Plato's *Sophist*: Rebarbative by Design?

G.R.F. Ferrari,
Department of Greek and Roman Studies, University of California, Berkeley

The dialogue on the sophist serves as a warning posted by Plato for his students and for posterity. Although the use of techniques such as the method of division were encouraged in the Academy by Plato himself for the purpose of training his budding philosophers, Plato had nevertheless become concerned that the training was turning into a self-standing pursuit. The philosophic life was at risk of degenerating into the merely scholarly life. In the essay, this point is made primarily by considering the dramatic irony to which Plato subjects the Stranger's choice of angling as the subject of a paradigmatic division.
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A theme voiced in the *Parmenides* sets my agenda for what follows in this essay. Parmenides praises Socrates for seeking clarity about the beautiful, the just, and the good. Socrates, he says, is on a "noble," even a "divine" course; but he is tackling the task too early, before he has had sufficient training (*Prm.* 134c-d). The training, then, does not itself count as a way of inquiring into values; it is only preparatory to such an inquiry. And indeed, all explicit talk of values is absent from the second part of the *Parmenides,* despite having been a significant feature of the discussion in the first part. Furthermore, this contrast of topic is reflected in a contrast of dialectical method. In the second part, Parmenides uses "didactic" dialectic on a mostly docile interlocutor, whereas in the first part it is Socrates's own views that are being put to the test, and found wanting. The dialectic there is "peirastic."

These features of the *Parmenides* recur in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* — dialogues led by another philosopher from Elea. Indeed, the features are stepped up: now the dialectic is didactic throughout; and the Stranger positively boasts of how his technique of "collection and division" is indifferent to distinctions of value. An example he gives is that the technique makes nothing of the general's presenting a grander or more dignified figure than the lice-catcher — not insofar as each exemplifies the class of hunters (*Sph.* 227a-b).

That the method of division ignores questions of value is a contention that has not gone without scholarly response. Ruby Blondell protests that "since 'sophist,' 'philosopher,' and 'statesman' are all heavily laden concepts, even

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to inquire about them is to inquire about values … Distinctions of value cannot be *discovered* by division. But a prior understanding of such distinctions … underwrites its successful practice" (Blondell, 2002, 359). How effective is this response? First of all, it is an open question whether the Stranger's practice of division is in fact successful. I for one am about to argue that the divisions he comes up with in the *Sophist* are quite superficial. And in any case, whatever we assume about the Stranger's prior understanding of distinctions of value, it remains the case that those values fail to appear in the divisions themselves; nor does the Stranger give any adequate account of his prior understanding. Accordingly, values are absent, for all intents and purposes, from the body of the discussion that is put before us. And they are absent despite the fact that the distinction between sophist and philosopher seems, *par excellence*, a distinction of value.

By putting values to one side, the *Sophist* leaves out what is crucial to the distinction between sophist and philosopher. And in this respect, the Stranger's paradigmatic classification of the angler turns out to be all too appropriate to the classifications of the sophist in which he then engages. After a preliminary classification of the angler as hunter of a particular kind of creature, the Stranger proceeds to analyse the angler's art in mechanical terms only — as a pattern of movements in a certain direction, using equipment of a certain shape. At no point are we given a sense of what the angler has to know in order to be an angler — what will enable him actually to catch a fish. The definitive factor is omitted. As Seth Benardete has pointed out,[1] the information the Stranger supplies about the angler's practice would suffice for a painter who wanted to produce a convincing picture of an angler; but that picture would give only a superficial idea of the actual practice. Above all, the division leaves unmentioned the manner in which the angler gets the better of the fish. All hunting, we are told, is clandestine — this is what distinguishes it from open combat (219e1-2). But the angler goes further: he deceives the fish by disguising one thing as another. Either organic bait or an artificial lure is presented to the fish as if it were simple prey.[2] If anything makes the angler's art the art that it is, this does. It is an art of disguise.

The relevance of this omission only comes into focus much later, when the Stranger stops treating the sophist's art as an art of acquisition and

1 Benardete, 1984, vol. 2, 79-81.

2 Book 3 of Oppian's *Halieutica* describes the variety of baiting, trapping, and other techniques used in fishing, all of them strategies of deception. For the possible use of artificial fishing lures in ancient Greece, see Haskins, 1891.

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proposes instead that it is an art of imitation (231d-235a). The stranger chooses the angler for his practice-case because, he says, the angler's skill is mundane, familiar, and readily comprehensible, yet can take as long to classify thoroughly as a more difficult target such as the skill of the sophist would (218d-e). But soon enough the angler's skill turns out to be relevant as the skill that it is rather than just for its formal properties as a target of classification: both the angler and the sophist are hunters, the one of fish, the other of rich young men.

The Stranger treats this point as an unforeseen and lucky discovery (221d8-9); but even after making it, he still does not appreciate the full relevance of the angler's skill. The account of the angler was hollow for lack of attention to its element of deceptive imitation; no less hollow is the account of the sophist as hunter. Deceptive appearances almost beg to be dwelt upon as a factor in some of the categories produced by this first division of the sophist, which include persuasive talk, the seductive gifts of lovers, and the blandishments of flatterers. Describing the pleasure that flatterers provide for their hosts, the Stranger even uses the word for "bait" (δέλεαρ, 222e6). This, however, is an alert from Plato to the reader; the Stranger himself makes nothing of it.

Indeed, Plato the author has been toying with his character the Stranger from the moment the divisions began. Why did the Stranger feel that a practice-case was necessary in the first place? Because sophists as a class are "awkward and hard to hunt (δυσθήρευτον)"; so, we should begin with "easy," "small," or "trivial" cases, and only then proceed to work on the "bigger" or "biggest" one (218d). The dramatic irony is rich; the Stranger is oblivious to the implications of his own imagery. We are to use something small and trivial (σμικρόν, φαῦλον) to hunt down something bigger (μεῖζον, μέγιστον); and what do we choose? What else but the art that uses the small fry to catch the big fish! And yet this detail goes unmentioned in the division that the Stranger proceeds to develop. And even after the Stranger has noticed that, as it were, the small fry too is a kind of fish — that is, he has noticed that both the angler and the sophist can be described as hunters — still he misses the further fact that the sophist does not merely resemble the angler insofar as he too is a hunter; in addition, the sophist lends himself to being portrayed as the very same type of hunter that the angler is — namely, one whose art depends on deceptive mimicry.

Now, it is true that the Stranger does eventually come to treat the sophist as a deceptive mimic. Before he gets to that point, however, he runs through several further divisions that continue to treat the sophist's art as acquisitive rather than productive, locating him in different categories of acquisition

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on the basis of his observed behavior. Thus, sophists can be found chasing after rich young men, or marketing their intellectual products in various ways, or fighting for prizes in public debate. And these markers of sophistry are mere external symptoms — as mechanically described, in their way, as were the angler's actions with rod and hook. Their superficiality is acknowledged when Theaetetus and the Stranger start speaking of the divisions as different ways in which the sophist has "appeared" to them (πέφανθαι, 231c1; πέφανται, 231d2). The very multiplicity of these appearances is then treated as itself a deceptive "appearance" (an unhealthy φάντασμα, 232a3). Thus begins the transition to the idea that the single art that is proper to the sophist is not acquisitive after all but productive; his art is a kind of production of images. The sophist is a deceptive imitator, and the false image he constructs is of himself as an authority. He is a mere image of the wise man. This is the result at which the final division of the sophist arrives (264c-68d; esp. 268c1).

And, thus, the dramatic irony at the Stranger's expense continues to the last; for, in effect, the Stranger is treating sophistry in this final division as imitative in the very way that angling is imitative*; yet he gives no sign of realizing that this is what he is doing.* That is, he gives no sign of recognizing that the angling-paradigm has become even more relevant than he at first suspected. The sophist in the final division captures his clientele by making himself their deceptive bait; he attracts them with a false appearance of authoritative wisdom. He is not simply hunting for prey; he is angling for prey. And like the angler, he is aware of the deception; the Stranger classifies him as an "ironic" rather than "simple" mimic (268a7-8).

Now consider the message that this development in the dialogue sends — a message from Plato to the reader. On the one hand, the Stranger is well aware that angling is a banal activity by comparison with sophistry, as we have seen. On the other hand, if his final analysis treats sophistry as no deeper or more complicated an activity than angling — as it does — and if he himself shows no awareness of this fact, then he has proven himself incapable of asking whether sophistry might not after all be something more than a kind of angling. He has neglected the deeper implications of the paradigmatic method that he himself introduced into the discussion, which demanded examination of the greater by means of the lesser. That is, the method demands a sense that the target is something of greater significance than the case selected to illustrate it. But the Stranger has instead reduced the big fish of sophistry to the small fry of angling. The final division, then, is no less superficial than the divisions that have preceded it. This would be what Plato is indicating to us.

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What more *is* there to sophistry, then, than a kind of angling? This too is a question that the ending of the dialogue should prompt us to ask. And readers of the trilogy *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman* have already encountered an answer in the Protagorean section of the first dialogue in the trilogy, the *Theaetetus* — led, of course, by a maieutic Socrates, not by the didactic Stranger. Sophists traffic in appearances not simply in the banal sense of disguising themselves as authorities but in the deeper sense of exploring whether appearances are themselves the only authoritative factor for human beings, be it in social life or in their awareness of the world more broadly. By comparison to this idea, all of the divisions produced by the Stranger in the *Sophist* can be seen to remain on the surface of things. And this impression is only reinforced when we consider the dialogues from the middle period that feature sophists. These give us a sense of *how* the sophist turns himself into alluring bait for the young, not just *that* he does; they yield a far richer sense of what makes sophists "tick" than the *Sophist* itself does.

But why, it may well be asked, would Plato bother to produce such elaborately superficial attempts to understand sophistry, when he had already done better work on that score? One answer is this: the discussion in the *Sophist*, as is often noted, takes place under the shadow of Socrates's impending trial (mentioned in the final lines of the *Theaetetus*). In the *Apology*, Socrates insists that his mission as a philosopher has been misunderstood, and that the hostility his fellow citizens feel toward him derives from their having unfairly confused him with other kinds of intellectual, notably those known as sophists. The divisions in the *Sophist* are a veritable gallery of unflattering public images of the sophist; but when the Stranger comes to the relatively flattering portrait of a "noble" kind of sophistry — widely acknowledged to correspond to Socrates's own inquisitorial practice of philosophy — and a practice which the Stranger considers very different from the general run of sophistry, Theaetetus, who is becoming bewildered by the plethora of guises in which the sophist has appeared, insists that this noble sophistry nevertheless does bear some resemblance to the sophist as typically understood (231a-b). And even the Stranger, after all, does categorize the practice as a species of *sophistry*, however noble. Seen in this light, the divisions in the *Sophist* can be read as scrutinizing the social peril in which Socrates currently finds himself. Their superficiality would be their point; for they correspond to the superficial view taken of Socrates by his fellow-citizens.

That is one way to give the divisions point. Another is to note the many provocative details within the divisions that amount to a running commentary by Plato directed at the reader rather than serving to convey the Stranger's teaching to Theaetetus. An example comes when the Stranger

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leaves out birds of the air from his classification of prey that hunters hunt, despite the fact that birds are caught in the air as well as on water (220a). Land and water are the only two elements considered (as happens again, by the way, in the *Statesman*: see *Plt.* 264c-e). Plato's hint here? That the Stranger's analysis is resolutely "down to earth," leaving no room for the Socratic hunt for philosophic souls which, like birds, long to take flight into the higher regions of thought (if I may use the imagery of *Phaedrus* 249d). The divisions are replete with such moments.

Those divisions, however, comprise only one part of the *Sophist,* and not even the largest part. There is the lengthy metaphysical discussion in its central pages to be taken into account, which prepares the ground for the final division. These pages have their independent validity. Unlike the divisions, they are not amenable to being treated as outright Platonic parody. Nor can they be explained as alluding to Socrates's trial. Their presence in the dialogue does need explaining, however, since, whatever their independent value, the position they occupy in the economy of the dialogue is strikingly awkward. For after we have finally made our way through their thickets, we learn that the purpose of these pages was merely to enable us to classify the sophist as an imitator without fear of embroiling ourselves in paradox over issues of non-being. Yet Plato in other dialogues is quite capable of writing about imitation and image-making without agonizing over problems of non-being, as he makes the Eleatic Stranger do. Even more awkwardly, the abstruse metaphysics of the mid-section does not in fact play any active role in the final division of the sophist. In making that final classification, the Stranger draws his distinctions within the category of imitation with a confidence that owes nothing to his having recently analysed non-being in terms of difference. In these ways, the dialogue's mid-section comes to seem dispensable.

Nevertheless, readers quite understandably come away from this dialogue with the impression that its massive mid-section is what gives the work as a whole its philosophic heft. *This* is how to deal with sophists, we think: dispelling their sophistries about non-being using the clear light of logical syntax. And the Stranger too seems fully invested in this aspect of his task. But here is the irony that results. The ostensible point of the mid-section is to prevent the sophist from evading capture; the Stranger fears that the sophist will wriggle free from analysis by challenging any references to "that which is not" (235b-c, 236e-37a, 241e). Yet the sophist ends up evading capture anyway, escaping under the cover of a logical and metaphysical investigation that begins instrumentally but ends up, it would seem, being elaborated independently. To put the matter bluntly, the dialogue on the

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sophist never properly addresses what makes sophistry bad and philosophy good. In the dialogue's dominant mid-section, resolving scholarly *aporiai* has become an end in itself, only tangentially related to understanding what makes sophists tick. It seems as a result that, when questions of value are shunted aside, the philosophic life degenerates into the merely scholarly life.

In order to make sense of the dialogue as a whole, then — of its metaphysical digression no less than of its divisions — I adopt the following hypothesis. It is a hypothesis I take to apply also to the *Parmenides* and the *Statesman.* Plato wrote these Eleatic dialogues at a time when he had come to preside over an Academy well-stocked with clever youngsters and ambitious junior colleagues — mathematicians, astronomers, and dialectical jousters notable among them. Mathematics, astronomy, and the dialectical joust were disciplines that Plato himself had encouraged in the Academy, for the purpose of training his budding philosophers; but he had become concerned that the training was turning into a self-standing pursuit. That is, he had become concerned that the practitioners of these disciplines were more focused on paradox and on the cracking of puzzles than on what makes human life meaningful; had become keener on distinguishing one from many than evil from good.

The value-free "view from nowhere" that is the Stranger's stock in trade does, however, have its uses, which should not pass without acknowledgment.[3] Divisions that rank louse-catching on a par with generalship; analyses of "Greatest Kinds" that are greatest not in the sense of being the most important of Forms but of being those of broadest application: the value-neutrality of these pursuits is a useful jolt to the conventional consciousness, and therefore good training for any apprentice philosopher. Nevertheless, such matters are only preliminary to the sense of values one should aim to acquire — and to be capable of vindicating — in philosophic maturity. (The idea underwrites the advice from Parmenides to the youthful Socrates of the *Parmenides*, which set the agenda for this essay.) Deprived of that ennobling aim, the techniques that the Stranger demonstrates to his young students come to resemble a box of tricks.

Many a reader of the Eleatic dialogues has been struck by their rebarbative qualities: their stiffness; their many oddities; their structural blemishes; the superficiality of their divisions. These matters are not something we should seek to mitigate and explain away. They are warning signs posted by Plato.

3 I am grateful to I-Kai Jeng for urging this point on me in a related conversation about the Parmenides.

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And if all this is right, then in no sense are the classic Socratic dialogues of earlier periods transcended by those of the late-period, still less jettisoned.

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