SOPHISTIC ARGUMENT

Contrasting Views

Plato was correct to regard them as masters of illusion who presented men not with the truth but with fictions, images, and “idols,” which they persuaded others to accept as reality.

Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*

In his *Elements of Logic* (1836), Richard Whately conjures up an illogical antagonist with whom to contest his points, particularly on the efficacy of the fallacies. This device constitutes a kind of running dialogue between himself as the epitome of reason and a champion of unreason. The antagonist is simply called “the Sophist.” He acts deliberately to obscure and disguise expressions, while hoping they appear as simple as possible (161). “Sophistry,” Whately writes, “like poison, is at once detected, and nauseated, when presented to us in a concentrated form” (162), but the wily Sophist dilutes his deceptions, thereby making them more virulent. When he cannot prove his point, he distracts his audience so as to avoid the need for a proof (193), and he generally stands to represent all that can be understood by the term ‘unreason’. This is a devastating portrait. It makes of the Sophist a thoroughly unpalatable character. Our question, though, has to do with the origin of this idea and whether it accurately approximates any historical Sophist who would have acknowledged the title. Whately’s depiction is a common one, influenced in no small part by the tradition that comes down to us from Plato and Aristotle and sees them as the philosophers, logical in thought and purpose, resisting the encroachments of the Sophists, illogical in all respects.

AGAINST THE SOPHISTS

In spite of the rehabilitation that the Sophists have enjoyed in recent studies (Kerferd 1981; Schiappa 1991, 2003), the negative judgments of Plato and Aristotle have tended to be endorsed by argumentation theorists.¹ A major text that aims to capture the current state of affairs in the study of argument (van Eemeren et al. 1996) conveys what is indeed the standard story on the
10 Sophistic Argument and the Early Tradition

Sophists. Referring to the Sophists of fifth-century Greece, the authors tell us that they “were itinerant scholars who taught lessons in argumentation and social and political skills” (30). But the argumentation that they taught presumably was bad argumentation. The authors transfer the advocacy of relativism, often attributed to the fifth-century Sophists as a group, to a particular standpoint in argumentation that they call a sophistic standpoint. Of this, they write: “objectively speaking, there can be no such thing as good argumentation. If one person convinces another with his arguments, this is because the other person accepts what he says. The first person is, in other words, agreed to be right, but that does not necessarily mean that in objective terms he actually is right” (ibid.).

What appears here to be a description of sophistic practice is on closer scrutiny a prescription. Behind the account stand the assumptions that good argumentation must have standards outside of social agreement and that the Sophists recognized no such standards. Both assumptions may prove questionable. But what is notable here is that a particular conception of argument, and indeed good argument, is being projected onto the Sophists and used to find their practice inadequate. In this respect the authors follow in the steps of Plato and Aristotle.

One argumentation theorist who is cognizant in his work of the controversy surrounding Plato’s and Aristotle’s interpretations of the Sophists is Douglas Walton. This is significant because in many respects Walton’s own dialectical model of argument has much in common with the Sophists’ interest in likelihood and plausible inference, as he himself recognizes (1998a, 15–16; 1995, 4). The problem, as Walton suggests it, is that the denouncing of the Sophists by Plato and Aristotle was so widely accepted as correct that any interest in a logic based on presumption and opinion was in turn regarded as less than respectable. This, however, does not prompt Walton to go back and investigate the argumentative practices of individual Sophists (beyond a recognition of Antiphon’s predilection for the argument from likelihood [1998a, 15]). Instead he directs his attention to salvaging the disfavored aspects of dialectical argument.

Again, while Walton acknowledges the recent controversies surrounding Plato’s and Aristotle’s interpretations of the Sophists, he does not himself pass judgment except to accept their condemnation of eristic argument. Eristic argument, in their terms, is a form of argument that aims at victory at any cost.2 The standard examples of this are found not in any of the Sophists’ extant writings but in Plato’s Euthydemus. In fact these examples often seem to be taken as the examples of sophistic argument, even though, or perhaps because, the Euthydemus constitutes Plato’s most derisive treatment of “sophistic thought.” That it is countered by a greater number of respectful portraits
of Sophists in other dialogues is often overlooked. Certainly the depiction of sophistic argument presented in the *Euthydemus* fuels the judgment that the Sophists were not serious arguers inquiring after truth but perpetrators of fallacious reasoning and seekers of personal profit. At least this is the view that Walton follows Aristotle in sharing. Aristotle links sophistical argumentation and fallacies (or sophistical refutations) to eristic argument. That Walton is in agreement with this move is indicated when he relates it to his own new dialectic: “Aristotle is also making an extremely important statement about the analysis of fallacies that is preserved in the new dialectic. Fallacies are associated with deceptive shifts from one type of dialogue to another in the new dialectic” (1998a, 191). The stigma of deception clings to eristic argument, and in turn to the Sophists who are deemed its exponents. Even when the controversial nature of Aristotle’s interpretation is recognized, the association holds firm. Yet, as we will see, there is more to sophistic argument than eristics, and not all sophistic argumentation can be equated with fallacy even if we permit ourselves to view it only through Aristotelian lenses. Eristic argumentation itself may even be seen to have some merit to it (Grimaldi 1996, 29).

FIGURES OF INFLUENCE

For a contrasting image of the Sophist, consider one aspect of the discovery by August Mariette of the Serapeum at Memphis, Egypt. During the excavation an avenue bordered by 141 small sphinxes was uncovered between the temple and the Serapeum. It followed a curve and stopped. Beyond the last of the sphinxes was a bench surmounted by Greek statues. These were arranged in a circle, known today as the Philosophers’ Circle. They had been erected during the Ptolemaic period. Represented there are the poets Homer, Hesiod, Demetrius, and Pindar. Presumably they were exemplars of their craft. Opposed to them are philosophers such as Plato, Herachitus, Thales, and, in their company, Protagoras. This last association of the famous “Sophist” Protagoras with the likes of Plato suggests a much different attitude toward the two on the part of those who arranged the circle, an attitude that sees grounds to associate them rather than set them in opposition. Insofar as we understand Protagoras to be the most famous of the group of fifth-century Sophists, then the statues at the Serapeum might make us wonder how firmly the opposition between philosopher and Sophist should be maintained.

Such is the tone that is struck in some counterviews of the Sophists that arise occasionally in the history of philosophy. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1892), Hegel promotes several features of sophistic reasoning, noting at one point: “If sophistry is bad in the sense that it signifies a quality of which only bad men are guilty, it is at the same time much more common than this would imply; for all argumentative reasoning, adducing of arguments and
counter-arguments, bringing into prominence particular points of view, is sophistry” (367). People take on the standpoint of the Sophist whenever they judge concrete cases in which a particular point of view determines the action that results. In everyday life we cannot avoid this. Hegel sees the greatest gift the Sophists offered to have been culture. Men wished for culture and so to be guided by thought and no longer through oracles, custom, or passion. What Hegel means by culture is “that what free thought is to attain must come out of itself and be personal conviction; it is then no longer believed but investigated—in short, it is the so-called enlightenment of modern times. Thought seeks general principles by which it criticizes everything which is by us esteemed, and nothing has value to us which is not in conformity with these principles” (256). Accordingly, he writes, “[a] man of culture thus knows how to say something of everything, to find points of view in all” (356).

Eduard Zeller (1883), likewise, offers a very sympathetic reading of the Sophists, noting the breadth of their influence, including that on people such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Herodotus. “It remains the undying service of Sophism to philosophy that it turned Greek philosophy to the study of man himself and first laid the foundations of a systematic education of the young” (92). But he also notes that the movement was brought into ill repute by certain Sophists (such as Euthydemos and Dionysodoros), who “degraded sophism to paltry hair-splitting, logical quibbles and fallacies” (91).

The impact of the Sophists to which Zeller refers belies the subsequent negative portraits. Contemporaries such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Euripides all reflect a serious engagement with their ideas and ways of arguing. The debate on different regimes in book 3 of the Histories has been suggested to reflect the influence of Protagoras on Herodotus, and both figures were associated with the founding of Thurii (de Romilly 1992, 221). In a similar vein, the text of the Dissoi Logoi (or Contrasting Arguments) that we will examine in part 2 echoes Herodotus at 3.38.

The influence on Thucydides is even more pronounced, as is widely acknowledged. The technique attributed to Gorgias of presenting hypotheses that cover every possibility (as with his account of Helen’s behavior) is freely employed in Thucydides’ speeches, as are debates that match opposing sides of an argument.

Perhaps, though, the influence is most richly apparent in the extant tragedies of Euripides. As Desmond Conacher notes, “The influence of Sophistic rhetoric on Euripides is almost a cliche of literary studies of his plays” (1998, 50). But the impact of their thinking on a range of issues far exceeds the rhetoric alone. Euripides’ alleged association with Prodicus, with whom he is said to have studied, may account for his interest in precise definitions (Conacher 1998, 28), and a similar relationship with Protagoras may account
for the apparent interest in the relativity of ethical values on the part of many of his characters as well as a skepticism toward the existence of the gods. Fragment 795, for example, criticizes anyone “who boasts of knowing anything concerning the gods,” a remark that is consistent with the Protagorean claim that he could not know whether or not the gods exist, in part because of the obscurity of the subject (DK 80 B4). While observing that the Helen is a demonstration of what it means to make the weak argument strong, Conacher sees this echoed in a line from Euripides’ Antiope: “If one should be clever at speaking, one should be able to establish a case (agôna) consisting of two arguments for every proposition” (cited in Conacher, 51). Conacher calls this “a similar claim,” but the reference is specifically to the sophist strategy of ‘double arguments’, which also occupies Euripides in the Hecuba (123–24)—dissôn muthôn rhêtores (“speakers of twofold arguments [or narratives]”).¹ There are good reasons for treating the making of weak arguments strong and the creating of double arguments as quite distinct strategies. Still Conacher’s point is to mark the extent of the sophistic influence on Euripides’ language and modes of argumentation. While in some plays the appearance is more ten-dentious, in others it is uncontroversially pervasive. Thus of the Heraclidae Conacher writes: “It can, perhaps, be described as one of Euripides’ most Sophistic plays, both in its iconoclasm with regard to traditional values and certainties, and in its presentation of shifting attitudes and arguments suggestive of the more chameleonic aspects of Sophistic discourse” (93).

Last, but certainly not least, in terms of contemporary influence is the testimony of the law courts. The mainstay of the legal institution in fourth-century Athens was speech making, and in this area the sophistic influence was powerful and again pervasive. The purpose of law was to express the will of the demos—ordinary citizens who made up the core of the state. Represented by a selected body of citizens, the demos would hear the cases of prosecutors and defendants, effectively in debate, and would then decide the issue by vote. Thus the power to persuade through speech was an essential skill for those engaged in civic life.⁶ We see this graphically in the case of Socrates in Plato’s Apology. He recognizes the importance of speech making when he enters the court and excuses himself for being a bad speech maker (Apology 17b). He saw his skill lying in elenchtic debate (illustrated in the exchange with Meletus [24d–26a]) and not the long speech. Thus Callicles in the Gorgias can warn him that his failure to grasp the skills of speech making can only lead to a failure to defend himself and consequently his downfall (486a–b). The ability, then, to turn the tables on one’s opponent in argument (the peritrope), or present an argument on both sides of an issue, or take a weak case and make it strong—all strategies we should associate with sophistic argumentation—was valuable in the extreme, and it is no surprise that the citizenry of Athens was prepared
to give considerable sums of money to those who professed to teach such
things. These were the Sophists. And while the central goal of winning victory
over an opponent may imply no more than eristical contests such as those wit-
nessed in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, as was suggested above, we will later see that the
constructive strategies involved far exceed these. We find a range of argument-
tative strategies, for example, in the extant writings of Antiphon the Sophist,
one of the ten writers known as the Attic Orators.  

**POSITIVE VIEWS OF SOPHISTIC ARGUMENT**

Contemporary argumentation has not been so kind to the Sophists. As we have
seen, the treatments of van Eemeren et al. (1996) and Walton are the standard
treatments in argumentation theory, if the Sophists are mentioned at all. There
are, though, some exceptions to this rule, exceptions that serve to question
what in fact is “standard” here. Notably Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-
Tyteca (1969) challenge the received view when they observe that the value
of the Sophists’ enterprise depends very much on the value we place on the
type of argumentation involved. Plato considered truth to be more important
than gaining the adherence of an audience. But for Perelman and Olbrechts-
Tyteca, “as soon as these procedures are examined from the angle of argumen-
tation, a justification can be found for them which makes them less offensive”
(319). The implication is, of course, that there is still some offense committed
by the Sophists, but at least Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca understand a
model of argumentation, and perhaps *good* argumentation, that can be recon-
ciled with sophistic practice.

A more complete positive engagement with the Sophists’ reasoning is pro-
vided by John Poulakos (1997). He goes beyond simply noting the antipathy
that Plato and Aristotle felt toward the Sophists to ask what exactly it was that
they were rejecting: “How did the Sophists reason? Why? On what grounds
did philosophers of the fourth century B.C. reject the logic of sophistical
thought?” (13). These are useful guiding questions. Poulakos also introduces
several methodological principles in approaching these questions. Of most
significance is the understanding that logic is “time- and place-specific” (ibid.).
Poulakos sees different logics arising in response to different cultural situa-
tions and declining when those conditions no longer pertained, as opposed to
progressing over time. Such might be reflected in a shift from the oral-based,
itinerant teaching and public sphere contexts of the Sophists to the emerging
text-based, institutional, and private contexts of Plato’s writing.

In accordance with this, Poulakos follows the principle that a logic can be
derived from studying the practices and ideas of the Sophists (14). There is
ample material for following this direction. Although we are limited to frag-
ments of the Sophists, there are many corroborative accounts of their prac-
tices and positions, including those of Plato and Aristotle: “the informational
aspect of the critics’ comments” (14). The difficulty is to distinguish description from interpretation in these accounts. But while such a difficulty will loom large over any such project, it ought not to deter us from employing the approach. In Poulakos’s study it is the culturally derived sense of spectacle that comes to the fore (along with their associations with the pre-Socratics and poets); he presents the Sophists as figures interested in competition and exhibition, with modes of reasoning (such as the eristic argument) developed to those ends. Sophistic logic, he concludes, concerns itself “with situational forces, specific points of contention, and new visions of linguistic expression. In short, it must be a circumstantial, agonistic, and exhibitive logic” (16). This logic is founded around three notions, which he develops in a general discussion without direct reference to any of the individuals involved. The first notion is that of opportune rhetorical moments, or kairos. This involves speakers responding spontaneously to fleeting situations marked by their unique features (18). The second idea is that of playfulness (paignion), seen in the making of the weaker argument stronger and the way in which the language was exploited in the coining of new words and arguments (20). The final notion is that of possibility (to dynaton), which refers to things that are not but could be. Here, Poulakos argues, the Sophists introduced a third alternative between the strict opposition of the actual and the ideal (21). The merit of Poulakos’s essay is the way he culls these features from the cultural and political contexts in which the Sophists worked and further explains how each notion served as a target for Platonic and Aristotelian criticisms. Several of his points will enrich some of the discussions that follow.

Other recent writers direct attention to the argumentative practices of specific Sophists. For example Consigny (2001) gives a logically consistent reading of the Gorgianic corpus, and both Schiappa (2003) and Mendelson (2002) draw out the qualities of the approach to argument taken by Protagorus. These works will be among those discussed in the chapters ahead, but Mendelson’s treatment is particularly worth mentioning in this introductory chapter because of the attention he gives to antilogic. Protagoras is renowned for saying that there are opposing logoi concerning every subject (Diogenes Laertius 1985, IX 51). Following Michael Billig (1987) and G. B. Kerferd (1981), Mendelson understands this two-logoi doctrine to be the method of antilogic. Billig (45) notes that Plato uses antilogikos in the Theaetetus (164c) to refer to the practice of those who consider opposing arguments, since Socrates and Theaetetus have shown both that the man who remembers knows and that he does not know, and in the Phaedrus (261d–e) antilogikos describes Zeno’s art of speaking that makes the same thing appear like and unlike, stationary and in motion. Kerferd draws from these passages, among others, in asserting that the essential feature of antilogic for Plato “is the opposition of one logos to another either by contrariety or contradiction” (63). This idea
undergoes considerable development by Mendelson, who judges it a method of pedagogy. In antilogic, by his reading, there is an implicit commitment to dialogic exchange “that distinguishes it in almost every way from the unilateral emphasis of traditional debate” (2002, 49), and as an argumentative method of inquiry, the focus is on the experience of opposing positions interacting (78). This may seem a stretch from what can be culled from extant fragments, where no obvious interaction per se is emphasized (opposing arguments can just stand in opposition to each other), but it is a measure of Mendelson’s skills as a historian of argument that he can so plausibly tease clues and strains of theory from the remnants and implications of what we do have. Much of Protagorean practice, for example, is understood in relation to his most famous fragment on the human-measure doctrine. While Mendelson expresses a reluctance to place too much weight on the meaning of this fragment, in the end much of what he has to say about Protagoras follows from how he understands this basic position. The human-measure doctrine states that the human being is the measure of all things: those that are that they are, and those that are not that they are not (DK 80 B1). While the latter part of this doctrine invites an intriguing debate with the Platonists over the question of how we can know what is and what is not, it is the opening clause that holds the most interest for argumentation. Protagoras would seem in these few words to place meaning and interpretation in the domain of human agency and to raise interesting questions of how we are to arrive at any agreements about the world and our place in it. For Mendelson this shifts the focus directly onto the argumentative practice that is implicated by such a view. If humans are the final arbiters of what is the case, and things are as they seem to each individual, then it makes perfect sense to argue strongly for each side of an issue and to consider carefully those arguments before deciding which view to adopt.

RESISTANCE TO REVISION

We can already see in these discussions the kernels for some fruitful recovery of sophistic ideas on the nature and practice of argumentation. Yet the negative image largely prevails today in spite of such serious moves of rehabilitation. I close this chapter by returning to that negative view and considering why it has been both so intense and so intransigent.

We have considerable testimony to indicate that among their contemporaries the Sophists were held in suspicion. Or perhaps, as Jacqueline de Romilly has suggested (1992, 236), the period of innovation and enlightenment that they inaugurated was destined to pale as crises of morality and religion ensued and imitators caricatured their ideas, intentionally or otherwise. Aristophanes provides a graphic reaction to the Sophists’ influence in Clouds, where alleged claims to teach anything are ridiculed and the weak argument wins out over the strong.
Such an attitude is echoed in Xenophon’s reaction to the Sophists, the tone of which prefigures the disdain expressed by Whately. In his work On Hunting (Xenophon 1897, vol. 3), Xenophon spends twelve chapters detailing the merits of hunting: its methods, the quality of the hounds employed, and its value to those who participate. But at the start of chapter 13 there is a sudden switch in apparent topic and the introduction of strong invective against the Sophists, “as they are called” (13.1), who, although they promise to lead the young to virtue, actually lead them in the opposite direction. The connection with what has gone before, in Xenophon’s mind, seems to lie in the pros and cons of how to lead young men to virtue. He engages in some specious causal reasoning in chapter 12, that since the virtuous men of the day all hunted in their youth, then it is hunting that leads to virtue. This is a laborious route to approach the attack on the Sophists in chapter 13, if that was his intention. But for our purposes it is what he has to say about them that is of interest. He claims never to have seen anyone who “owed his goodness to the sophists of today,” and their voluminous writings are on “vain and frivolous” subjects, rather than those that would lead to goodness. He then develops a contrast of method with the philosopher. The wisdom of the Sophist consists in “word-subtleties” (or names, onomasi); that of the philosopher in “thoughts and ideas” (noemasi). The Sophist issues “sonorous catch-words” (paraggelmata); the philosopher provides “reasoned conclusions” (enthumemata). And on the contrast between appearance and reality, Xenophon strives for his writings “not to seem but rather to be useful” (13.5). In a final description that echoes the Plato of the Euthydemus and the Sophist, and that aptly relates to the subject matter of his own work, Xenophon calls the Sophist “a hunter after the rich and the young” (while the philosopher is friend to all) (13.9).

Plato’s response to the Sophists, while more nuanced than Xenophon’s, is still largely negative, at least in its reaction, and there is little doubt that the historical reputation of the Sophists owes much to the force and artistry of Plato’s rejection. And reject them he had to, because on every front they represented a threat to his project and interests, offering widely accessible public education, proposing questionable views on virtue and justice, and, most important, eschewing any attempt to uncover an objective truth. As Plato has his mouthpiece, Socrates, indicate more than once, if the ideas and procedures of certain Sophists are correct, then the very activity of dialectical inquiry is pointless and the project of philosophy as Plato conceives it must fail. These were not consequences he was prepared to tolerate, and he reserves some of his more incisive arguments for the debates with the Sophists that take place within his dialogues. While major Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias are accorded dialogues in their own right, many others populate the dramas and enter the discussions throughout. Moreover, even where no Sophist is present, their threatening ideas still lurk in the shadows, a fitting
backdrop to some crucial debates that set the agenda for much of Western intellectual history.

While Aristotle was at odds with Plato on many fundamental questions of philosophy, on the value and threat of the Sophists they were largely in agreement. Throughout the Metaphysics, for example, questions are raised about the tenability of sophistic ideas. And concerns over the consequences of sophistic practice arise in the ethical works as well as works such as the Rhetoric. But it is undoubtedly in the Sophistical Refutations that Aristotle wields the heaviest blow against the Sophists’ historical interests. The close association of sophistic arguments (or refutations) with the analysis of fallacy that grounds subsequent studies in Western logic effectively undermines the value of ‘sophistic argument’ generally. It is this aspect of the Sophists’ heritage that still most needs rehabilitating. That there is much more to sophistic argument than fallacious reasoning should be apparent from any review of the extant fragments, but sophistry has such a negative currency in our languages that such a review seems unwarranted. Even on nonfallacious terms, the legacy of sophistic argument may seem ambiguous. De Romilly judges the widely recognized ability to defend both points of view in a debate to suggest “a disconcerting unconcern for truth” (1992, 80) and to be quite fitting of the modern-day charge of “sophistry.” With so much force and historical weight behind the detractions, the case for reappraising sophistic argument remains particularly challenging. In the next chapter we begin the task of furthering that project and arguing for its importance.