The *Sophist*, Sophists, and Socrates

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A riposte to those who think that Plato thought well enough of sophists ever *seriously* to suggest that Socrates the philosopher could be one of them.
sophistry, division, philosophy, Socrates, knowledge

There was in Plato's mind such a thing as 'sophistry', an activity carried on by 'sophists'. This is what the main speaker in *Sph.*, the Visitor from Elea ('EV'), proposes to investigate. He does so by using the method Socrates himself recommends in *Phdr.*: 'collection and division'. 'Collection' is a matter of

> perceiving together and bringing into one form (*eidos*) items which are scattered in many places, in order that one may define each thing and make clear whatever it is [that one is investigating]. (*Phdr.* 265d3-5)[1],

which I take to describe the same process as that described, in Socrates' earlier defence of love, as a matter of

> comprehend[ing] what is said by reference to *eidos* [i.e., roughly, what is said universally], arising from many sensations and being collected together into one[2] through reasoning. (*Phdr.* 249b7-c1).

That process occurs at least seven times in the *Sph.*, i.e., once for each of the seven accounts of the sophist. Each of the seven attempts to give an account of the sophist is a matter of 'bringing into one form items that are scattered

1 Translations of *Phdr.* are from Rowe 2005.

2 That is, I suppose, one *eidos*. This is not, of course, itself a collection: the 'taking together' (*sunairein*) makes what is 'taken together' into a single item, i.e., a 'form', to which reference is already made when we speak of any one of the things 'taken together', these being 'said by reference to form'. Ten ostriches each reported as an ostrich, or as two, three … ostriches, when 'taken together' give us 'ostrich', singular. As he begins the investigation of the sophist by looking at anglers, EV is of course already looking at something *kat' eidos legomenon*, as we do just by identifying someone as an angler. There will then be many more than seven 'collections' going on in the conversation. It is 'division', as I shall suggest, that is the more difficult, and the more important, part of the process called 'collection and division'.

in many places', or 'collect[ing] into one through reasoning' what 'aris[es] from many sensations', which is what is involved in understanding terms that refer to 'forms'. Each of the accounts of the sophist is an account of a form, or, as we may put it more transparently, a type: a type, that is, to which the sophist allegedly belongs but – until the seventh account – without the description of that type capturing his *essence*.

So much for collection. The process of division divides forms, often but not always into two further 'forms', choosing one of these two or more to persevere with, and so on until a plausible candidate account of the definiendum appears. Division is used throughout all seven attempts at defining the sophist, but plainly the most important division is that between the six failed accounts and the one that finally replaces them – finally, that is, so far as the dialogue is concerned: in principle the seventh account itself might be replaced. (There are no guarantees in the business of dialectic. I will later justify my inclusion of the sixth attempt among those that 'fail'; the manner of its 'failure' is rather different from that of the others.)

The outcome here in *Sph.*, with the seventh account, resembles the one described late on in *Phdr.*, with a reference back to the beginning of Socrates' defence of love and its identification of four beneficial sorts of madness:

> the [second speech] led us to the parts of madness on the right-hand [i.e., good] side, and discovering and setting forth a love that shares the same name as the other but is divine, it praised it as the cause of our greatest of goods (266a6-b1).

The situation is not quite the same, since the first six accounts of the sophist (or at least the first five: the sixth, again, is different) all give us aspects of the sophist, not different sophists in quite the way that the *Phdr.* account offers four different madnesses: it is just that each *would be* a different sophist if the relevant account in each case captured the essence of sophist. The trouble with these accounts is that they pull in varieties of non-sophists as well as sophists: others could be 'fee-earning hunters of human beings', 'importers-exporters of lessons in excellence', 'retailers' of such lessons, or manufacturers of them, or could earn a living from competitive speaking. As for the sixth account, it will drag in – so I shall propose – the quite different type, the philosopher, so being in the end not about the sophist at all.

Why, then, does EV apparently make out that it is? This is a question that has perennially puzzled readers of *Sph.*, or at any rate those readers who

recognise that for the Plato of this dialogue, and indeed of the whole corpus,[3] the sophist is an object of contempt, and sophistry merely the outcome of bad choice, not to mention ignorance.[4] Why is the sixth account set up as an account of the sophist if it is really an account of something else? EV himself says that the sixth account, in 'putting him down as a cleanser …',[5] is by way of a 'concession' to the sophist, as it must be when he has remarked only a few lines before that the resemblance between this 'cleanser' and the sophist is like that between dog and wolf (231a: the dog being what helps protect the sheep and goats from the wolf). So why make such a concession?

Many have been tempted[6] by some apparent similarities between this type and that mostly silent presence in the dialogue, Socrates, to suppose a reference to the stage parodies of the great man as a sophist. So, for example, Gregory Vlastos calls it 'an authentic, if partial, representation of Socrates [in the "Socratic" dialogues]'.[7] But there are also major dissimilarities.[8] For one thing, Socrates' chief aim is always something more than 'cleansing' others of beliefs that stop them from learning – namely to *find the truth*, and find it with them; or, in case that should be a contentious claim,[9] everyone must surely agree that it is not true of Socrates' interlocutors that they respond

3 *Sph*. apart (and perhaps *Prt*., which takes one sophist's – supposed – position with apparent seriousness), it is hard to think of a single dialogue that suggests the least affinity with the breed. Thomas Slabon, in discussion in Toronto (where I gave a version of the present paper), pointed to *Smp*., where a remarkably Socrates-like Eros is represented as both philosopher and sophist (actually 'clever magician and sorcerer and sophist', 203d7); but (a) Plato's own use of the slippery term 'sophist' varies; (b) Socrates has *something* in common with sophists (a connection with sophia: he looks for it, they mimic it); and (c) he is neither magician nor sorcerer, except to the puzzled onlooker.

4 Compare the dismissal in *Plt*. of all contemporary politikoi as 'the greatest sophists among sophists', ignorant as they are, and 'the greatest imitators and magicians': 303c3-5 (translation from Rowe 1995).

5 'The sixth [thing we found him being] was controversial, but all the same we made a concession to him [*autôi*, the sophist, *sunchôrêsantes*] and put him down as a cleanser in relation to soul of beliefs that prevent it from learning [*doxôn empodiôn mathêmasin peri psuchên kathartên*]' (*Sph*. 231e5-6 [translations from the *Sph*. are from Rowe 2015[1]]). The word order puts 'in relation to soul' as much with the learning as with the cleansing, a point that will later be relevant to my argument.

6 Like some participants at the Symposium, as became apparent in several discussions.

7 Vlastos 1994, 17-18.

8 See Rowe 2015[2], to which the present essay is in many respects a sequel.

9 George Rudebusch prefers, in correspondence, that we stick to 'Socrates' own words' about himself in *Ap*., where 'his highest purpose is to convert others to philosophy (this is the content of his service to god as a reverent human being)'. My short response to this is that *Ap*. is only 'Socrates' own words' in that it is a monologue; Plato is not generally a Boswell to Socrates' Johnson.

to his 'treatment' by 'becoming angry with themselves but less aggressive towards others' (230b9-c1). If there are interlocutors who are 'cleansed', in the relevant respect, in the dialogues (Meno?), they were never inclined to aggression in the first place, and any who do get angry are neither cleansed nor angry with themselves, only with Socrates (Callicles, Thrasymachus). In this respect, the most we can say is that the sixth account describes someone who succeeds in doing what Socrates typically, signally, and repeatedly failed to do. So there both is and is not a reference to Socrates. (As I shall immediately go on to argue, the method the sixth 'sophist' uses *seems* to belong to the sophist, which is what allows him at least to appear to join the company of the preceding five, but on closer examination does not.) So now the question will be: why does Plato tease us in this way?

An important part of an answer is to be found, I propose,[10] in an insight by Monique Dixsaut:

> There exists, then, a noble way of employing sophistic: that is, in this sixth definition, centred on antilogy, a version of which the *philosopher* is capable but the sophist is not … In this way sophistic finds itself ennobled, and if it were practiced by a Socrates we see what it could amount to: a purification from ignorance, an understanding of the pitfalls of language and the unfounded nature of all opinion [*doxa*] (Dixsaut 2000, 306).[11]

In other words, according to Dixsaut, the sixth type of sophistry is sophistry *as it would be* in the hands of a philosopher. By assigning sophistry suddenly to the *genos*[12] of philosophy, the Visitor ennobles it. The sixth definition or account of sophistry, as Dixsaut understands it, makes it a useful thing instead of the useless, even damaging, thing it is as we see it in action in the world around us: if this is what sophistry, and antilogic, really were, the world would be a better place, because it would 'purify' or cleanse souls of ignorance.

There is, however, one important point on which I part company with Dixsaut. On her analysis what is described in the sixth account is, I think, still meant to be sophistry: sophistry 'ennobled', but sophistry nonetheless. But that appears to me contradicted by what the Visitor says at 231a-b, part of which I have already referred to:

10 See Rowe 2015[2].
11 My translation from the French.
12 Or *eidos*: the two terms are interchangeable in *Sph.*

> EV: For myself, I'm fearful of saying that they [the type described in the sixth account] are sophists.
> THEAETETUS: Why so?
> EV: Because to do so would be to attribute too great a status (*geras*) to them.
> THEAETETUS: All the same, what has just been described does bear quite a resemblance to someone of that sort.
> EV: Yes, and a wolf has quite a resemblance to a dog – the most savage of creatures to the gentlest. To be safe, one must be particularly on one's guard when it comes to similarities; for similarity is the most slippery of kinds [*genê*]. But still, let then stand as sophists; for the dividing lines on which the dispute will turn will, I think, be no minor ones, when they [those who match the description in the sixth account] guard their territory as they should (*Sph.* 231a1-b1).

While the first five accounts each picked out a feature of sophists and tried to make that what defines a sophist, the sixth account instead picks out another feature of them (their skill at producing contradiction) and imagines that feature being used in a way other than the way in which sophists in fact use it. Or rather: the sixth account picks out the sophists' skill at producing contradiction, i.e., causing others to contradict themselves ('antilogic', 225b, 232b), and implicitly compares it with the superficially similar but really quite different process of revealing to people the shifting nature of their beliefs. Their beliefs contradict one another because *they*, the owners of the beliefs, 'wander about', *planôntai*:

> EV: They [the 'sophists' of the sixth account] ask questions on whatever someone thinks he's talking sense about when in fact he's talking nonsense; and then, because the people whose beliefs they are examining are continually shifting their position, their task is easy. They use the conversation to collect those beliefs together and put them side by side, thereby revealing them as contradicting one another not just on the same subjects but in relation to the same things and in the same respects (*Sph.* 230b4-8).

The contradiction-*producing* sophist, the antilogician, is not interested in what people think, or in changing it, as the contradiction-*revealing* 'sophist' here is (being in the business of 'cleansing' them of those *doxai* that impede their learning, i.e., acquiring new and less contradictory *doxai*). An observer like Aristophanes can call Socrates a 'sophist', noticing his interest in contradiction but not recognising the superficiality of the resemblance (that

most slippery of kinds). Revealing contradictions is different from producing them, not least because it is differently motivated: contradiction-producing is for winning, or winning and making money, while contradiction-revealing is for a cleansing that will ideally clear the way to knowledge.

Sophistry, then, I claim, for Plato in *Sph.* has no positive side; there is no such thing as good sophistry. This, I propose, is the chief point in introducing the sixth account. If there *were* to be such a thing as good sophistry, it would have to be something quite different from what it is in fact. The sixth 'sophist' is not even a mirror image of sophistry. It is not sophistry *at all* (nor is Socrates a sophist *at all*). The sixth kind does vaguely involve, or gesture at, 'antilogic', which is the pretext for introducing it; but *its* antilogic is a matter of discovering contradictions that already exist, in what people believe[13] rather than getting someone who starts with one position, on any subject, to a point where they assert the opposite of that position. Sophistry, then, is unlike *politikê*, which will be the subject of *Plt.*: there are, or could be, true *politikoi*, experts in a real and important *technê*, and there are so-called *politikoi* who mimic the true ones and their expertise. But there is no such thing as a good sophist. Rather, sophists pretend to be something else, namely the wise (as the name *sophistês* suggests), or the philosopher, whereas the philosopher (even Socrates) never practises sophistic, or anything that resembles it in any but the most superficial way.

The superficiality of the resemblance between sophist and philosopher is already guaranteed by the fact that the former has no interest in the one thing that preoccupies the latter: truth. But the difference between the two types as they are described in *Sph.* goes deeper.[14] According to EV at *Sph.* 231b5-6, the activity that defines the sixth type is 'challenging [*elenchos*] that takes place in relation to empty belief in one's own wisdom'. This recalls Socrates' challenging of his interlocutors, in *Ap.* and elsewhere, and the chief sort of ignorance he reveals in them: the one he himself lacks, his lack of it being his only claim to wisdom. So much so Socratic. But the context in *Sph.* also includes an analysis of *kakia*, badness, contrasting a popular account of it in terms of 'disagreement' between different elements in the soul with an analysis that attributes such disagreement to a failure of reason:

13 Or what they think: 'beliefs' will include long-standing ones, whereas *doxai* will include what it merely occurs to someone to say when asked a question.

14 For a full justification of the radical interpretation of the sixth account I am about to propose, see Rowe 2015[2].

that is, to a different kind of ignorance.[15] In the case described here in *Sph.*, the ignorance that is removed by the revealing of contradictions is ignorance of a failure of reason itself – a failure that has resulted in a soul that is unnaturally divided against itself. Those examined 'are angry with themselves but … less aggressive towards others … and are liberated from those great, obstinate beliefs about themselves' (230b8-c2): they are angry with themselves, I propose, precisely because of those beliefs they had until now '*about themselves*'. What they recognize is that they are in truth rational creatures, potentially one and not many, and they blame themselves for the way they have been leading their lives up till now.[16] Compare Socrates at the beginning of *Phdr.*: he has no time to worry about the truth of myths like the one about Boreas and Oreithuia because he is

> not yet capable of 'knowing myself', in accordance with the Delphic inscription … I inquire … into myself, to see whether I am really a beast more complex, more typhonic than Typhon, or both a tamer and a simpler creature, because I share by nature some divine and un-typhonic portion (*Phdr.* 229e5-230a6).

Insofar as this is a real question for him, he is the examinee as much as the examiner. Someone who realises, as he presents himself as realising, that they are that 'tamer (*hêmerôteros*) and simpler [i.e., more unified?] creature' will indeed be angry (*chalepainein*) with themselves, i.e., their former self. They will also become 'less aggressive' (EV), or 'be tamed' (*hêmerousthai*, *Phdr.*), in relation to others; compare the description of the black horse of

15 *Sph.* 227e13-228e5. The difference between the two analyses is introduced as a difference between 1. *kakia* understood as disease ('when people are in poor condition, don't we observe beliefs disagreeing with desires, anger with pleasures, reason with pains, indeed all of these with each other', 228b2-4: this is disease insofar as disease is 'disagreement in what is naturally akin, because of some sort of corruption', 228a7-8), and 2. *kakia* understood as ugliness, or things being out of proportion. The 'things' in this case (still, as in 1., beliefs, desires, anger, and so on) ought to share the same target but miss it because they are out of kilter – this last part being my proposed interpretation of a controversial sentence at 228c1-5. ('Don't we observe beliefs disagreeing with desires', etc., *in diseased individuals*: this state, then, is only 'what *the many call ponêria*' [228d7], because, after all, who would judge the truth of things by reference to defective cases?)

16 Or rather would, if there were any actual cases of such conversion (which would depend on there actually being exemplars of the type described in the sixth account of the sophist).

the human soul – or of some human souls[17] – in the myth of *Phdr.* as *hubreôs … hetairos* (253e3), or *hubristês* (254c3).

The idea of the sixth sophist (so-called) of *Sph.* as bringing about self-realisation in his interlocutors recalls some thoroughly Socratic ideas (about ignorance, about challenge, and so on). But what is proposed is a project far larger than anything our familiar Socrates ever proposed: nothing less than a complete, Damascene reorientation. And the distance between this 'sophist' and the actual, eristic sophist could not be greater, as the next part of the dialogue will confirm. The sophist deals in what is not, while by implication, because of his interest in the truth, our sixth 'sophist' (the one who is not a sophist at all) deals in what is.

To sum up so far. We have five types each of which shares something with the sophist, but none of which captures his essence; and we have a sixth that uses a method (or would use it, if there were any actual exemplars) that superficially resembles that of the real sophist, but that turns out to be the type that the sophist mimics: the gentle, domesticated dog rather than the wolf, advancing the cause of knowledge rather than subverting it. If only sophists *were* like this, using their expertise in contradiction to positive ends rather than destructive ones. But for that they would need expertise in soul-cleansing, and so in the soul itself, to enable them to 'remove those [of their 'patients"] beliefs that obstruct the lessons to be learned, and render them clean and pure, thinking they know only the things they do know and no more' (230d2-4). If this is Socrates, it is Socrates recast after the model of the sophist's skill in antilogic. But simultaneously it is the sophist recast, *per impossibile*, as having a care for his interlocutor/patient, and the expertise to prepare them for learning. Prominent among beliefs that such expertise would target, I propose, are, first, that the soul is naturally in a state of internal *stasis* (228a5, with b2-4), and secondly that the treatment required is *kolastikê*, 'corrective expertise', i.e., punishment (229a3-5).[18] Cleansing from such beliefs will involve a complete rethinking of the subjects' understanding of themselves, under the guidance of the expert soul-cleanser, armed as he is with his understanding of the natural unity and rationality of the whole soul.

17 I.e., of diseased ones, to use EV's language in *Sph.*

18 Which Theaetetus claims is 'in accordance with *anthrôpinê doxa*' (229a6-7: cf. n.15 above); to which EV responds 'Would *didaskalikê* not be the most appropriate *technê* for dealing with any *agnoia*?' (a8-9).

The form or kind, sophist, then, is bad through and through.[19] But if so, how can there be a *form* of sophist at all? A passage from *Phdr*. I referred to at the beginning of the present paper, describing collection (249b7-c1), continues: 'And this is a recollection of those things which our soul once saw when it travelled in company with god and treated with contempt the things we now say are, and when it poked its head up into what really is (c1-4). Not long before, Socrates has described this region 'above' as one of truth, 'occupied by being which really is (*ousia ontôs ousa*) … observable by the steersman of the soul alone, by intellect, and to which the class (*genos*) of true knowledge relates', and so on (247c6-8). Does the *eidos*/*genos* sophist then reside there, too, in the region beyond the heavens, alongside justice, moderation, even knowledge (three examples given at 247d of those contents)? Surely not, when the sophist as antilogician comes close to denying, if he does not actually deny, that anything is true apart from the claim that nothing is (true). After all, in the story the soul's wings are supposed to be nourished by the sight of the things there, and the soul's wings stand above all for its identity as a *reasoner*: how would the sight of the arch-denier, of the very type that *misuses* reason, help with that?[20]

The commonest modern solution to this puzzle, at least implicitly, is probably still to suppose that Plato has moved on by the time of writing of *Sph*.: forms are no longer what they once were, in *Phdr*. or *R*., *eidê* and related terms now referring rather to 'kinds', without the old metaphysical connotations. That is certainly a way of dealing with the issue, but the question then arises about the basis on which the new Plato will maintain his commitment to truth and the possibility of knowledge, especially in the ethical and aesthetic spheres. That commitment is no less visible in what are surely later dialogues like *Tht*, *Sph*., *Plt*. and *Ti*. than it is in earlier ones; it is grounded in those earlier ones (I include *R*. among them) in talk about forms, and we find no indication in the trilogy *Tht*.-*Sph*.-*Plt*. or in *Ti*. that the

19 Thomas Slabon asked (in Toronto) why the discussion in *Sph*. should be restricted, as it evidently is, to eristics like Euthydemus and Dionysodorus; might not including a Protagoras, say, make a difference to the equation sophist = bad, period? My answer is that the Plato of *Sph*. seems to have decided that the two brothers and their sort are the real sophists. If others do not fit the description, then presumably they are not sophists, but something else: pretenders to the rhetorical art, perhaps? (But as such they too will at least have a foot in antilogic.) Cf. also point (a) in n.3 above.

20 It is true, as Verity Harte pointed out to me in discussion at the Symposium and later, that insofar as the sophist is a pretender to *sophia* we need to understand what *sophia* is in order to understand him. But to understand what *sophia* is, we presumably have no need of the sophist (who does not even understand *sophia* himself).

old metaphysics has been abandoned – that is, apart from the fact that forms appear to be talked about, and handled, in new and different ways. Or has Plato just decided that he has new things to do, and new things to talk about, leaving the metaphysics to one side?[21]

The latter is surely the least plausible explanation, when *Sph.* itself contains its own metaphysical interlude, starring 'friends of forms' who think that nothing else really *is* at all. What this interlude ultimately suggests is not a move away from treating forms as *to ontôs on* but rather an attempt to spell out the implications of giving them such a status. Again, the connections between *Sph.* (later) and the *Phdr.* (earlier), specifically in relation to the method of collection and division, are plain enough.[22] *Phdr.* warmly recommends the method of collection and division, with *Phdr.* 265c-266c giving us the most extensive explicit description we have of the method, while *Sph.* includes Plato's most single-minded application of it: that, surely, is enough to make my own continuing treatment of them together more than plausible.[23]

If, as I began supposing, the process of 'perceiving together and bringing into one form items which are scattered in many places' (*Phdr.* 265d3-4) is the same as the one described in the myth in Socrates' second speech on love, as 'comprehend[ing] what is said by reference to *eidos*, arising from many sensations and being collected together into one through reasoning' (*Phdr.* 249b7-c1), 'and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once saw' (c1-2), collection and division can evidently coexist with 'the theory of recollection',[24] and the full-blown 'theory of Forms' (as it is typically named, and understood), because it does in *Phdr.*; and if it does in *Phdr.*, why should it not in *Sph.*? In any case we need an explanation of how the two things can co-exist, given that there is at least one dialogue where they do.

21 For a useful treatment of some of the issues here see Alikan 2017.

22 For the building blocks of the method *Phdr.* uses *eidos* and *idea*, *Sph.* mostly *eidos* and *genos*; proponents of a change in Plato's metaphysical thinking implicitly use the last term, *genos*, to bolster their case, talking about the 'kinds' of *Sph.* in contrast to the 'forms' of *Phdr.* But if *eidos* and *genos* are interchangeable in *Tht.*, *eidos* and *idea* are so in Phdr., and I find no clear evidence that *eidos* is used differently in the two dialogues.

23 On the relative date of *Phdr.* see, e.g., Thesleff 1982, Tomin 1988, Usacheva 2012 (and especially the bibliography in the last). Not many – among those for whom chronology matters – would protest strongly, on whatever grounds, at the claim that *Phdr.* was written not so long before *Sph.*

24 Even if in the context of a myth; but what are Platonic myths for, if not to give an indication of the direction in which the truth lies (or themselves to form part of the argument, as in *Plt.*)?

According to *Phdr.* (if, again, 'bringing into one form' and 'collecting things into one through reasoning' refer to the same sort of process) all humans engage in collection, *qua* human. There is nothing extraordinary about the process itself; it is just part of being human to be able to 'see things together'.[25] The difference from the employment of the philosophical method called 'collection (and division)' is just that while non-philosophers do the 'seeing together' unreflectively, the philosopher does it systematically and purposefully – 'in order that one may define each thing and make clear whatever it is' (*Phdr.* 263d4-5). The problem lies with that 'most slippery of kinds', similarity (*Sph.* 231a8): similarities can always deceive, which is one reason why division is as important to the method as collection. We may all be capable of 'bringing things together into one', but there is no guarantee that the 'one' we construct really is a one, or the one we were looking for. This is why we need method, and the philosopher: in *Phdr.* it is the *philosophical* lover's experience of beauty that is being described; in *Symp.*, too, the lover who comes to see Beauty Itself in a sea of beautiful things is under expert guidance. But even the non-philosopher has a dim notion of what beauty is, which the *Phdr.* story attributes both and simultaneously to recollection and to our inborn capacity for collection.

'Recollection' here is an expression of what Sarah Broadie calls Plato's 'realism about values':[26] there is such a thing as beauty (the form) that exists out there, as it were, unchanging, not a matter of opinion, and so on. There are similarly forms of good, justice, moderation. But then, to go back to the question in hand, is there also a form of *sophist*? We evidently need the philosopher to hunt him down, given that it takes even EV seven passes to capture him (if he does). But the difficulty with the sophist is not the same as with beauty, or justice. Everyone knows there are sophists. The problem is with pinning them down, exactly, because they share features with multiple other types. What makes a sophist different from – a statesman, for example, since apparently existing *politikoi* are also sophists?[27] Or from Socrates, if Socrates is a philosopher? Are sophist, statesman and philosopher the same, or three distinct kinds (*Sph.* 217a-b)? 'Sophist' could be a shifting signifier, or just a contested category, and perhaps that is what *we* might want to say of it. But these are not available options in *Sph.*: the creature is assumed to be lurking somewhere, hidden, yet in plain sight.

25 'Recollection' thus merely theorises a plain fact.
26 Broadie 2021, 211.
27 *Plt.* 303c3-5 again.

Some things do not require a method to find them. 'When someone utters the name of iron, or of silver', Socrates asks Phaedrus at *Phdr.* 263a6-7, 'don't we all have the same thing in mind?' But then

> What about the names of just, or good [i.e., the names that properly belong to what is actually just or good]? Doesn't one of us go off in one direction, another in another, so that we disagree both with each other and with ourselves? (a9-10)

Beauty, *to kalon*, is another similarly disputed item (love, too, according to *Phdr.*). Everyone uses the names that belong to such things, but there is little agreement about what to apply the names *to*. 'Sophist' seems to present a similar level of difficulty, but with this difference: that questions about what is just or good or beautiful are not only with us all the time, but pressing in a way that the question about the nature of the sophist is not. We need to know, on a regular basis, whether *this*, *now* is just, or good, or beautiful[28], and in the first two cases at least there are no visible examples we can point to for help – the laws, maybe, but have *they* been laid down knowledgeably (*Plt.*)?

There is another, even more important difference between an investigation into the sophist and investigations about the good, the just and the beautiful: the former is completable, whereas the latter are not. There *can be* no complete account of any of them, such that answers about the justice, goodness or beauty of any individual item can be read off from it. No two situations in life will be exactly alike: nothing, in any life, can be decided in advance, about what is to be done or not to be done *here*, *now*.[29] The content of the forms of justice, goodness and beauty will not be expressible by simple formulae, or even by a list of individual just, good and beautiful actions. No

28 It suits Socrates' argument in *Phdr.* to claim that beauty is the exception, shining out even among the objects of sense. But elsewhere the *kalon* is itself a contested item, even in individuals.

29 I am here combining *Plt.* with lessons I have learned from Broadie 2021. Gerson 2022 objects to '[a] critical methodological assumption' of the book, that 'a dialogue such as *R.* has to be interpreted within its own limits' (307). This is a misunderstanding: rather, Broadie sets out to understand a particular image (the good as sun-like) in *R.* within the context of the argument of that dialogue. No general methodological principle is in play, except the reasonable one that an image introduced in a particular context might be illuminated by that context; and my own immediate experience suggests that what Broadie discovers, in one dialogue by itself, has the capacity to illuminate corners of other dialogues too (in the present case, *Sph.*). Sarah Broadie was too meticulous, too much of the *philosophos*, to make the assumption claimed without having shown for herself how it might be true. She is and will be much missed.

such list would be completable; there would always be more material to be collected, more division to do.

Significantly, even the gods in *Phdr.* are not in continuous contact with this level of reality, feasting on its contents in each circuit they make of the heavens, 'then descending back into the region within the heavens and going home' (*Phdr.* 247e). Between them, the twelve gods cover a range of human types, each of those human types imagined as caught by Eros and lifted up by him to catch at least a glimpse of Beauty (even if only once, and even if only in the remotest past …); but only followers of Zeus, being of a similar sort to him, become philosophers and, I take it, acquire something of his superior wisdom. The others miss the chance offered to them by their sight of truth and become anything from a 'law-abiding king' to a sophist or demagogue, or, worst of all, a tyrant. In this story, the forms sighted by gods or human souls (justice, self-control, knowledge, 247d) appear to be beyond and above even the highest agents in the Platonic universe.[30] This is not an arbitrary piece of Platonic 'doctrine', but rather a consequence of the fact that the full content of such forms will be unknowable even by a divine intellect. It will be unknowable because it will have to encapsulate all past, present, and future instances of the good, the just, … as they appear in the infinitely large quantity of differing concatenations of circumstances.[31] Nevertheless, despite their elusiveness, the good, the just and the rest remain the ultimate standards for, or goals of, divine activity, whether locomotion or intellection. Together they constitute (the objects of) the knowledge described by Socrates as

> not that knowledge to which coming into being attaches, nor the knowledge that strangely differs in different items among the things that we now say are [i.e., sensible particulars], but that which is in what really is and which is really knowledge (*Phdr.* 247d7-e2).

These forms, I claim, the good, the just, the beautiful and so on, are on a different level from all others.[32] Their separateness is a consequence both

30 Compare the way the divine Craftsman of *Ti.* takes them, or more specifically the good, as his point of reference in building the cosmos.

31 What, then, defines divinity if not complete knowledge? Their unchangeability, I suggest, and their unchangeable rationality: they have nothing to make them forget the good and the just, even if they are not in permanent contact with them; their horses are merely a mode of transport, with no capacity for diverting the divine attention. If 'gods' stands for divine intellect, the same will go for it.

32 Even from the *megista genê* of Sph., which are *megista* because of their ubiquity (nothing threatens the status of the good, the just and the beautiful). Cf. Socrates'

of their infinite depth and of their importance for both human life and for the cosmos. Contrast the sophist, just above tyrant, lowest of the low, in the list of lives in *Phdr*. It is not even clear whether the form, sophist, will be a permanent thing, when its exemplars are a consequence of merely contingent human failings (philosophers, by contrast, or the just, whether people or actions, being rooted in the organizing principles of the cosmos). If history repeats itself after a Great Year, then the same mistakes will go on being made, and sophists will always be with us. But if Plato were seriously wedded to the idea of the cycle of history, that would undermine what I take as his most important project of all: for the reform of society.

This project surfaces in *Sph.* itself, if I am right in supposing that the sixth account of 'sophist' is in fact an account of something quite different: i.e., a type committed to knowledge and truth. In *Plt*., the next dialogue in the series, the reform of society will take centre stage, in the guise of a community overseen by an expert statesman able to rely on his own judgement instead of inherited and/or democratically established laws, so bringing order to it as the Demiurge once brought order to the cosmos – and I take it, thanks to a comparable understanding of the good and the just. After all, EV, who presides in both *Sph.* and *Plt*., is compared to a god in the opening conversation (*Sph.* 216a-d) – a god attending on humans, in a curious reversal of the image in *Phdr.* of human lovers each following their own divinity.

To be clear: it is not in the least my intention to deny that there is a form, sophist; rather the reverse – unless being eternal is a necessary part of being a form. If it is, then Plato will apparently be happy to use the same term, *eidos*, to refer to two different things in the same context. I prefer to suppose that *eidê* are the 'ones' produced by (philosophical) collection in any and every context, and that some of them are eternal, some not. The ones that are eternal are those that provide the content of Plato's 'realism about values' (plus those that underpin the structure of things, like being, sameness and difference); that he is a realist about (the forms of) values does not entail that he is a realist about other forms. There are people that are called, and are, sophists, and that is enough, I propose, for there to be a Platonic form of sophist – just as there is, unfortunately, a contemporary, modern, type of the same ilk.

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proposal that the good is 'even beyond being, superior to it in dignity and in power' (*R.* 509b8; on which see Broadie 2021).