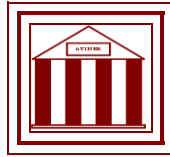


Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

PHI2014-1184

Socrates, the Greatest Sophist?

Luiz Paulo Rouanet

Adjunt Professor

Federal University of Sao Joao del-Rei

Brazil

An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Rouanet, L.P., (2014) "Socrates, the Greatest Sophist?", Athens: ATINER'S
Conference Paper Series, No: **PHI2014-1184.****

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr
URL: www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN: **2241-2891**

01/09/2014

Socrates, the Greatest Sophist?

Luiz Paulo Rouanet
Adjunt Professor
Federal University of Sao Joao del-Rei
Brazil

Abstract

Nietzsche once said: “Aristophanes was right: Socrates belonged to the sophists”. Indeed, when we examine the Sophist, we note a suggestion that the most elevated sophists bear many similarities to the character of Socrates as depicted by Plato. Thus, at the end of the dialogue, at 268 c-d, the Stranger and Theaetetus seem to agree that: “He, then, who traces the pedigree of his art as follows – who, belonging to the conscious or dissembling (εἰρωνικοῦ) section of the art of causing self-contradiction, is an imitator of appearance, and is separated from the class of the phantastic which is a branch of image-making into that further division of creation, the juggling of words, a creation human, and not divine – anyone who affirms the real Sophist to be of this blood and lineage will say the very truth.” In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that Socrates was a character situated between the Sophist and the philosopher, but a new kind of philosopher, of which he is the paradigm: the ironical, self-suspicious searcher of truth.

Keywords: Plato, Sophist, Irony, Truth.

Introduction

In this paper, I shall deal mainly with the *Sophist*. I am concerned with the characterization of Socrates as a “real sophist”. Curiously enough, Socrates appears only in the beginning of this dialogue, while he gradually disappears after a certain juncture and is virtually absent in subsequent dialogues. This fact in turn leads to a psychological hypothesis: in the *Sophist* Plato commits a double murder: of Parmenides, the “father” of ancient philosophy, and of Socrates, his (Plato’s) own “spiritual father”.

Nietzsche, following Aristophanes, held that Socrates was actually a sophist:

*Es wird Aristophanes Recht gegeben: Socrates gehörte zu den Sophisten . Aeschylus thut das Rechte, ohne es zu wissen: Sophokles glaubt also das Rechte wissend zu thun. Euripides meint, Sophokles habe unbewußt das Unrichtige gethan: er wissend das Richtige.*¹

In the following pages, I shall first offer a brief account of the dialogue *Sophist* adapted to the arguments of this paper. Second, I shall discuss Plato’s “double murder” of Parmenides and Socrates, his two “fathers”.

Plato’s *Sophist*

In the very beginning of the *Sophist*, Theodorus, the “host” of the discussion, introduces a stranger from Elea, who belongs to the circle of Parmenides and Zeno and is a “true philosopher” (μάλα ἀνδρα φιλόσοφον):

THEODORUS: Here we are, Socrates, true to our agreement of yesterday; and we bring with us a stranger from Elea, who is a disciple of Parmenides and Zeno, and a true philosopher.²

The question is: Is the stranger *another* great philosopher, in which case he is being compared with Parmenides and Zeno, or is he a “true philosopher”, in which case he is being compared with Socrates, who would not be a true philosopher. Socrates’ reply is indeed ironic, suggesting that he has been hurt by Theodorus’ remark:

SOCRATES: Is he not rather a god, Theodorus, who comes to us in the disguise of a stranger? (...) And may not your companion be one of those higher powers, a cross-examining deity, who has come to spy our weakness in argument, and to cross-examine us? (217 b).

¹Friedrich NIETZSCHE, NF-1869,1[44] — Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1869. Nietzsche source: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>. Read in 31 March 2014; italics are mine.

²*Soph.* 216 a. *The Complete Works of Plato*. Transl. by Benjamin Jowett. Delphi Classics, 2012; Πλάτων, ΣΟΦΙΣΤΗΣ. Thessaloniki, Greece: Εκδόσεις Ζήτρος, 2008.

This beginning may furnish the clue for the ensuing examination of the sophists. I shall return to this question in the second part of this paper. Regarding the nature of Socrates's irony, it is worth quoting Louis-André Dorion: "Socratic irony consists in a double dissimulation: not only does he feign ignorance, he also pretends to recognize the knowledge that his partner claims to have."¹ In this case, however, the stranger does indeed exhibit knowledge, as we note in the dialogue.

The second observation is that the method of interrogation made famous by Socrates in Plato's dialogues may have been employed by others before him. And it is Socrates himself – always as portrayed by Plato – who points to Parmenides as his predecessor in the use of this method:

SOCRATES: (...) I shall only beg you to say whether you like and are accustomed to make a long oration on a subject which you want to explain to another, or to proceed by the method of question and answer. I remember hearing a very noble discussion in which Parmenides employed the latter of the two methods, when I was a young man, and he was far advanced in years.²

Although an encounter between Parmenides and Socrates cannot be ruled out, Socrates would have been very young when, and if, this happened: according to the established date, Parmenides died in 460 B.C., while Socrates presumably was born in 470/469 B.C. This would make Socrates approximately ten years old, but in the *Parmenides* Socrates is surely older.³ We cannot therefore be certain about the presumed meeting between Socrates and Parmenides.

The Elean Stranger adopts the second method, namely interrogation, and, after choosing Theaetetus as his partner in conversation, he starts by defining the specific method which will be employed in the conversation. This will consist in scrutinizing the question by dividing genera into smaller parts. He exemplifies this method by "cross-examining" the various kinds of fishing and fishermen. This is meant only to show how to proceed later in the examination of the kinds of sophists. The real investigation starts in 222e and following.

The first definition of "sophist" is "a hunter of rich young men". This is the conclusion of the arguments concerning the first kind of sophist:

STRANGER: Then now, Theaetetus, his art may be traced as a branch of the appropriative, acquisitive family – which hunts animals, – living – and – tame animals; which hunts man, - privately

¹Louis-André DORION, "A figura paradoxal de Sócrates nos diálogos de Platão". In Francesco FRONTERROTA and Luc BRISSON (org.). *Platão: Leituras*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2011, p. 32. My translations, except when indicated otherwise.

²*Soph.* 217 c.

³Cf. KIRK, G. S.; RAVEN, J. E. *Os filósofos pré-socráticos*. 2a. ed. Trad. Carlos A. Louro da Fonseca, Beatriz R. Barbosa e Maria A. Pegado. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, s/d.

– for hire, - taking money in exchange – having the semblance of education; and this is termed Sophistry, and is a hunt after young men of wealth and rank – such is the conclusion. (*Soph.* 223b).

The second definition of the term “sophist” is “a merchant of the soul or knowledge”. The central passage in this connection is the following:

STRANGER: (...) so this trader in virtue again turns out to be our friend the Sophist, whose art may now be traced from the art of acquisition through exchange, trade, merchandise, to a merchandise of the soul which is concerned with speech and the knowledge of virtue (*Soph.* 224d).

(It is so sadly ironical that in our own days a professor can be also defined as a merchant of the soul or knowledge...). But this is not the definition we seek, for it corresponds to some of Socrates’ adversaries, not to him.

There follow the third and fourth definitions of “sophist” as a petty merchant of, respectively, first or second-hand goods. Thus:

STRANGER: (...) that part of the acquisitive art which exchanges, and of exchange which either sells a man’s own productions or retails those of others, as the case may be, and in either way sells the knowledge of virtue, you would again term Sophistry?

THEAETETUS: I must, if I am to keep pace with the argument. (*Soph.*, 224e).

The fifth definition of the term “sophist” is “a mercenary practitioner of eristic”. First, the definition of eristic:

STRANGER: (...) that [disputation] which proceeds by rules of art to dispute about justice and injustice in their own nature, and about things in general, we have been accustomed to call argumentation (Eristic)?

THEAETETUS: Certainly. (225c)

Next, the fifth definition proper:

STRANGER: But now who the other is, who makes money out of private disputation, it is your turn to say.

THEAETETUS: There is only one true answer: he is the wonderful Sophist, of whom we are in pursuit (...). (*Soph.* 225e).

We come to the sixth and last definition of the term “sophist”, which is of greatest interest. However, before arriving at this definition, the dialogue offers an important treatment of the soul and its relation to the body, which extends

from 227d to 228a. The main subject is the “purification of the soul or intellect” (227c). So begins the Stranger:

STRANGER: Do we admit that virtue is distinct from vice in the soul?

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

STRANGER: And purification was to leave the good and to cast out whatever is bad?

THEAETETUS: True.

STRANGER: Then any taking away of evil from the soul may be properly called purification?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

STRANGER: And in the soul there are two kinds of evil.

THEAETETUS: What are they?

STRANGER: The one may be compared to disease in the body, the other to deformity. (227d-228a)

So far, we have two kinds of disease, one of the body, the other of the soul. Evidently the Stranger is looking for someone who can purify the soul, just as one who purifies the body is a physician or therapist. The crucial passage regarding Plato’s doctrine of evil is this:

STRANGER: (...) surely we know that no soul is voluntary ignorant of anything? (228d).

All ignorance, in other words, is involuntary. Until now, Plato has not challenged Parmenides’ prohibition, which forbade every search of nothingness, or not-being. Under Parmenides’ strictures, ignorance would be just lack of knowledge, that is, non-being. In the exchange, the Stranger (we can only conjecture whether he represents Plato himself) will confront his “father” Parmenides, but we shall treat this in the next section.

There is a special form of ignorance: “When a person supposes that he knows, and does not know; this appears to be the great source of all the errors of the intellect.” (229c). Because this seems to be the main target of Socrates’ practice, we may be approaching a description of such ignorance. There follows, in 230b-d, a long exposition of the art of purification of the soul, which will be called, for lack of another name, “superior sophistry”. It is akin to Socrates’ practice, but according to the text was already practiced by others before Socrates, in the time of Parmenides if not earlier. Here is the relevant passage:

STRANGER: They cross-examine a man’s words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectical process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the

same things, and in the same respect. (...) For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more. (230b-d)

So, this last form of sophistry is by no means a negative one. On the contrary, it is compared with the art of the physician: this kind of sophist might be termed a “physician of the soul”.

Refutation is key to this kind of sophistry: “For all these reasons, Theaetetus, we must admit that refutation is the greatest and chiefest of purifications (...)” (230e).

In the conclusion of this part, the Stranger states:

Let us grant, then, that from the discerning art comes purification, and from purification let there be separated off a part which is concerned with the soul; of this mental purification instruction is a portion, and of instruction education, and of education, that refutation of vain conceit which has been discovered in the present argument; and let this be called by you and me the nobly-descended art of Sophistry. (231b).

We have, then, identified six kinds of sophist so far: 1) a hunter of rich young men; 2) a large-scale seller of knowledge related to the soul; 3) a small-scale seller of knowledge related to the soul; 4) a manufacturer and seller of such knowledge; 5) a practitioner of eristic; 6) a purifier of the soul’s opinions. The last kind of sophist does not seem by any means negative, and can, generally speaking, be assimilated to the art practised by Socrates. Let’s keep this in mind for the conclusion.

The Double Murder in the *Sophist*

The point I would now like to make is that in Plato’s *Sophist* there are not one, but two “murders”. The first, most commonly observed and admitted by Plato – or at least by the “Stranger of Elea” – is that of Parmenides. The other, noticed less often, is that of Socrates. I will try to demonstrate this in the following discussion.

Plato assumes the first parricide, which is explicit, notwithstanding the denegation – in the Freudian sense of the word – in the following passage (241d):

STRANGER: I have a yet more urgent request to make.

THEAETHETUS: Which is – ?

STRANGER: That you will promise not to regard me as a parricide.

THEAETHETUS: And why?

STRANGER: Because, in self-defense, I must test the philosophy of my father Parmenides, and try to prove by main force that in a certain sense not-being is, and that being, on the other hand, is not.

The Stranger of Elea asks Theaetetus to not consider him a parricide on this account. Of course, this is not a murder of a father in a literal sense, but, metaphorically speaking, it is exactly this. I do not however intend to pursue the argument that leads to the negation, or overcoming, of the Parmenidian prohibition of the discussion of not-being, or nothingness; I shall pursue, instead, the evidence leading to another parricide: the implicit murder of Socrates, Plato's true "spiritual father". Would Socrates be included in the class of philosophers or sophists even if he were considered the best of them?

Let's return to the beginning of the *Sophist*. Theodorus introduces the Stranger of Elea, a philosopher visiting the city:

THEODORUS: Here we are, Socrates, true to our agreement of yesterday; and we bring with us a stranger from Elea, who is a disciple of Parmenides and Zeno, and a true philosopher. (261a).

It is crucial to recall the passage in order to understand the nature of the "double parricide". Would Plato be ironically undermining Socrates's status as a philosopher – a position Socrates never claimed for himself anyway? What, then, would Socrates be if he is not a "true philosopher" nor a sophist in the traditional sense?

The Stranger is presented as "a truly important philosopher". What does this mean? Considering Theodorus's lack of sensitivity, would this mean that Socrates is not a truly important philosopher? Given his notorious humility, he does not put himself in the position of a philosopher. The man of Elea, being a stranger and a philosopher, would be superior to him, a "weak thinker". As Socrates says, "(...) may not your companion be one of those higher powers, a cross-examining deity, who has come to spy our weakness in argument, and to cross-examine us?" (217 b).

Socrates refers to philosophers in the third person, not including himself among them, and this evaluation does not sound ironical (216c):

(...) the true philosophers, and such as are not merely made up for the occasion, appear in various forms unrecognized by the ignorance of men, and they "hover above cities", as Homer declares, looking from above upon human life (...); sometimes they appear as statesmen, and sometimes as sophists (...).

Would not Plato include himself among these philosophers, "unrecognized by the ignorance of men"? Modesty would forbid this, but the form of dialogue seems perfect for such dissimulation of the real nature of the philosopher, and

of the way Plato thinks about himself. And we cannot and should not pass this limit.

From this point, Socrates seems to gradually disappear, as though in an eclipse. In the *Sophist*, which we are examining, he gives way to Theaetetus, and in the subsequent dialogues he almost never appears. Likewise in the *Statesman*, which is logically next to the *Sophist*, as anticipated in the beginning of the discussion of the *Sophist*, and should be followed by the *Philosopher* – never written by Plato, but apparently written by Aristotle –, the characters are the Stranger of Elea, Theaetetus, and Socrates the Young, a homonym of Plato's teacher.

Most of the *Sophist* discusses, effectively, the thesis of Parmenides, which is not however our subject. What I am here discussing is the thesis of the symbolic murder of Socrates. He is not considered a philosopher, if we consider the ending of the dialogue. There the Stranger and Theaetetus discuss the orator who uses irony either in public – in long speeches – or in private discussions. The orator is an “ironical imitator” (ειρωνικον μιμητην).

The ironical imitator, in his turn, can be divided into two further kinds:

STRANGER: Upon consideration, then, there appear to me to be two; there is the dissembler, who harangues a multitude in public in a long speech, and the dissembler, who in private and in short speeches compels the person who is conversing with him to contradict himself. (268b).

The description seems familiar. The first kind would be the popular orator (Δημολογικόν). Then the Stranger asks:

And what shall we call the other? Is he the philosopher or the Sophist?

THEAETHETUS: The philosopher he cannot be (Τὸ μὲν πού σοφόν αδύνατον), for upon our view he is ignorant; but since he is an imitator of the wise he will have a name which is formed by an adaptation of the word sophos. What shall we name him? I am pretty sure that I cannot be mistaken in terming him the true and very Sophist. (268c).

Would Socrates, then, be the “greatest of the Sophists”, as Nietzsche suggests? The ending of the dialogue seems to indicate this. Maybe we will never know for certain in the absence of the dialogue *Philosopher*, but we can conjecture.

Final Remarks

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate, first, that although Socrates was an intermediate figure between sophist and philosopher, nevertheless according

to the *Sophist*, he was included in the first category of sophist, albeit a higher, or greater one. Second, I have argued for the “double murder” committed by Plato in the disguise of the Stranger of Elea: the first murder, which was explicit, was that of Parmenides; the second murder, implicit, was that of Socrates. In a single dialogue Plato got rid of his two “spiritual fathers”. From that point onwards, he was free to develop his own true philosophy. My finding can be combined with Giovanni Reale’s thesis of the “oral tradition” of Plato’s doctrine.

The *Sophist* is a huge and highly complex dialogue; here I focused on only two points. Much work remains to be done on this work. That is the beauty of Platonic studies.

References

- Dorion, Louis-André. A figura paradoxal de Sócrates nos diálogos de Platão. In Francesco FRONTERROTA and Luc BRISSON (org.). *Platão: Leituras*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2011.
- Kirk, G. S.; Raven, J. E. *Os filósofos pré-socráticos*. 2a. ed. Trad. Carlos A. Louro da Fonseca, Beatriz R. Barbosa e Maria A. Pegado. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, s/d.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. [NF-1869,1\[44\]](#) — *Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1869*. Nietzsche source: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>. Read in 31 March 2014.
- Plato. *The Complete Works of Plato*. Transl. by Benjamin Jowett. Delphi Classics, 2012.
- Πλάτων, Σοφιστής. Thessaloniki, Greece: Εδόσεις Ζήτρος, 2008.
- Reale, Giovanni. *Para uma nova interpretação de Platão*. Trad. Marcelo Perine. São Paulo: Loyola, 1997.