

*By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, *Postmodern Sophistications*. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.*

*The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.*

*In this book I developed a pragmatic middleground, using themes from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force on our politics or art or philosophy a simple opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.*

*Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition between postmodern and modern views remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.*

*The second part of the book deals with architecture. The word postmodern has gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term for an attempt to bring substantive content into formal modernity retains important.*

*My conclusions about postmodern architecture's failure to escape modern distance from history also remain true, as does my argument that that proclaimed modern distance from history is itself an illusion, that we are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as we have imagined true of our ancestors.*

*If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to learn from your reactions.*

*David Kolb, January 2018*

*Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Bates College  
davkolb@gmail.com, www.dkolb.org, mobile 547 868 4713*

*This chapter examines the supposed invincible power of persuasion.*

### **Chapter 3. The Power of the Sophist**

To attack Plato, turn to his ancient enemies for advice. Those who want to undermine Plato's quest for grounded systematic unity and certainty must get along without the firm criteria sought in the traditional philosophical

discussions of knowledge, ethics, and politics. So thinkers such as Lyotard give a sympathetic portrayal of the Sophists as useful for understanding our own situation.

As in Plato's time so today the role assigned the Sophists is more symbolic than historically accurate. They are cast as the Other even when they are evaluated positively. This is not to deny that historical research has dealt with the Sophists on their own and not exclusively as a foil for Socrates; such discussions start as early as Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy, and recent scholarship has made them appear as thinkers grappling with problems of knowledge and truth, inventing ways to talk about language, and starting the kinds of ethical discussions that Plato and Socrates continued in new ways (cf. Kerford 1981 and Feyerabend 1987). To some extent this forces them into current debates in analytic philosophy, but it does allow us to see them somewhat outside Plato's shadow.

My concern will not be with this search for the historical Sophists but with how they are invoked as the Other. Whatever the dimensions of their role in Greek intellectual life, it has passed, and their role in the wider western tradition has been through portraits painted by other thinkers for their own purposes.

### Plato's Sophists

Plato painted the minor Sophists as fools and charlatans, the major Sophists as earnest teachers, but all of them as devoted to a pernicious anti-philosophy that endangered individual and social health. The Sophists offered

a new education to fit men for their role in the new democratic and commercial world. They acquainted their students with current developments and taught them a knack for rhetorical persuasion. When they spoke about knowledge and reality they produced ideas drawn from Parmenides and Heraclitus that licensed a facile relativism.

If Plato were speaking in today's terms he would call the Sophists radical conventionalists about truth and morality, thinkers who in so far as they talk about it at all measure truth in terms of individual or group perception. They teach a grab-bag of persuasive methods without subjecting them to any tests. Plato does not present Gorgias as cynically putting out arguments he knows are bad, but as someone who cannot understand the difference between a good and a bad argument. In the end Gorgias does not care about such a difference; what matters is the immediate persuasive effect of his words.

The Sophists travelled about Greece offering education to upwardly mobile urban youth. Sophistic education stood in contrast with the traditional education based on the great myths and aristocratic military values. As we see the Sophists presented by Plato and Aristophanes, they tested the old ways by the standards of their own desires. They delighted in pointing out inconsistencies in the old stories, and they replaced them with a new story about personal and social power: truths depend on personal perception, norms depend on who is in power, rhetorical training can put power in your hands.

Plato agreed with the Sophists that the traditional education was no longer useful. Those old stories no longer helped people find their way in the confusions of Athenian life, nor could they stand up to Socrates's demands for grounded integrity of vision. But Plato feared the Sophistic education, which he saw leading to opportunistic manipulation. At best the Sophists produced a skilled speaker bent on shallow self-indulgence; at worst they created dangerous leaders and a docile public; always they destroyed faith in reason and moral virtue.

The reduction of Gorgias's cultivated tone to Callicles's frank will to power set the mode for subsequent evaluations of the Sophists. In Plato's Socratic story, discussions of value and truth cannot be polarized by any desire short of the overwhelming desire for complete wholeness and integrity. The search for truth and justice cannot be guided by a desire for success in business, political influence, or prosecution of the war against Sparta. Such goals would limit any discussion that might put the chosen purpose in question. The Sophists dispense their teachings for pay; they make wisdom something you can buy and use for your own purposes. Socrates takes no pay and he stands ready to question your purposes.

Neither the tradition nor the Sophists tested their standards of belief and conduct by the rigors of Socratic self-questioning. What was needed was a commitment to the search for a guaranteed knowledge based on standards that could put in question all our presuppositions and all our desires save the desire for wholeness and truth. One must inquire until it becomes luminously

clear what the basic structures of the world are, and how these shape the proper way human to live. Plato's theory of the forms filled in the ontological details, but the quest for unity and grounded truth need not be tied to that particular theory. As philosophy went on, other metaphysical systems took over the foundational role, but the Socratic quest continued. That quest contained its own internal goals.

Both Plato and the Sophists agreed that the values and beliefs of the past were not reliable guides for action. Both insisted on a reflectively critical attitude towards tradition. For Plato this meant testing tradition against the necessities revealed in the Socratic quest for knowledge. For the Sophists this meant using tradition where it helped attain one's goals. Although Plato was in the end more respectful of traditional values, neither he nor the Sophists let students remain unquestioningly within the traditional ways. Athenian conservatives were correct in classing Socrates with the Sophists insofar as the effect on tradition was corrosive in both cases.

### Knowledge, Opinion, and Metaphysics

The goal of grounded knowledge and guaranteed norms defined for Plato the quest that came to be called philosophy. Lately the term *metaphysics* has been used to describe the central activity of philosophy in Plato's sense. Heidegger first made this use of the term popular in his discussions of the "overcoming" of metaphysics and the "end of philosophy" (Heidegger 1957, 1966). Since then, other thinkers have used the term more freely than Heidegger but in the spirit of his discussions, which are

themselves now branded as too metaphysical.

In this context metaphysics denotes the attempt to base our lives on the availability of true reality that grounds our knowledge and allows us to survey the necessary structure of the world unified into a systematic whole that we can represent to ourselves in a clear language. Plato had a particular theory to offer, but rival theories that dispute his conclusions still keep the goal and methods of metaphysics. The dogmatic materialist is in this sense as metaphysical as Plato. Even the Logical Positivists who were bent on rooting out what they called metaphysical views can be classified as metaphysical thinkers in this other sense of the word because of their belief in a sure ground that can be made present through psychology and logic.

The Sophists stand opposed to Plato's search for true knowledge and so, it would seem, to metaphysics. It is their refusal of reason and their reliance on opinion in matters of ethics and politics that interests postmoderns. I might note in passing that the historical Sophists should be judged metaphysical by those who like to apply that label. It is possible to be a relativist or a conventionalist and still be metaphysical in Heidegger's sense, if one believes that there is some central ground for our lives that is or can be purely present to us, and on which the relativity of knowledge turns. For the Sophists who invoke the distinction between nature and convention (*physis* and *nomos*) that ground is nature as a field of contesting desires for satisfaction and power. Opinions and norms are determined by the strength of the desires and the skillful power of individuals who manipulate one

another. One can know one's desires and can know the power available. There is among the Sophists nothing comparable to the subtle discussion of the elusive nature of desire that is found in Plato's *Philebus*, to say nothing of contemporary treatments of desire that have learned from Freud that desire can never be encountered as full and unambiguously present.

The realm of opinion is described by Plato as the opposite of the realm of knowledge. Opinion is fallible, changeable, ungrounded, linked to the shifting sands of perception, and formed by persuasion. Knowledge is infallible, fixed, grounded in the presence of its unvarying objects, and formed by rational argument. Recent philosophy, however, tends to define knowledge as justified true belief. The difference between opinion and knowledge is to be found in how they are supported. This is a non-Platonic way of supporting Plato's distinction since it dispenses with a separate realm of secure entities to be the objects of knowledge. But this view is still metaphysical in Heidegger's sense, since it seeks unified certainty based on the presence of the justifications that turn opinion into knowledge.

### Reason and Persuasion

As Plato pictures them the Sophists are not so much anti-rational as pre-rational; they have not made the proper distinctions. They teach how to achieve power by changing the ideas of one's fellow citizens. Manipulation and argument are the same. If one lives in the realm of opinion, why should it matter how opinions are changed, especially if people are happier and more harmonious afterwards? Even Plato resorts to the noble lie, and he has

Protagoras give a noble defense of persuasion as healing people and improving their adjustment to the city. It is not necessary that they agree with the process; they will come to agree.

In fear of manipulation, Plato insists on a strong distinction between acts of Sophistic persuasion, with their hidden violence against the nature of reason, and acts that lead to rationally motivated agreement among participants in argumentation. Sophists influence our beliefs; Socrates seeks mutual understanding based on shared reasons.

Plato claims that these two kinds of communication should be mixed only in a "true rhetoric" that would be firmly based on rational argument. In his dialogues, though, Plato is more flexible than his sharp division might seem to allow. The Socrates he portrays is in his way a supreme Sophist; he tells myths and uses many tactics of persuasion. Plato the author is even more protean and difficult to hold to the standards he enunciates. But his official doctrine emphasizes the search for unities, foundations, and system in the constant presence of true reality.

Those who uphold Plato's distinction today usually appeal to method, but there is no agreement on what methods are acceptable. The first step in distinguishing between forceful persuasion and rational agreement has often been to cite deductive logic. If we look at a pattern of sentences we can measure them against the logically valid patterns. Rational argument must follow these patterns while persuasion need not do so. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, since logical arguments could be employed with

false premises for persuasive effect. The next step is to require logical arguments to guarantee the premises, but as both Plato and Aristotle point out this strategy fails since it would be impossibly circular to justify deductively all statements.

These problems are compounded in the real world where we want to judge not patterns of sentences so much as speech acts. A perfectly logical pattern of sentences can be used in an irrational way, by emphasis on its complications, by speed of delivery, by using it as a badge of expert status, and so on. It would be good if we could distinguish Sophistic persuasion from rational argument by their purposes, but this begs the question. Each is trying to bring the other person to agree; it is the way the purpose is specified which differs, and it is just that difference that is being questioned.

Since Plato, mathematics has served as the best example of purely rational argument. It seems to need no other discursive modality. Mathematics can be such a clear discourse as long as there is no disagreement about its basic definitions and premises. But this should not be the model for philosophical or practical discourse where the problem is to arrive at acceptable definitions and principles and classifications, not to start with them. Kant makes this point in the Canon of Pure Reason in the first Critique, and Hegel makes a similar point in the Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit.

In discussions where principles are in question, we have to switch to another more flexible mode of discourse that speaks about the basic premises

and criteria being used.

As I said in the previous chapter, much of what Plato and Aristotle wrote falls into this other type of discourse, which Plato calls the upward way *to* principles and Aristotle calls dialectic, a mode of discourse about basic principles and concepts that is not yet explicitly structured by those principles.//Footnote Plato seems to reserve the term "dialectic" for the entire ensemble of the wandering way to principles and the structured way back down to the particular issues in question. In this mode it is more difficult to distinguish rational agreement from persuasion because there are fewer shared rules to rely upon.

A promising way to talk about different kinds of discourse is to look at the different intellectual virtues required. Plato and Aristotle cite virtues whose practice makes this discourse good in its kind. So we have the portrait of Socrates contrasted with the portrait of the Sophists, and Aristotle's discussion of intellectual virtue in book VI of his *Ethics*. Socrates and the Sophists both share the ability to see possibilities, to size up their audience, to put words together well. But Socrates's willingness to question everything and to be proven wrong, his tolerance for indefinitely postponed conclusions coupled with his dedication to the search for grounds and principles make a picture quite different from the Sophist in a hurry to persuade. On the other hand, in real life situations when conclusions must be reached without the infinitely extendible time frame of the Platonic dialogues the picture of Socrates begins to blur.

Judgments about whether a given act embodies a given virtue are notoriously difficult to agree upon. And can we be sure that the intellectual virtues are unchanging? The end of metaphysics is accompanied by the promotion of new intellectual virtues. Nietzsche offers his counter-images to Socrates. Derrida, Lyotard, and others try to persuade us of new intellectual virtues. Aristotle's *phronesis* is now joined by irony, playfulness, a spirit of transgression, and sensitivity to occasions for the creation of new language games. These cannot be simply added to the older lists, nor are the new promoted by the sort of communication and texts that are in accord with the old. If there are such new virtues, the problem of delimiting acceptable means of persuasion becomes even more difficult.

#### Metaphysical Fear

At the beginning of the modern age when Descartes started his examination of method, he made explicit his fear that he had been persuaded by custom, education, and social pressure to believe what a true method would find to be false. A proper method would let him start over and avoid the persuaders. But method for Descartes is more than logic; it is an attempt to replace the Platonic and Aristotelian discussion of first principles with a disciplined intuition of self-evident clear and distinct ideas. A distinction between the logically valid and the psychologically persuasive was not enough for him; it had to be supplemented by the appeal to intuition. Since his time debate over proposed methods that will render unnecessary the discourse about first principles has often replaced that discourse, without

conclusive effect.

Today we have techniques of manipulation on a scale that would have done Callicles proud. They are not playful transgressions; we do well to fear the link between such power and what passes for knowledge. If there is only persuasion, Plato warns us, there is no discourse except the confrontation of power and propaganda. If we cannot draw the line, he says, all means of persuasion will be acceptable. Violence may be done to us, in crude or subtle ways and we will not be able to stop it. Even worse, we may not be aware of it.

We fear violence: on the largest scale, nuclear war, on the national scale, the violence of social disintegration, the war of all against all. We fear as well the calm created by power making us behave. We fear especially the insidious violence of a false consciousness that would make us believe. We fear we will behave not because we have reached a consensus, nor because we have calculated threats and rewards, but because we have had our opinions changed. The government, the capitalists, the church, our own unconscious needs may play the Evil Genius, and we may live a lie without being aware that we have been (re)programmed. But if there is only opinion and our opinions are the result of persuasion, what's the difference between being programmed by our upbringing and being reprogrammed by Protagoras's clients?

For all that Plato's metaphysical quest is out of fashion, do we still share his fears enough to need his remedy? Must we keep a distinction in

kind between Sophistic persuasion and acts of rational convincing?

Postmoderns say no, and I want to make a preliminary argument that will have the effect of weakening the need for such a distinction.//Footnote It may seem that the we are faced with only two choices: either there is a distinction of degree or one of kind between persuasion and rationality. A continuum or a sharp division. But these are not the only kinds of distinctions available. It would be interesting to work out a distinction between persuasion and rationality along the lines of the medieval distinction between two aspects that can distinguished but never exist separately. End Footnote//

In what follows I take for granted the end of metaphysics in the traditional Platonic sense of a search for secure foundations in a constantly present basic reality. There is more to be said about that "end" but I want to limit these remarks to how it involves the Sophists and the fears they symbolize. My point will be that if we reject Plato's description of the realm of knowledge we should also balk at his description of the realm of opinion. If we take for granted that Plato's quest is flawed, then Plato's fears of Sophistic persuasion should be weakened as well. It is not enough to challenge his metaphysical cure; we need to examine how he has described the disease. In doing so we can perhaps soften the current debate about rationality, which is fueled by Plato's hopes and fears. In a way I am reiterating the Nietzschean point that to deny one half of a conceptual dichotomy does not always leave us with the other half exactly as previously described.

*Plato is wrong on both sides of his dichotomy between philosophy and rhetoric.* If philosophy is the search for an unshakeable presence of true reality, the realm of rhetoric and opinion is described as if it were completely malleable: beware the Sophist who can persuade you of anything he wishes. Behind this description is another metaphysical presupposition, a pure power of persuasion capable of being applied at will against opinions that are passive and yielding. Like philosophy that soars above space and time, so Sophistry for Plato involves a power of persuasion that lies outside the limits of context and history.

If, however, our opinions are not passive effects but are themselves ways in which we are in motion, and if powers of persuasion derive not from some pure will but from those motions and projects we find ourselves among, then the fear of the Sophists may be cut down to human scale. The realm of opinion turns out to have considerably more resistance than is apparent in the descriptions we get from Plato (or in those from postmoderns who reproduce that free power of persuasion, now as a free movement of transgression or ironic re-creation).

I call this power *pure* because it is of its nature unarticulated and so able to assume an indefinite number of forms. It has no limits that we can find, no defined strengths and weaknesses. It has no shape that can be gotten around, and by its subtlety it can get around behind and influence us without our knowing. Any normal power of persuasion or force has a shape and limits that allow us to begin to deal with it, to confront it or to avoid it. But this

power is outside history, able to use tradition or depart from it as seems most persuasive. It is the shadow of Plato's pure love of truth, which also can overreach any historical situation, but unlike Plato's love of truth, this power has no natural goal to give it a measure.

This power resembles some modern definitions of free subjectivity as self-moving towards arbitrary goals. Followers of Leo Strauss and others who want to use Plato's polemic against the Sophists to analyze the modern situation play up this parallel, seeing the cure to be a return to natural measures. Yet by taking steps against it they concede the possibility of a power without form or measure. I am arguing that no such power is possible, that all power, both the power of persuasion and our power of creation and choice, is found already in particular motion. Our powers and projects are definite in a way which is not a limitation on some prior pure power. Our measures are historical but they are not easily escaped, because they hide no pure drive within them.

We are horrified by the fantasy of a subtle use of violence that could change us without our knowing it. This would be the ultimate weapon of offense or defense. But whether this pure power appears in its positive role as The Method for finding truth, or in its negative role as the Sophistic power of persuasion, the same mistake occurs.

It may seem I am making Plato into too much of a Manichean who imagines the love of truth and the desire for persuasion at war for our souls. Sometimes Plato's rhetoric does make it sound that way, but he does not

mean it literally. According to Plato's metaphysics there is only one such power, the desire for order and truth. Sophistry is possible because of the disorder in the world and in the human soul. That disorder is inherent in the realm of change; our task is to bring our inner world to order and stability. Sophism has no unitary origin, only the chaos of impulses that makes us manipulable. But Plato writes more wisely than his metaphysics allows. Just as Plato has trouble accounting for the possibility of willful evil, so he needs more than the turmoil of desires to account for the Sophist. The master Sophist is not just a desiring man flailing about, but a calculating person of skillful means. Plato's official psychology is based on the contrast between order and disorder. If your life is not polarized by the love of truth and reality, you have no unified personality. He means to portray Callicles in the *Gorgias* as less a unified person than a collection of stray desires. But the portrait takes on a life of its own and the Sophist comes to us with his own principle of unity, a counter-personality for which there is no real room in Plato's theory. Instead of being within the movement from disorder to order, we are caught between rival sources of order.»

Fears of Sophistic persuasion in public life resemble the fear of being deceived in private opinion that have played such a role in modern philosophy since Descartes worried about whether the material world was really there. We fear that we have been already persuaded, without a chance to compare, judge, and assent. Some power has twisted our world so that we live a lie that we cannot identify as such. Descartes's deceptive God or Evil

Genius was a perfect persuader, since he operated outside any context.

In its original, epistemological form this fear has long come under attack in texts such as Hegel's Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Nietzsche's "How the Real World Became a Myth," Peirce's writings on Cartesian doubt, various texts of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Austin, Bousma, and, more recently, the attacks of Putnam, Davidson, and Rorty that question whether it is even meaningful to think of us as totally deceived. This is an impressive litany of names, and it testifies to widespread scepticism about the effectiveness of epistemological scepticism. It is not so easy to make this fear sound plausible today. The corrective has been to convert global to partial doubt, to look at situations piecemeal, and to ask what practical difference it would make if the sceptical story were accepted. In its theoretical form sceptical doubts can be reduced to a combination of the everyday doubts we ought to have about our opinions in detail and the overall attempt to improve our pictures of the world. When we give up the dream of being perfectly sure we can give up the fear of being perfectly deceived.

Fear of a practical power of persuasion that we could never locate or resist is a version of epistemological scepticism. The fear of the Sophist should be reduced to a combination of our everyday detailed attempts to avoid being manipulated and the attempt to make our social arrangements more open. We should give up the fantasy of a totally manipulative, or a totally un-manipulative, society. As Plato would say, we are creatures of the middle, neither being nor non-being.

Those who oppose postmodernism claim that if we accepted the postmodern descriptions of our situation we would be opening the gates to Sophistic persuasion and relativism. On the other hand, some of those promoting the various postmodern moves so praise our power of creating new language games, or of making free with historical materials, that they assign us some floating position beyond history. Both the fear and the praise assume pure power: Plato's erotic quest for certainty, modern context-free reason, Sophistic persuasion, and much postmodern play have all too much in common.

Crude power and attempts to manipulate us are always present; we learn to see them, to recognize new ploys, and to take steps. This is not easy, but it is not impossible. We know what to do, even if we do not always do it. It makes sense to be worried about the persuasive efforts of the capitalists or the military or the government or the media or the advertisers or our own unconscious desires. But we are neither a pure energy struggling to free itself from a prison of circumstance nor purely malleable clay waiting to be shaped by the forces about us.

We find ourselves in historical situations we did not create, with goals and values we did not choose. We work at revising and correcting as we build new places for ourselves. There are no impermeable walls keeping us in, just as there are no magic methods of escape. There is no pure power to know or create or persuade which is being resisted by inert opinion or society. Our powers come from the historical situation; they are already

shaped.

We are at once in motion in different ways. Our world is multiple and conflicts give us plenty of occasions to examine or redo our values and opinions. No magic is needed, only some sensitivity that our daily life keeps alive by rubbing us raw all too often. We need vigilance to clear a space for examination and thought. And if modern society especially tries to close that space we must work against that pressure. But it is a pressure, not an irresistible force, or we could not discuss it. Our task is not to out-think or out-feel the Sophists but to keep alive the questions and conflicts that we find ourselves among, and keep alert to new dimensions of pressure and opportunity.

One might object that I should not compare the Sophist, whose persuasive efforts are directed by a will towards a goal, with the more impersonal influences implied in modern theories of culture, language, and ideology. But fear of these more diffuse influences should be reduced by the same gestures. If the influence on us of language or history or culture is in no way traceable but only to be feared, without that fear ever being in any way capable of being substantiated and worked against, then that influence has become a power so subtle that it makes no discernible difference.

It is tempting to locate the ultimate deceiver in our own unconscious. We have all experienced the shock of discovering that our own motives were not what we had thought. But of all the sources, our unconscious is least like a focused power. Evasive and eternally ambivalent it may be, and protean in

its always being elsewhere, but these very same qualities prevent it from being a modern embodiment of the concentrated power of the Sophists. It makes our inhabitation of the world uneasy and ambivalent, but just for that reason it does not create a seamless web of deception.

Later I will discuss what might appear to be yet another version of the Sophist's power, the distorting effects of the "system" on the "lifeworld" that Habermas discusses.» The next several chapters discuss the place and limits of self-criticism, so that we later we can investigate building together in history and context.

This deflationary, pragmatic approach to the Sophist's power takes the drama away but returns us to the world of real confrontations and struggles. The reality is more humdrum, which is not to say easy. Indeed it may be more difficult than it would be if Plato's positive or negative fantasy were realized. Crude power and persuasion we know how to deal with, but we have to be continually alert as these take new forms or we discover kinds we did not know were operative. The worries are less threatening, but they demand more continued effort. Self-reflection can help, and a whole frontier of ethical and political philosophy opens out when we resist the fantasies of totality. We return to the in-between, but, both science and scepticism aside, that is where we have always known that we were.