Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?

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Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?

Problematicizing the Construct “Sophistic Rhetoric”

There has been a distinct “turn” in recent scholarship toward what is called most commonly “sophistic rhetoric.” For a variety of reasons, “sophistic rhetoric” represents a veritable oasis of ideas for contemporary theories of discourse, composition, and argumentation. Consider a few manifestations of a “sophistic turn”: John Poulakos has developed a “sophistic definition of rhetoric” which he believes provides an important contribution to a contemporary understanding of discourse (“Towards”), and which he offers as a model of liberating rhetoric (“Critique”). Declaring himself a sophist, Jasper Neel advocates “sophistical rhetoric” as “a study of how to make choices and a study of how choices form character and make good citizens” (211). Roger Moss has made a “Case for Sophistry” as an antidote to the paralyzing influence of realism, and Sharon Crowley has made “A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry” to encourage a more sociopolitical engaged model of pedagogy. These examples can be multiplied, but I think they suffice to show that the concept of “sophistic rhetoric” has grown in popularity in a variety of ways.

The turn to “sophistic rhetorics” is, in many ways, attractive and productive. To those who see our understanding of the workings of discourse as inescapably rooted in ancient Greece, the turn to “sophistry” provides a valuable alternative to Platonic and Aristotelian pedagogical traditions. Nevertheless, I want to make the case that “sophistic rhetoric” is, for the most part, a mirage—something we see because we want and need to see it—which vaporizes once carefully scrutinized. My position is that we are unlikely to come up with a historically defensible definition of “sophistic rhetoric” that is nontrivial and uniquely valuable. Furthermore, I believe that the practice of reproducing incoherent historical concepts is pedagogically unsound, and hence alternatives should be considered. I close by suggesting specific alternative appropriations that allow us to retain the “best” contributions of “sophistic rhetoric” without engaging in anachronism.

Who Were the Sophists?

The first problem with the notion of “sophistic rhetoric” is identifying what we mean by “sophistic.” Most scholars take the word as meaning literally belonging to the sophists, and refer to the group of individuals of the fifth century BCE to whom Plato denotes as such. The standard list, canonized by Diels and Kranz
and adopted by scholars such as Poulakos ("Towards" 40), includes Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicas, Thrasymachus, Critias, and Antiphon. Unfortunately, canonized or not, the list is somewhat arbitrary and cannot be squared with the available ancient testimony.

The word "sophist" is in Greek sophistēs, meaning a person of wisdom (sophia). The term first appears in Findar in the early fifth century and predates the appearance of the group of so-called "older" sophists of Diels-Kranz. The notion that there was a distinctive "sophistic rhetoric" seems to have originated in the writings of Plato, and it has been reified through a series of accounts that (mistakenly) take Plato seriously as a historian (see, e.g., Cope; Guthrie). But Plato's references to "sophists" include people normally not included in the standard list (Micus, Proteus), and though he refers to four of the standard list as "sophists" (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicas, Hippias) he does not do so with the other three (Thrasymachus, Critias, Antiphon). When he uses the term generically, such as in his Sophist, it appears that he is often referring to fourth-century rivals rather than fifth-century sophists. In both Plato's and Aristotle's writings there is evidence of different kinds of "sophists," which they sometimes take pains to distinguish and sometimes lump together (Classen). In other words, even in the corpus of texts that has most influenced our conception of "sophistic rhetoric," there is sufficient equivocation to warrant another look at the evidence.

Aristophanes' comedy Clouds is the only preplatanic text which survives that discusses "sophists" at length, and it provides a perspective quite different than that found in Plato. The main "sophist" lampooned is Socrates, and decades later the label "sophist" was still commonly applied to him despite Plato's protests (Nehamas, "Eristic"). Most of the play's action takes place at "Thinkery" (phrontistēria) and the object of sophistic training is portrayed as to produce "persons of wisdom" (sophistēs) or "thinkers" (phrontistēs). When Strepsiades comes to the Thinkery to learn how to avoid paying his debts, Socrates requires him to learn to reason analytically and "scientifically." Socrates' lesson concerning how to win a lawsuit is an exercise in the invention of creative arguments that has little in common with the discussions of forensic rhetoric found in the fourth century. The play never once mentions "rhetoric" (rhetorikē) or "oratory" (rhetoreia), yet there is a surprising variety of subjects explored at the Thinkery. The subjects include what are now called astronomy, surveying, geometry, and meteorology; all are treated as serious interests of the Thinkery's inhabitants. Throughout the play, Aristophanes portrays the process of learning to speak (legein) as a natural consequence of learning to engage in "sophisticated" reasoning.

As documented in detail by G. B. Kerferd, a wide variety of people occupying an assortment of professions were called sophists in ancient Greece, including poets (such as Homer and Hesiod), musicians and rhapsodes, diviners and seers, and an assortment of "wise men" we now would categorize as presocratic philosophers, mathematicians, and politicians. According to Kerferd, "the term
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σοφιστής is confined to those who in one way or another function as the Sages, the exponents of knowledge in early communities” (“The First” 8). In fact, the term “philosopher” was not used to demarcate a specific group of thinkers until well into the fourth century BCE (Havelock). As Martin Ostwald notes, “the Athenian public made no attempt to differentiate sophists from philosophers” (259). We are reading history backwards when we call presocratics such as Thales and Pythagoras “philosophers” since prior to Aristotle they would have been described as “sophists.” Even in the fourth century, Isocrates and Plato called each other “sophists” and themselves “philosophers,” making it purely a modern bias to label either definitively (cf. Quandahl).

Despite the ancient evidence suggesting that “sophist” was a label used to describe a variety of people, a common means of identifying a specific group of fifth-century sophists is by reference to their professionalism; that is, some distinguish sophists from nonsophists by whether or not they charged fees for their teaching (Kerferd, SM 25). The question then becomes: Why is this a useful litmus test? The “parasitical” behavior of some sophists was often cause for their approbation in ancient times (Blank); how could it possibly benefit us to limit the label of sophist in such a way? Surely we would not limit “sophistic” teaching to that which has been paid for! If, on the other hand, some substantive differences can be identified between the teachings of those who charged for their services and those who did not, then would not those doctrinal differences be more appropriate defining variables? One appeal of the “sophistic movement” that is often claimed is that it helped provide an education useful for a democracy. Accordingly, defining “sophist” as a “professional educator” has a certain egalitarian appeal. The evidentiary merits of such a view are dubious, however (see below), and even if true it would follow that those who offered their teachings for free would be even more useful for the democratic masses. In short, there seems to be no good reason why the charging of fees ought to be considered a necessary condition for being a sophist. Nor is the charging of fees a sufficient condition for being a sophist, since even Zeno and Plato charged fees, and few defenders of a “sophistic” perspective would want to include their doctrines.

In ancient as well as modern times, the label “sophist” is assigned rather inconsistently according to the biases of the writer. In ancient times, persons as diverse as Prometheus, Homer, Hesiod, Damon, Solon, Thales, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Zeno, Plato, Socrates, and Isocrates were called “sophists” (Blank; Kerferd SM). Aeschines, Eudoxus, and Protagoras are included in Philostratus’ Lives of the Sophists as well as in Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of Eminent Philosophers. In modern times, even the list of seven sophists listed by Diels-Kranz is far from universal. George Grote omits Critias and adds Polus, Euthydemos, and Dionysodorus (486); Kerferd adds Callicles and Socrates, as well as the authors of Dissoi Logoi, the Anonymus Iamblichus, and the Hippocratic Corpus (SM); and W. K. C. Guthrie adds Antisthenes, Alcidamas, and Lyceophon.
Whom we choose to call a "sophist" necessarily impacts upon how we describe "sophistic rhetoric." As Kerferd points out, the process of designating certain individuals as "sophists" necessarily influences what "sophistic" doctrine or curricula turn out to be (SM 35). If "sophist" includes the presocratic philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Isocrates, then the resulting picture of "sophistic rhetoric" is considerably different than if a smaller group of people is so designated.

To summarize the argument thus far, it is clear that we cannot identify a defining characteristic of "the sophists" that allows us to narrow the group to a degree sufficient to adduce a common perspective or set of practices. Either we treat the term as broadly as did the ancient Greeks, in which case almost every serious thinker must be included, or we are forced to pick a trait that serves no useful function other than to confirm some preconceived preference. Any account of "sophistic rhetoric" will tend to beg the question because it will presuppose who should be called a "sophist"—a determination which must be made on doctrinal grounds. The circularity of the reasoning seems to be unavoidable, and is part of the reason "sophistic rhetoric" should be considered a mirage.

**What is Sophistic Rhetoric?**

Even if we were able to agree on who to call "the sophists," it does not follow necessarily that a clear notion of sophistic *rhetoric* would result. There are three senses of "rhetoric" which need to be distinguished at this point—rhetorical theory, practice, and ideology. Rhetorical *theory* is what George A. Kennedy refers to as "conceptual" or "meta" rhetoric, and is what scholars generally mean when they say that the sophists "taught rhetoric." Some, but not all, writers advocating "sophistic rhetoric" imply that there was a distinctly "sophistic" definition or theory of rhetoric attributable to the sophists. Unfortunately, there are good reasons for challenging any claim that there was ever such a thing as a distinct and explicit sophistic theory or definition of rhetoric. A host of philological sources claim that the Greek word for rhetoric (*rhéorikhé*) originates no earlier than Plato's writings, and it is possible that Plato himself coined the word.³ *Rhéorikhé* appears nowhere in any document or fragment attributable to a fifth-century source, nor does it appear in the writings of Isocrates—the most famous teacher of oratory in the fourth century BCE.

If one cannot identify an *explicit* sophistic theory of rhetoric, one is left with ferreting out an *implicit* theory. But even this task is difficult—even if one treats the Diels-Kranz list of sophists as definitive. The pivotal theoretical term (or "keyword")¹⁴ found in the few surviving doctrinal fragments of the "sophists" is *logos*—one of the most equivocal terms in the Greek language. The implicit theory of language one finds in Protagoras and Gorgias (the two sophists we know the most about) have little in common: Gorgias treats persuasion as a matter of deception and questions the possibility of communication altogether, while Pro-
tagoras’ fragments suggest that he viewed “making the weaker account the stronger” as a matter of improving a person’s (or city’s) objective condition. In a recent critique of Poulakos’ “sophistic definition of rhetoric,” I argue that while it might be possible to identify the incipient rhetorical theory of individual fifth-century figures, the available ancient evidence renders suspect any generalization about a common “sophistic” theory of rhetoric (“Neo-Sophistic”, cf. Cole Origins).

It is equally difficult to identify anything like a common set of sophistic rhetorical practices (Cole, Origins 71-112). Some portrayals of “sophistic rhetoric” suggest that the speeches of the sophists shared certain stylistic characteristics. Roger Moss’s “case for sophistry,” for example, notes the “highly-wrought use of alliteration, assonance, rhyme and other parisonic devices, parallelisms of all kinds” that “define sophistry” (213). There are two problems with such portrayals. First, even working with the “standard” list of seven sophists, one finds little evidence of stylistic commonality. Most writers who take a “tropical” approach to “sophistic rhetoric” rely extensively on the example of Gorgias’ highly poetic style. But Gorgias was virtually unique among the public speakers of his time, a fact which undercuts any effort to equate his style with that of a general “sophistic” style. Accordingly, it would be more appropriate to espouse a “Gorgianic rhetoric” than a “sophistic” rhetoric. Second, stylistic accounts of “sophistic rhetoric” confuse cause and effect. As argued by Thomas Cole (Origins) and Robert J. Connors, the stylistic innovations found in surviving “sophistic” treatises are a manifestation of the widespread changes associated with the shift from “oral” to “literate” modes of composition. Paradox, allusion, antithesis, and the like can be found in a wide variety of fifth-century texts by “sophists” and nonsophists alike (Solmsen, 83-125; see also Quandahl). Hence the appearance of these devices is not a sufficient criterion by which to differentiate between “sophistic” and nonsophistic discourse.

The third sense of “rhetoric” that one finds linked to “the sophists” is best described as an ideology. Describing “sophistical rhetoric” as “emancipatory,” Poulakos suggests that “the Sophists’ rhetorical lessons were subversive in that they aimed to disempower the powerful and empower the powerless,” and that “sophistical rhetoric flourished as a radical critique of the Hellenic culture in the fifth century BC” (“Critique” 99). Similarly, Harold Barrett and others (Kennedy, 18-19; Müller) contend that the most useful aspect of sophistic teaching was that it aided participation in the democracy. Unfortunately, such idealistic accounts of “the sophists” cannot be squared with the historical evidence.

It is simply wishful thinking to describe the sophists collectively as populist-minded teachers wishing to aid the “hitherto voiceless and marginalized” (Poulakos, “Critique” 101). Whoever “the sophists” were, the ancient authorities are virtually unanimous in their assessment that the fees the sophists charged were very high (Blank). Ostwald contends that “only the wealthy” could afford to hire a
sophist, and that their followers “consisted largely of ambitious young men of the upper classes” (237-42). Kerferd concludes that “what the Sophists were able to offer was in no sense a contribution to the education of the masses” (SM 17). The verdict, in ancient times as well as the present, is that the most appreciative audience was an aristocratic one and, indeed, most of the political leaders who managed to overcome a nonaristocratic birth were rather suspicious of the sophists (Blank 14-15).

We would do well not to over-romanticize the relationship between “the sophists” and Athenian democracy. True, Protagoras is credited with providing the first theoretical defense of democracy (Menzel), but it should not be forgotten that even the most advanced stage of Athenian democracy still limited citizenship to a minority of the adult male population, retained the institution of slavery, and was thoroughly misogynist (Cantarella; Keuls). Furthermore, there was by no means a consensus among “sophists” about the value of democracy (cf. Dupré; Guthrie; Ostwald 229-50). Antiphon, Critias, and Socrates were all “sophists” who eventually were put to death for their anti-democratic teachings or activities. Furthermore, some “sophists” explicitly championed the doctrine of physis, or “nature,” over nomos, democratically derived custom-law:

For a price only the well-to-do could afford, sophists promised to provide the disenchanted younger generation with rhetorical and other training. . . . By and large, nomos identifies the conventions, traditions, and values of the democratic establishment, which the older generation tended to regard itself as guarding; arguments from physis were marshaled by an intelligentsia that took shape in the Periclean age and from the 430s attracted the allegiance of young aristocrats. (Ostwald 273)

In short, even if we stipulate the traditional list of sophists as “definitive,” there is no consistent ideology which could be called a distinct “sophistic rhetoric.”

I strongly suspect that the label sophistic-anything may be more misleading than useful. The attributes one finds common to all or most of the standard lists of sophists are also common to many other thinkers of the fifth century—such as their questioning of the dominant religious dogmas, their innovation in compositional style, and their roles as “teachers.” When one finds an authentically unique contribution, such as Gorgias’ account of the power of logos, the very uniqueness that makes the contribution noteworthy makes the label “sophistic” an over-generalization.

The Uses and Limits of Interpretation

One defense of the notion of “sophistic rhetoric” is to admit that it may be, in some sense, a “mirage,” but to insist that it can be retained as a “useful fiction.”
After all, history is a form of story-telling that is interpretive and rhetorical through and through; the myth of a single, authoritative “objective” historical account has been exploded. Furthermore, “sophistic rhetoric” forms part of a useful narrative with which to explore certain recurring issues in the history of ideas. As Poulakos puts it, “because cultural conflicts and contradictions are still with us, because no utopia has yet been devised, and because rhetoric pervades so many human practices, the story of the Sophists is still relevant” (“Critique” 100). Specifically, as Susan C. Jarrett has argued, “sophistic rhetoric” provides a point of departure from “classical philosophy” that allows us to identify and deconstruct certain persistent “binary structures” (such as rhetoric/philosophy) that are prototypical of hierarchical strategies used to displace and marginalize people and ideas.

I am sympathetic toward such an argument. In fact, the sort of narrative that pits the provocative “revolutionary” sophists against the “establishment” figures of Plato and Aristotle is exactly what attracted me to study the “sophists” in the first place (cf. Pirsig). And clearly any theory of “history” that asserts that a single objective true account of an era or event is possible is no longer tenable (Novick). Are there any good reasons, therefore, to resist the turn to “sophistic rhetoric,” even if such a notion is granted to be a fiction? I believe that there are, and consequently will proceed to defend three propositions: first, that there are limits to interpretive variability; second, that there are more useful constructs to study for political and social critique than “sophistic rhetoric”; and third, that “sophistic rhetoric” fails to overcome the binary oppositional structures it is credited with challenging.

Consider first the argument that “all history is interpretive; hence there is no problem maintaining the fiction of ‘sophistic rhetoric.’” From “all history is interpretive,” it simply does not follow that “all interpretations are equally useful.” Those who defend a radical version of reader-response theory with respect to historical texts find themselves in a dilemma. If, on one hand, history is merely a matter of interpretation, and all readings are considered “equal,” then the question becomes “Why trouble ourselves with the sophists at all?” If all we will ever find in “sophistic” texts is what our presuppositions tell us we’ll find, then why bother? Why not instead simply formulate those presuppositions into a contemporary, postmodern theory of rhetoric, and wash our hands of dead Greeks altogether? So the first part of the dilemma is that if there is no way to escape the present by engaging ancient texts, then there is no apparent reason for considering “sophistic” texts.

If, on the other hand, we admit that ancient texts resist some interpretations more than others, then we are encouraged to accept that interpretations may be evaluated and compared. Consider the case of the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, the writer most often credited with formulating the “there are no facts, only interpretation” position. Why couldn’t I simply declare that my reading of Nietzsche revealed that he was “really” a Platonist? What is it about his texts that
resists such a reading? Similarly, what is it about the texts of the fifth century BCE that prevent me from arguing that they articulate a "sophistic calculus"? Alexander Nehamas argues that even Nietzsche insists that some interpretations are better than others. The problem with some renditions of Nietzschean perspectivism "is that they have been too quick to equate possible with actual falsehood, interpretation with mere interpretation" (Nietzsche 67). Noting that Nietzsche sought to replace the standard Christian interpretation of morality with his own, Nehamas argues that those who equate interpretation with mere interpretation “presuppose that to consider a view an interpretation is to concede that it is false” (Nietzsche 66).

There are no magic formulas for knowing in advance the difference between a good and bad interpretation or a more or less defensible historical account. But some interpretations are more persuasive than others, and hence display a longer shelf life. Some interpretations even become "facts." As long as we treat "facts" as temporarily reified interpretations which are socially constructed and subject to deconstruction, it does no harm to say that "facts" exist and even help to explain the difference between more or less reliable historical accounts.

An example can illustrate the relationship between the process of reification/deconstruction and the social utility of "facts." Consider the statement "John F. Kennedy died in 1963." I think it is fair to call this statement a reliable fact to which most, if not all, readers would give their assent, and which is more persuasive than some alternatives ("JFK died in 1881") or the statement's contrary ("JFK did not die in 1963"). Nonetheless, it is certainly possible to imagine that our "fact" could someday be rejected by the vast majority of people. Aside from the phenomenon of "new" theories that challenge the statement (such as the discovery of a secret conspiracy), the concepts and presuppositions underlying the statement could be revised. Postmodern challenges to the concept of "self" or "personhood" might render the notion of "John F. Kennedy" problematic; our understanding of death might change in such a way as to require revision of the statement; and, alternative calendar systems (or even a rejection of linear time!) could make "1963" obsolete. But until we are willing to pay the conceptual cost of rejecting present notions of identity, death, or time, "John F. Kennedy died in 1963" can be regarded as a reliable "fact."

Recent philosophers of science talk of facts and observations being "theory-bound." That is, even the simplest measurement or observation in science is made possible only through a host of conceptual commitments (Latour and Woolgar). A scientist rejects a "fact" only at the cost of giving up the conceptual apparatus producing it, which is why Thomas S. Kuhn says that scientists abandon one theory only when a suitable alternative is available that also can account for certain "facts." It is also the case that new theories sometimes have rendered old "facts" obsolete. Knowing that scientific "facts" are socially constructed, historically contingent, and theory-bound does not make them any less useful or reliable—it
simply helps us to understand science as a human activity. Similarly, the more
general statement that “all facts are interpretations” does not vitiate the utility of
“facts.” It simply helps us to understand the social processes that construct facts,
and it points out that there is a conceptual cost to rejecting those that are well-es-
established.

Accordingly, we can conclude that the interpretive, narrative, and rhetorical
aspects of doing history do not require a cessation of efforts to evaluate competing
historical accounts. Though historians must concede that any account is potentially
subject to later revision, they need not abandon their efforts to produce accounts
that make sense of the available socially constructed, historically contingent facts.

The price we pay for giving up “facts” altogether is that we must give up
history as well. For the only difference between the genre of literature called
“history” and various sorts of fiction is that the former has something to do with
“facts.” If history is purely fiction, then Ronald Reagan’s history of the Vietnam
War is as reliable as that of Stanley Karnow, and his account of the Iran-Contra
Affair is as good as that of Bill Moyers.8 I hope these examples challenge the often
implicit assumption that radically relativizing history is an emancipatory move; “it
ain’t necessarily so.” “Facts” figure crucially in the “power/knowledge” dynamic
problematized by Michel Foucault. Eliminate all vestiges of the will-to-truth, and
naught but the will-to-power remains. If power is all that writes history, then there
is no basis for reclaiming marginalized histories, no basis for critiquing estab-
ishment narratives, and no basis for curing cultural amnesia about past genocide,
misogyny, and racism. In the face of poststructuralist critiques of “facts,” one
historian of rhetoric recently reported “I feel almost paralyzed by the impossibility
of writing history” (Crowley, “Octagon” 13). Her testimony suggests that—far
from emancipation—cynicism toward “facts” can induce intellectual self-
imprisonment.

“Sophistic rhetoric” has and can be used to critique various sociopolitical
arrangements and modernist notions of disciplinarity (Takis Poulakos). Hence the
sophists’ “story” is sometimes revisited as a useful chapter in the history of ideas.
Once again, however, such a turn can be as misleading as it is useful. From a host
of perspectives—political, social, demographic, technological, economic, aesth-
thetic, linguistic, etc.—contemporary American life has little in common with
ancient Greece. At a superficial level, one can find similarities between contem-
porary sociopolitical or educational arrangements and virtually any culture. It is
mostly what Martin Bernal calls “European cultural arrogance” that we regard
ancient Greece as the “birthplace” of the most valuable elements of “western
thought” (73). Citing mostly the testimony of the ancient Greeks themselves,
Bernal argues that much of the philosophy, geometry, and even political theory we
often credit the Greeks for devising actually had their origins in Egypt (see esp.
103-09). It was the racism of various nineteenth-century historians that replaced
the ancient Greek's own account of their Egyptian and semitic heritage with what
Bernal calls the "Aryan Model" of western intellectual history.

Far more useful "chapters" in intellectual history abound, and most of them
offer far more textual and other sorts of "data" than do the ancient Greeks. We need
not turn to Athens to find strategies of oppression and marginalization; we need
only look around us. We need not turn to ancient Greece to understand how
power/knowledge relationships are manifested through disciplinary arrangements;
we need only consider the past two centuries of the relationship between capitalism
and higher learning. In short, we do not need the fiction of "sophistic rhetoric" as a
way into pressing contemporary issues. In a culture saturated by rhetoric, we need not
seek refuge in a romanticized fictionalization of a place "long ago and far away."

There is an important sense in which the turn to "sophistic rhetoric" functions
ideologically to support the status quo. By promoting an historical fiction, we
legitimize political leaders who do the same. By suggesting that there is a sort of
transmilleennial "essence" of "sophistic rhetoric," we promote an outdated meta-
physics that obfuscates our own contingency in history. Richard Rorty notes that
historicist "writers tell us that the question 'What is it to be a human being?' should
be replaced by questions like 'What is it to inhabit a rich twentieth-century
democratic society?' . . . This historicist turn has helped free us, gradually but
steadily, from theology and metaphysics—from the temptation to look for an
escape from time and chance" (xiii).

Obviously, I am not saying that historians should ignore ancient Greece. My
point is only that once we grant that "sophistic rhetoric" is largely a fiction we need
not use it as a route to studying other topics. Instead, we should skip the detour and
move directly to the contemporary sites of social and political struggle. As James
A. Berlin has put it:

Rhetorics interpellate us, hail us, position us, subject us, put us in our
places—and not in others. The places, the positions, the subjects, and
subjectivities are not eternal and true, are not timeless and trusty. . . .
We need new rhetorics. . . . We need rhetorics that allow new voices to
be heard, new audiences to act, new actions to be taken, new actors for
these actions, new ways of figuring the ways language figures us.
(6-10)

"Sophistic rhetoric" also has been invoked as a means for transcending certain
philosophical dualisms which poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques have
called into question. Aside from the obvious reply that these contemporary cri-
tiques make such a "sophistic" turn superfluous, it is arguably the case that the
notion of "sophistic rhetoric" reproduces such binary thinking. Even if some
scholars have succeeded in reversing the verdict on the case of Plato vs. Sophists,
they have not transcended the dualities implicit in the conflict. The postmodern
challenge is not merely to reverse our evaluation of such pairs as rational/emotional, literal/figurative, truth/opinion, *physis/nomos*, and philosophy/sophistry, but to *deconstruct and replace* the pairs. Hegel portrayed the presocratics as Objectivists (thesis), the sophists as Subjectivists (antithesis), and Plato/Aristotle as providing the proper Synthesis. We do not overcome such binary oppositions by preferring one over the other; we overcome them by moving beyond the Hegelian framework.

**The Rhetoric of Definition**

A basic assumption of this essay is that definitions are both normative and important. I assume that most readers will concede the point that there is no such thing as a “correct” definition of a word in any absolutist, metaphysical sense. One can either surrender to the conventional definition of a word—the most common or “dominant” definition—or one can defend an alternative. Accordingly, any discussion of a concept such as “sophistic rhetoric” unavoidably involves what can be called the rhetoric of definition—persuasion about how some facet of our experience *ought* to be labeled and defined. Scholars defending “sophistic rhetoric” typically must engage in some act of defining what the terms mean to them, or else rely on readers’ intuitions as to what the terms denote. Similarly, my efforts in this essay have been concerned with the meaning(s) of “sophistic rhetoric.” What is at stake is how we as a group of specialized language-users ought to define and use the phrase “sophistic rhetoric”—or whether it should be used at all. The question is normative because “all those who argue in favor of some definition want it . . . to influence the use which would probably have been made of the concept had they not intervened” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 213).

My argument is that a historically based definition of “sophistic rhetoric” derived from fifth-century Greece is improbable, and ahistorical definitions are misleading, unhelpful, or superfluous. The principle of Ockham’s Razor suggests that “sophistic rhetoric” is expendable. If we want to empower certain contemporary discourses with identifying labels, then let us use labels that are more straightforward: feminist rhetoric, oppositional discourse, and cultural critique are three examples.

Or, if borrow we must, then let us be explicit about the nature of our debts. If we find more inspiration in Isocrates’ educational program than in Plato’s, then let us invoke Isocrates rather than the label “sophistic.” Kathleen E. Welch’s recent book is a positive model in this regard: She self-reflexively describes her efforts as “appropriations” of classical discourse, and she focuses on the contributions of specific individuals (Gorgias, Isocrates, and Plato) rather than on an artificial grouping. Alternatively, if we need a specific rhetorical antidote to competing appropriations of classical texts, then at least labels such as “modern sophistic” or “neosophistic” acknowledge that it is we who have formulated the rhetoric, and that we are bracketing consideration of what “sophistic” rhetoric might or might not have been (Leff; Schiappa, “Neo-Sophistic”).
Though most of my examples in this essay have been drawn from recent champions of "sophistic rhetoric," my argument "cuts both ways" in the dispute between those who praise or castigate the sophists. That is, if it is anachronistic to praise fifth-century "sophistic rhetoric," so too is it fallacious to condemn it. Those who would praise Plato's or Aristotle's treatment of rhetoric must do so on grounds other than by comparison with a hypothetical "sophistic rhetoric" if they want to avoid the charge of attacking a person of straw.

The dichotomy between "mirage" (a purely "subjective" phenomenon) and "oasis" (an "objective" phenomenon) is, in the final analysis, inappropriate. For "sophistic rhetoric" is better characterized as a "reservoir"—a human-made construct with many possible uses. The concerns I have expressed in this essay about "sophistic rhetoric" have more to do with the potential consequences of such a turn than the actual quality of the above scholars' work—in other words, I have less quarrel with the specific "uses" of "sophistic rhetoric" that have been made so far than with the process-related question of whether it is necessary or appropriate to rely on an historical construct that cannot be historically grounded. I believe that "sophistic rhetoric" is a construct that we can do without; a fiction, originally invented by Plato for his own ends. We no longer need to maintain the fiction for ours.\(^1\)

Notes

\(^1\) As the texts of writers such as Diogenes Laertius (CE 3rd century), and Philostratus (CE 2nd or 3rd century) demonstrate, later antiquity clearly recognized a specific profession of "sophist." What is at issue in this essay is the usefulness of such a label for describing a consistent position toward "rhetoric" in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

\(^2\) It is noteworthy that Plato's _Sophist_ never once uses the word "rhetoric" (\(\pi\gamma\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\upsilon\alpha\omicron\iota\kappa\iota\)).

\(^3\) According to Werner Pitz, "\(\pi\gamma\tau\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota\kappa\iota\) findet sich nicht vor Plato" (15). Other sources concluding that Plato's _Gorgias_ is the earliest extant use of the word "rhetoric" include Kroll (1039), Liddell and Scott (1569), Atkins (766), Hommel (1396), and Martin (2). For the argument that Plato coined the word _rhetorikē_, see Cole (Origins 2) and Schiappa ("Did Plato?").

\(^4\) On "keywords" in classical rhetorical theory, see Welch (12-14).

\(^5\) Sharon Crowley's "Plea for Sophistry" cites only Protagoras and Gorgias as examples of sophists, and her analysis acknowledges that the two perspectives conflict (327). Similarly, Renato Barilli's treatment of "the sophists" includes only Protagoras, Gorgias, and Isocrates. For Gorgias see Verdenius, Segal; for Protagoras see Cole ("Relativism"), and Schiappa (Protagoras). For a comparison of their perspectives on language, see Kerferd (SM 68-82).

\(^6\) See, for example, Moss (213-17) and Kennedy (29-31).

\(^7\) For Socrates see Stone; for Critias see Sprague (241-49); for Antiphon see Sprague (108-11, 127-28).

\(^8\) For a compelling analysis of Reagan's abuse of "facts," see Green and MacColl.

\(^9\) See, for example, Jarratt's useful reworking of the _mythos-nomos-logos_ pair into a fifth-century-inspired _mythos-nomos-logos_ schema (31-61). Even though Jarratt's title refers to "the Sophists," she avoids most of the criticisms launched in this essay by grounding her claims with specific fifth-century texts (mostly those of Protagoras and Gorgias) and by demonstrating considerable historiographical reflexivity.

\(^10\) I am very grateful for the comments on an earlier draft of this essay by John T. Kirby, Janice M. Lauer, and James A. Berlin.
Works Cited


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