτερον). In both dialogues, λόγος and δόξα are closely linked by way of thought (διάνοια) as the mediating element, so that the criteria for truth and falsity of λόγοι are applicable also to truth and falsity of opinions. In the *Seventh Letter*, in the hierarchical pyramid of the means for acquisition of knowledge, true opinion rises to even higher epistemological dignity, since it is paralleled with intelligence (νοῦς) and knowledge and thus placed above name, λόγος and image and closest to the supreme fifth element (the εἶδος). This role of ἀληθῆς δόξα in *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Seventh Letter* also fits in with the general role of ἀληθῆς δόξα in Platonic epistemology in the early and middle dialogues. Thus, ἀληθῆς δόξα needs to be taken seriously as an essential element in Plato’s epistemological thinking, and the *Sophist* occupies a central position in this context.

dianoia, doxa, epistemology, logos, truth

The problem of true and false speech is one of the principal concerns of the *Sophist*. A substantial passage of the last part of the dialogue (259d-264b) is dedicated to the question of how false speech (ψευδῆς λόγος) is possible. Yet it is often overlooked that the concept of ἀληθῆς δόξα (true opinion) and, for that matter, also ψευδῆς δόξα (false opinion), is closely linked to that topic. As a matter of fact, the concepts of speech (λόγος) and opinion (δόξα) appear to be interconnected throughout the entire passage. At 260b10-c4, for instance, the Eleatic Visitor sets the task: “The next thing is to inquire whether Non-being mingles with opinion and speech (τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο σκεπτέον εἰ δόξῃ τε καὶ λόγῳ μίγνυται [*sc.* τὸ μὴ ὄν].).” And he explains: “if it does, false opinion and false discourse come about; for to believe or say what is not—that may well be falsehood arising in thought and in words (μειγνυμένου δὲ δόξα τε ψευδῆς γίγνεται καὶ λόγος: τὸ γὰρ τὰ μὴ ὄντα δοξάζειν ἢ λέγειν, τοῦτ’ ἔστι που τὸ ψεῦδος ἐν διανοίᾳ τε καὶ λόγοις γιγνόμενον).” The Greek for “believe or say” is δοξάζειν ἢ λέγειν, which

again couples the two notions. Similarly, in 261b1-2, Theaetetus concurs: “We must prove that falsehood exists in relation to speech and to opinion (δεῖ δὴ ψευδὸς ὡς ἔστι καὶ περὶ λόγον καὶ περὶ δόξαν ἀποδείξαι).” These are two citations out of many in which speech and opinion appear closely linked. Hence, the question of true and false speech is related to the question of true and false opinion. Of course, the primary focus here is on explanation of *false* speech and opinion; but clearly there can’t be false speech or opinion without true speech or opinion.

Yet the epistemological question of how true and false opinions can be discerned refers directly back to the *Theaetetus*, to which the *Sophist* is the dramatic sequel. In the *Theaetetus*, ἀληθῆς δόξα plays a central role in the search for a definition of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). Theaetetus’ third attempt at defining is that knowledge may be the same as true opinion (*Th.* 187b5-6), a notion duly refuted as overly naive by Socrates. Consequently, in Theaetetus’ fourth attempt (*Th.* 201c9-d1), the concept gets refined, and true opinion is complemented by λόγος (in the sense of explanation or account, as in λόγον δίδόναι, “to give an account”, *Th.* 202c2). Yet it soon turns out that the problem has only been shifted, since now it is a reliable definition of λόγος that is elusive, as it runs into circularity, because if this account must itself include correct opinion (ὀρθῆ δόξα) on how the object in question differs from other objects, it will amount to a tautology (*Th.* 209d8-10), which is why for the time being the dialogue ends in aporia. But the problem as such is only adjourned until the next day, which is the setting of the *Sophist*.

My argument will have four parts: First, it will be shown how the *Sophist* tries to find solutions to issues left open by the *Theaetetus*. Next, it will be demonstrated in which way Plato links the problem of true and false opinions to that of true and false λόγοι in both dialogues. In a third part, the account of the *Sophist* will be compared with the epistemological passage in the *Seventh Letter*, pointing to significant differences. Finally, it will be asked how all this fits in with the overall role of ἀληθῆς δόξα in Plato’s epistemology.

To begin with, it seems obvious that the *Sophist* sets out to stop the aporetic gap left open at the end of the *Theaetetus* by finding a consistent account of λόγος that makes it possible to distinguish true λόγοι from false, and thereby implicitly to resolve the *Theaetetus*’ problem of a definition of knowledge.

In the *Sophist*, the possibility of discerning true λόγοι from false is ascertained by a more advanced definition of λόγος. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato still proceeds from a simpler concept of λόγος as a combination (συμπλοκή) of “names” (ὀνόματα, *Th.* 202b4-5). This concept of λόγος as a mere ag-

gregate of ὀνόματα, a concept that reduces speaking (λέγειν) to “naming” (ὀνομάζειν) and makes truth and falsity of a λόγος a function of the semantic “truth or falsity” of its constituent “names”, had already been underlying the debate about the correctness of names in the *Cratylus* (*Cra.* 385b2-d1; 431a8-c2; the term there being σύνθεσις). This “accumulative model” (Derbolav, 1972, 113–15) is overcome in the *Sophist* and replaced by a new model of λόγος as a combination (the terms still are συμπλοκή and συμπλέκειν), yet not of names with names, but of nouns (ὀνόματα) with verbs (ῥήματα) (*Sph.* 262d4; de Rijk, 1986, 196–202). This is a major advance over the accumulative model still retained in the *Theaetetus* (which is ultimately responsible for the failure of a definition of λόγος in that dialogue). It may be surmised, though, that even in the *Theaetetus* Plato was already aware of the developed concept of the *Sophist*: At one single moment this concept flashes up in a seemingly incidental remark (*Tht.* 206d2-5), when Socrates insinuates that making one’s thought (διάνοια) and opinion (δόξα) explicit through voice by means of verbs and nouns (μετὰ ῥημάτων τε καὶ ὀνομάτων: “words and verbal expressions”, Burnyeat-Levett, 1990, 345; “names (...) and phrases”, Polansky, 1992, 223; “expressions and names”, McDowell, 1973, 102) might be a workable definition of λόγος (οὐ δοκεῖ σοι τὸ τοιοῦτον λόγος εἶναι;); this is a crucial remark, since it brings together a number of pivotal notions that will recur (yet inverted) in the *Sophist*; yet for the time being it is quickly brushed aside in favor of the accumulative model that leads to aporia. Mind that ῥήματα do pop up as early as in the *Cratylus* (e.g. 431b5-7), yet perhaps in a different sense (“compound expressions”; de Rijk, 1986, 222–25).

In the *Sophist*, however, the fact that a λόγος must combine ὀνόματα and ῥήματα is only a minimum requirement that makes it a λόγος in the first place. For qualification as true or false, additional criteria are required (Detel, 1972): Not only must a λόγος be a λόγος “about what is” (περὶ τῶν ὄντων, *Sph.* 262d2, i.e. it must have an existing referent), but its combination of nouns and verbs must also meet the rules for admissible combinations of forms. As the Eleatic Visitor’s contrastive examples of “Theaetetus sits” and “Theaetetus flies” demonstrate, not any form can be combined with any, but the realm of forms has its combinatory rules. And, he adds, “just as some things fit each other and some do not, so too some vocal signs do not fit, but those that do fit form a statement” (καθάπερ τὰ πράγματα τὰ μὲν ἀλλήλοις ἤρμωσεν, τὰ δ’ οὐ, καὶ περὶ τὰ τῆς φωνῆς αὐ σημεία τὰ μὲν οὐχ ἀρμόττει, τὰ δὲ ἀρμόττοντα αὐτῶν λόγον ἀπηργάσατο, *Sph.* 262d8-e1). Whenever a phrase states of “what-is that it is”, it will be a true statement; but whenever it states “what is different from what-is” (ἕτερα τῶν ὄντων, 263b7), or of “what-is-not that it is” (τὰ μὴ ὄντ’ ἄρα ὡς ὄντα, 263b9), it will be a false

statement. So, even a false statement does say about its subject something that is, but something different from what is the case (ὄντων δέ γε ὄντα ἕτερα, 263b11). In this way, the criterion for truth or falsity of speech (λόγοι) is intrinsically tied to the pivotal discovery of Otherness (τὸ ἕτερον) as Non-Being qua difference, which makes for a more manageable replacement for the stumbling block of Eleatic absolute Non-Being (μὴ ὄν) (*Sph.* 255c-e). A firm criterion for admissibility or inadmissibility of any combination of nouns and verbs is thus ultimately provided by the establishment of the five μέγιστα γένη and the inclusion among them of Otherness (τὸ ἕτερον). These highest forms, too, only admit of limited mutual communion (κοινωνία) with each other.

Yet now that a criterion for true and false speech has been established, how does one get from true and false speech to true and false opinion (δόξα)? The key connector between the two turns out to be διάνοια (thought). On the one hand, thought is closely associated with speech. As the Eleatic Visitor affirms, “thought and speech are the same; except that the silent inner conversation of the soul with itself has been given the special name of thought.” (οὐκοῦν διάνοια μὲν καὶ λόγος ταυτόν· πλὴν ὁ μὲν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὐτὴν διάλογος ἄνευ φωνῆς γιγνόμενος τοῦτ’ αὐτὸ ἡμῖν ἐπωνομάσθη, διάνοια; *Sph.* 263e3-5). Yet on the other hand, “when this happens in thought and silently within the soul, can you give it any other name than opinion (δόξα)?” (ὅταν οὖν τοῦτο ἐν ψυχῇ κατὰ διάνοιαν ἐγγίγνηται μετὰ σιγῆς, πλὴν δόξης ἔχεις ὅτι προσείπης αὐτό; *Sph.* 264a1-2). As a consequence, since truth and falsity apply to λόγος, thought is conversation of the soul with itself, and “opinion the final result of thought” (δόξα δὲ διανοίας ἀποτελεύτησις), “it is inevitable that, since these are all akin to speech, some of them must sometimes be false” (ἀνάγκη δὴ καὶ τούτων τῷ λόγῳ συγγενῶν ὄντων ψευδῆ τε αὐτῶν ἔνια καὶ ἐνίστε εἶναι, *Sph.* 264b2-3). This is exactly what the Visitor had observed in the first place, namely that “thought, opinion and fancy all arise in our souls as both false and true” (διάνοιά τε καὶ δόξα καὶ φαντασία, μῶν οὐκ ἦδη δῆλον ὅτι ταῦτά γε ψευδῆ τε καὶ ἀληθῆ πάνθ’ ἡμῶν ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἐγγίγνεται; *Sph.* 263d6-8; on thought and opinion as elements of cognitive processes see de Rijk, 1986, 212).

This chain of reasoning clearly draws on a famous notion established in the *Theaetetus*, namely that thinking (διανοεῖσθαι) is an inward conversation of the soul with itself. Socrates there likewise describes the forming of an opinion (δόξα) by way of this inner conversation: “But when the soul has arrived at a decision, (...) is agreed and not in doubt, this is what we call its opinion” (ὅταν δὲ ὀρίσασα [...] τὸ αὐτὸ ἤδη φῆ καὶ μὴ διστάζῃ, δόξαν

ταύτην τίθεμεν αὐτῆς, *Tht.* 190a2-4; for discussions of this passage, especially of the relationship of διάνοια with δόξα and truth and falsity, see Dixsaut 1997, 10; 2015, 38; Narcy 2013a, 101; Gonzalez 2020, 184–85).

As shown above, a similar link between λόγος and δόξα by way of διάνοια had been suggested at the end of the *Theaetetus* (206d), if in inverse sense: whereas there δόξα, via διάνοια, found expression in speech, in the *Sophist* it is truth and falsity in speech (λόγος) that is – by way of true and false thinking (διάνοια) – extended to true and false opinion (δόξα); in other words, the possibility of discerning true and false λόγος will also assure the possibility of identifying false thinking and opinion and of telling it from true opinion.

Looking at things this way, the criteria described for the truth and falsity of λόγοι (based on κοινωνία of forms) appear to be equally applicable to the truth and falsity of opinions. The procedure of collection and division employed in the *diaereseis* of the *Sophist* actually practices a method of definition that comes close to what had been aimed at in the last attempt at defining λόγος in the *Theaetetus*.

It is thus evident that the *Sophist* in many ways continues the *Theaetetus*' search for an account of true knowledge by taking up various strands from the earlier dialogue, among them the question of true and false δόξα and its links with true and false speech.

In this context, one must not forget that Plato's concern about the role of language in philosophy was arguably prompted by theories on language and human knowledge that had been set up by the sophists, especially so by Gorgias of Leontinoi. Gorgias had advanced the view that, since true knowledge was unattainable, a powerful capacity of λόγος consisted in its ability to replace one opinion (δόξα) by another (*Helen, Frg. B* 11, 13). Since Plato's understanding of philosophy as a dialectical process leading to cognition of truth is essentially based on language as a tool both for communication and for classification of reality (ὄργανον διδασκαλικόν καὶ διακριτικόν τῆς οὐσίας, *Cra.* 388b13-c1), he could not get around clarifying the conditions of the reliability of language. But in view of Gorgias's well-known partisanship of δόξα, clarifying the concept of δόξα was equally inevitable. It may hence be that the "daring" (Rosen 1983, 313; de Rijk 1986, 214) neologistic description of the sophist as a champion of "opinion-imitation" (δοξομιμητική, *Sph.* 267e1), bereft of real knowledge, is actually a subtle dig at Gorgias.

If, on the other hand, from the *Sophist* we look ahead to the epistemological passage in the *Seventh Letter* (342a-e), significant shifts come to the fore. In the hierarchical pyramid of the means by which knowledge of an object is attained, knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), the fourth element, is first placed

separately above the triad of name (ὄνομα), definition (λόγος) and image (εἶδωλον). In that passage, however, precisely as in the *Sophist*, λόγος is defined as a compound of nouns and verbs (ἐξ ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων συγκαίμενος, 342b6-7), which seems to be an unmistakable cross reference to that dialogue.

Yet only a few lines later ἐπιστήμη is closely paralleled with two other epistemological instances: intelligence (νοῦς) and – true opinion (ἐπιστήμη καὶ νοῦς ἀληθῆς τε δόξα, 342c4-5); but, since these three are explicitly said to form a single whole (ὡς δὲ ἓν τοῦτο αὐτὸ πᾶν θετέον) detached from the lower three (name, definition, image), when it is said (*Ep.* 7. 342d1-2) that out of these four it is νοῦς that comes closest (ἐγγύτατα ... πεπλησίακεν) to the fifth and supreme one (the εἶδος), this same superior dignity would also befit knowledge, and true opinion likewise.

What is striking is that within this epistemological hierarchy the rank of ἀληθῆς δόξα turns out even higher than that of λόγος. This may be interpreted in the sense that for the late Plato ἀληθῆς δόξα (jointly with νοῦς) is in fact regarded as an essential element for the acquisition of knowledge (when supported by a true λόγος).

If we sum up what we have found about the role of ἀληθῆς δόξα in *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Seventh Letter*, a coherent pattern emerges in which the clarifications of the *Sophist* play a central role, and in which the dignity and import of ἀληθῆς δόξα gradually increase. In a nutshell, if knowledge may be defined as ἀληθῆς δόξα combined with λόγος, as the *Theaetetus* suggests, what is required to ensure its ἀλήθεια is that it complies with the criteria of truth established in the *Sophist* for both λόγος and δόξα alike.

But also if we look beyond this group of works, these observations nicely fit in with the general role of ἀληθῆς δόξα in Platonic epistemology (see Kraus 2018). It can be demonstrated that in the early and middle dialogues more often than not Socrates' attempt to find the truth about a certain problem takes its first start from a pretty vague opinion (which mostly comes either from rumours Socrates has heard from others “on the grapevine”, or from proposals ventured by way of a “shot in the dark” by some interlocutor; see Erler 2003). This initial opinion will then be put to test by dialectical examination, until it is found whether or not it qualifies as a *true* opinion. In the majority of cases, of course, the result will be negative, which will necessitate a new start. Notwithstanding, the truth criteria developed for λόγος in the *Sophist* are essential also for the testing of opinions for truth in Platonic dialectic and epistemology.

In the *Meno*, for instance, in the process of solving the problem of doubling a square, Socrates explains that what he elicits from the uneducated

slave-boy are the boy's own δόξαι (*Men.* 85b8, c4, c10, e7), which, when duly examined and corrected, may become ἀληθεῖς δόξαι (*Men.* 85c7). This evokes Plato's hypothesis method: δόξαι are brought forward by the boy as hypotheses, then examined and refuted by Socrates, until ἀληθῆς δόξα is reached.

But, it may be objected, in the Divided Line in the *Republic* the realms of δόξα and ἐπιστήμη are neatly kept apart from each other. Yes, apparently so. But if we accept, if hypothetically, that ἀληθῆς δόξα combined with ἀληθῆς λόγος may in fact rise to ἐπιστήμη, a bridge can be built that would permit transition (Kraus 2018, 269). Keep in mind that the lower part of the realm of ἐπιστήμη, the one conterminous with δόξα, is assigned by Plato to διάνοια, the same cognitive faculty that in the *Sophist* is repeatedly associated with both λόγος and δόξα as a mediating link. As we have learned, διάνοια, too, can partake of truth and falsity, just as δόξα can.

Looking at things in this way, a more positive assessment of the role of ἀληθῆς δόξα within Plato's epistemology emerges. As he often does, Plato may deliberately have adopted the sophistic concept and catchword of δόξα and reframed and adapted it to his own philosophical thinking. If this is so, ἀληθῆς δόξα needs to be taken seriously as an element of Plato's epistemology, and the *Sophist*, sandwiched between *Theaetetus* and *Seventh Letter*, occupies a central position in this development.

