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Sophistry, an Elective Affinity?**

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Crime as Language I – Narcissism and Sophistry, an Elective Affinity?

Claudia Simone Dorchain

Abstract

Narcissism and sophistry appear to be distant areas of human phenomena – the first belongs to the area of clinical disorders, which have been defined since recent times in ICD-10 and ICD-11, the second to the broad area of rhetoric, as it was already known in antiquity, understanding language as an instrument to achieve any purpose. However, apart from the historical perspective, which undoubtedly produces different results and highlights the differences, it is worth taking a systematic look at both phenomena, because unexpected commonalities can be identified here. Narcissism is considered a personality disorder that distorts thinking, feeling and acting. This distortion is also expressed, among other things, in unusual patterns of speech that systemically aim to demonstrate power to others. Sophistry has functioned in a very similar way ever since Plato wrote his famous dialogue Protagoras or Arthur Schopenhauer wrote his Eristic Dialectics and has clarified the artifices of being right at all costs. This essay shows that the sophist, as entertainingly described by Plato, not only wields an arsenal of rhetorical weapons containing the same elements throughout the centuries, but also that the sophist is a type of perpetrator, and furthermore that there is systemic sophistry in governments that per se contradict not only the truth of the statement but also the freedom of the citizens.

Keywords: *sophistry, narcissism, history of philosophy, Plato, Protagoras*

Those who want to be right even though they are inferior in the matter must proceed unfairly. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) wrote a world-famous book on how to be right in all cases by psychologically destabilising the opponent: *Eristic Dialectics* (1831). Schopenhauer says that some people use these unfair rhetorical attacks of the opponent intuitively, others need his training.¹ It is interesting that the philosopher distinguishes here between the studied sophists and the born sophists. We are interested in the latter as a type: could it be that the born sophists actually have a personality disorder, like clinical narcissism? A look at the history of sophistry, using the famous Platonic dialogue *Protagoras* (343 BC) as an example, may suggest that eristic dialectic is the natural mode of speech of the narcissist. With this suspicion elaborated on, sophistry, understood more broadly than just systematic word twisting, brings psychological, criminological and even political aspects into view.

Sophists vs. Philosophers: The Quest for Truth and Profit

Few professions in antiquity were as colourful as that of the sophist, if ancient writings are to be believed: “sophistés” meant itinerant teacher, while a broad curriculum of geometry, mathematics, poetry, music and especially rhetoric was part of their famous activities, and not infrequently their lessons were proteanly adapted to the audience. So frequent were the itinerant teachers that they influenced the image of antiquity, especially in Plato's time (428-348 BC), as compendia of history since Vorlaender show.² Socrates argued with the sophists – he sought truth, they sought profit, and this basic tension is at the same time the narrative framework of Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, which introduces the sophist of the same name and revolves around the teachability of virtue.³ An itinerant teacher named Protagoras of Abdera had actually lived, and Plato's eponymous dialogue, dated by Plato scholars around 343 BC, is often seen as an approximation of the actual historical person – but, beyond the anecdotal, as the protagonist of a famous school of thought that placed rhetoric in the service of persuasion. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who wrote the first German translation of this dialogue in 1804, already describes that this exemplary debate is about a “contradiction of being”⁴ between sophists and philosophers, where the sophists are portrayed as opportunists, the philosophers as seekers of truth. But was it that simple, did not philosophy also sell itself and put itself in the service of ideologues – were not ideologues also philosophers and vice versa? George Kerferd and Hellmut Flashar (1998) are of the opinion that Plato paints the sophists too negatively and hastily reduces their art to word twisting, while many sophists were indeed knowledgeable personalities, and quite a few philosophers were no strangers even to misleading

¹Arthur Schopenhauer (1831). *Eristic Dialectics*, artifice 15.

²See Karl Vorlaender (1919). *Geschichte der Philosophie, Vol. I*. Leipzig 1919, p. 69.

³Plato, Prot. 317 e – 319a.

⁴Schleiermacher: *Protagoras. Einleitung*. In: Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher: *Über die Philosophie Platons*, ed. by Peter M. Steiner, Hamburg 1996, p. 106.

rhetoric and an abuse of knowledge for political purposes.⁵ But the demarcation between philosophers and sophists was also difficult in ancient times because the latter made it difficult to clearly define their profession, oscillating between geometry, mathematics and rhetoric. For Plato it was obvious that the sophists were charlatans, and exactly in this sense he expresses himself in his dialogue *Sophistes*, when it comes to the definition and activity of these itinerant teachers.⁶ However, Plato's polemic was not undividedly accepted by his contemporaries and in the ancient afterworld. Flavius Philostratus (170-205 CE) was to say in his famous work *Lives of the Sophists*,⁷ looking back on this heyday of the sophists in Plato's Athens, that there were two kinds of sophists: orators and eloquent philosophers, the business of thought of the one clearly being that of mass suggestion, that of the other that of elucidating topics of epistemic value. But even here, the historical echo of what the Athenian philosopher describes in his *Protagoras* reverberates, the sophists' Janus-facedness, who vacillated between oratory for the sake of talking and seducing on the one hand and truth-oriented debate on the other, and not infrequently exercised this dual role with narcissistic grace in order to increase their own power.

Protagoras himself, according to a fragment from the collection of Herrmann Diels and Walther Kranz (1903; 2004, 2005),⁸ did not at all hide the fact that he was concerned to turn the weaker argument into a stronger one when necessary and irritate the opponent in a provocative and suggestive way, that is, to apply the classical and inventive art of eristics. The artifices used in this context will become clearer in the following. The sophists placed themselves in great (oftenly freely invented) traditions and sported false credentials, like Plato's Protagoras did, when he made his audience believe that Homer, Hesiod and Simonides have already been – we guessed it – sophists, as well as Orpheus and Musaeios, and that the gods of the Olymp themselves had made virtue a teachable subject and initiated the sophists as their mediators.⁹ The rhetor skilfully rebuffs the listener's obvious question as to why sophistry apparently served as a cover for activities such as music and poetry by suggestively pointing out that the sophists of old, in whose tradition he places himself, had only sought to avoid the envy of the ignorant crowd.¹⁰ Sophists also regularly attracted the most beautiful young men in town, like Alcibiades – as living advertising figures, as sexual objects, or as a kind of early “influencers” in order to increase their own reputation. For opportunists like Protagoras, rhetoric was their business model, and they were not exclusive: there was a lot of competition from established rhetoric teachers in the cities,¹¹ from philosophers and politicians who themselves trained their offspring with more or

⁵George B. Kerferd, Hellmut Flashar (1998). *Entstehung und Wesen der Sophistik*. In: Hellmut Flashar (Ed.): *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie. Die Philosophie der Antike*. Band 2/1, Schwabe, Basel 1998, p. 5.

⁶Plato, *Sophistes*, 223b-224e.

⁷Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 484.

⁸Herrmann Diels, Walther Kranz (Eds.), *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* 80B6 = Aristoteles, *Rhetorik* 1402a23-1402a24.

⁹Plato, *Prot.* 316d.

¹⁰Plato, *Prot.* 317a.

¹¹See Flashar (1998), p.8.

less noble intentions. But the business practices of many sophists are a model of unfair competition, which lives through - and builds on – eristic dialectic or black rhetoric.

The sophists, as described in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* showed the following intentions: they were interested in personal power, interested in overcoming the opponent, tried to enhancing their own ego, made narcissistic reference to social, cultural or institutional authorities ("name-dropping"), made use of long speeches or short speeches without reference to the content of the mediation situation,¹² merely as an interruption, and made frequently use of eristic dialectics. "Therefore I also maintain that the sophistic art is very old, but that those among the ancients who practised it took a pretext and hid it for fear of the ugliness of it, some behind poetry, such as Homeros, Hesiodos and Simonides, others behind mysteries and oracular sayings, such as Orpheus and Musaios,"¹³ boasts Protagoras and thus places himself in a glorious line of supposed predecessors in order to attract his paying clientele. Philosophers, on the other hand, showed contrasting intentions, they were interested in finding the truth and interested in convincing the opponent, they used truthful statements about their own position, if necessary, they were even admitting their own knowledge deficits, and made in general more reference to the matter than to one's own person. The use of long or short speech was adapted to the content of the communication situation, since the content and form of a statement should relate to each other in a meaningful way, and a true philosopher avoided eristic dialectics.¹⁴ But Plato's aversion to eristics was by no means only based on an antipathy towards the sophists and, exemplarily, towards Protagoras, but on a deeper systematic contrast, which was the reason for this antipathy in the first place: sophistry aimed at asserting an opinion, whereas the platonic understanding of knowledge – *epistémé* – was opposed to mere opinion, as he impressively lays out in his dialogue *Phaidon* (347 BC).¹⁵ Since eristic dialectic is in principle about outdoing the opponent by trying to strengthen an opinion on the operational level with all possible artifices and to put the opinion leader in an imaginably positive light, true knowledge can never be found in the honourable understanding of the truth-seeking idealist.

Winning Every Speech Duel: The Techniques of the Sophists

The speech duel - *elénchos* in Greek - was a contest to the death in public esteem: whoever lost in the speech duel was considered socially finished, and this massive fear apparently filled many students of the sophists with a willingness to give away money and conscience, as it were, to get rid of the danger of being publicly condemned. We can ask ourselves if there are parallels to today's cyberbullying, but we want to stick to the analysis of the platonic text and see

¹²Plato, Prot. 320a.

¹³Plato, Prot. 317d-e.

¹⁴Plato, Prot. 335a.

¹⁵Plato, Phaidon, 65c.

where such a duel could actually lead in practice. Socrates warns his rash student to get his head twisted by Protagoras: “So do you know the danger you run in giving away your soul?”¹⁶ Plato’s famous teacher thus leaves no doubt that he regards the emergence of his rival Protagoras not only as a disturbance and the rival himself as a vicious adversary, but also that his debating business is destructive to the soul. In order to understand why a sophist twisting of words can be dangerous for the soul, we have to understand what Plato actually means by the soul and how it is linked to substance and cognition. In Plato’s dialogue *Phaidon*, the soul is considered to be what makes the human being real.¹⁷ In this way, the Athenian philosopher breaks away from naturalistic thinkers who, like Democritus, see in the soul a pure breath or a natural organisation of atoms. For Plato, the soul is substantial and, as marked in dialogues such as *Phaidon* but also *Politeia*,¹⁸ it is open to rebirth and indestructible, it is unlosable substance, so the question may arise, how can a few words be dangerous to it, as Socrates fears? If we take a closer look at the sophistic techniques and artifices elaborately described in *Protagoras*, we can begin to understand where the actual danger to the human soul may lie.

The techniques of the sophists were numerous, as already mentioned: long speech/ not letting the opponent finish, the confusion of terms, called “isotopy modulation”,¹⁹ “name-dropping” for self-enhancement, which means self-valorisation through reference to celebrities, traditions and institutions, as well as the manipulative use of platforming/ deplatforming. These distortions of the speech still appear to be a danger to the truth and the search for truth in the dialogue, since it is clearly not a question of gaining knowledge and insofar diametrically opposed to the *epistémé*, but the danger to the soul only becomes apparent in the further interaction. Plato gives us many examples of how Protagoras tires or confuses his opponent Socrates with long speeches, or how he mixes up terms to get out of the trap eristically, and last but not least, how he always artificially exalts himself in order to destabilise his opponent.²⁰ This almost disarming deceitfulness of the sophist and his evasion of any substantive determination is not only a continued disappointment of the reader, but the reason why early platonic research since Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1919) already classifies the dialogue *Protagoras* as negative in terms of epistemology.²¹ This unproductiveness in epistemological terms, however, is only exemplified by the famous sophist from Abdera, for he follows the general scheme of his profession. When the sophists were forced to engage in a direct verbal exchange with their opponents about the *epistémé* – which they usually managed to avoid by using long speeches and distractions – they often used the following unfair tricks,

¹⁶Plato, Prot. 313a.

¹⁷Plato, Phaidon, 70c-72d.

¹⁸Plato, Politeia, 608c-612a.

¹⁹Also see Schopenhauer (1831), artifice 2, with an allusion on *Aristotle, Topik*, I, 13.

²⁰“Then, ashamed, as it seemed to me, since Alcibiades spoke thus and Callias asked him and almost all those present with him, Protagoras at last consented to talk again and made me ask him, wanting to answer.” Plato, Prot. 348a.

²¹Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1919). *Platon. Sein Leben und seine Werke*, 5. edition, Berlin 1959 (1. edition Berlin 1919), p. 110.

derived from *eristiké techné* in Greek, meaning the art of the rhetoric battle, which Schopenhauer declared in his work *Eristic Dialectics* (1831) as dangerous yet effective weapons, strategical twistings of words such as:

Ad rem: the matter is allegedly not true (introduce conceptual confusion, lie)²²

Ad hominem: the matter does not agree with what the opponent has said (making the opponent untrustworthy by self-contradiction)²³

Ad personam: the opponent is ridiculed (isolated, ridiculed, imitated)²⁴

Ex concessis: the opponent is forced to concede something incidental and from this the falsity of his presentation is inferred²⁵

Schopenhauer describes throughout that eristic dialectic serves no other goal than to be right *per fas et nefas* (rightly and wrongly), and that the sophist virtually basks in his overpowering action. In his dialogue *Protagoras*, Plato describes how the protagonist of the same name is celebrated like a movie star in Athens - although he actually only sells empty phrases like the relativity of the useful, for which he experiences fulminant encouragement in spite of the banality, as Socrates states astonished: “When he said this, those present raised a noise of applause, how beautifully he spoke”.²⁶ But the sophist is in fact not only an orator able to speak beautifully, but also an expert in black rhetoric, the art called eristic dialectics, which may easily lead to insults, slander, fraud and blackmail, i.e. clearly also borderline criminal or criminal behaviour – he is a dangerous character in a supposedly harmless appearance. Language is deliberately used by the sophist not as a means of communication, but as a weapon, that not only damages the person's reputation in the specific case, but also prevents cognition as knowledge of something, insofar as this is not at the discretion of the manipulative speaker, but also degrades the soul itself, the substance of which is knowledge or *epistémé*. The harms of sophistry are, according to Plato, threefold, in an increasing sequence: firstly, the possible criminal incrimination of the victim through the loss of reputation in the case of defeat in the *elénchos* or through false insinuations against the person, secondly, the prevention of true knowledge through suggestive confirmation of mere and false opinions and thirdly – and here lies the danger for the soul – the impediment of its preferential activity, the search for truth, which in the platonic understanding can never be done by offensive word twisting, but only by recollection of the realm of ideas. In his *Politeia*, the Athenian philosopher sees dialectics as a means of gaining knowledge,²⁷ the highest goal of which is the understanding of ideas as the origin of the soul – it is a long way from this idealistic understanding to the proto-criminal sophist, who sells untruths, damages the good reputation and creates dependencies.

²²Schopenhauer (1831), artifice 14, also called „fallacia non causae ut causae“.

²³Ibid., artifice 5.

²⁴Ibid., artifice 5 and 16.

²⁵Ibid., artifice 14 and 15, with an allusion on *Aristotle, Topik*, VIII, 1.

²⁶Plato, Prot. 334a-d.

²⁷Plato, *Politeia* 511b-c., also see Rafael Ferber (1989). *Platos Idee des Guten*, Sankt Augustin 1989, p. 97

Creating and Maintaining a Power Asymmetry: How Does Sophistry Work?

The profession of a sophist, which Plato sees in defaming the opponent, or using the art of weaponizing language, might not be effective at first glance, because psychologically, people want to be affirmed in their self-esteem, and this fundamental need has not changed since antiquity. How does the acceptance of a devaluation work? The sophist suggests to his opponent that he is powerless and stupid and that he urgently needs instruction in order not to be exposed to the ridicule and even the wrath of the general public: “For if you want to consider the punishment of the unjust, which is well meant by it, this alone will teach you that all men believe that virtue is to be acquired.”²⁸ At this point it is permissible to leave the framework of historical philosophy and consider what systematic conclusions modern personality psychology offers us about the behavior of the sophists, because here important consequences become apparent, which in turn follow up on Socrates's warning of the potential danger for the soul. Two psychological mechanisms are obviously essential for successful sophistry: ingroup-outgroup dynamic and learned helplessness. The error of judgment that arises from overestimating the influence and value of one's own group (“ingroup bias”) and at the same time being afraid of being judged by others, i.e., realizing exactly what the sophist suggests, has already been scientifically researched to some extent.²⁹ Learned helplessness arises when an individual is seemingly unable to escape a negative influence or a punishment,³⁰ and the corresponding suggestion often works through – verbal-evocative or actual social and spatial – isolation or “gaslighting” of the opponent, while omnipresence with its repetition effect anchors the messages in the subconscious. As it becomes obvious in Protagoras' proceeding, the inventive sophist uses suggestive messages that make the listener feel at his mercy if he does not want to experience bad consequences, which in turn creates a problem for which the wandering teacher not quite coincidentally happens to have the appropriate solution.

The similarities between sophistic techniques and modern findings on influence do not end here, but should include further research that is informative in this regard: Eric Berne, the inventor of transactional analysis, divided the instances of the human psyche into child-me, adult-me and parent-me.³¹ These three instances exist independently of each other and yet, in the healthy adult, in a lively interactive relationship with each other, and they can be stimulated by rhetorical suggestion, for example, by a speaker putting himself in the role of the parent self and consciously and specifically addressing the person being addressed in the child self. Protagoras makes use of the generation gap with regard to his younger listeners by actually stating that he could be their father in terms of age, speaking suggestively “As I am already old in years, and there is no one among you whose

²⁸Plato, Prot. 324a.

²⁹See Brian Mullen, Rupert Brown, Colleen Smith (1992). *Ingroup Bias as a Function of Salience, Relevance, and Status: An Integration*. In: *European Journal of Social Psychology*. Vol. 22, Nr. 2, 1992, p. 103–122

³⁰See Carlson, Neil R. (2010). *Psychology the Science of Behavior*. Pearson Canada. p. 409

³¹Berne (2006).

father I could not be in age.”³² In this way the sophist shows that he is actually pursuing the intention of establishing a kind of father-son relationship between himself and the potential students, which creates and maintains an asymmetry of power – at the expense of finding the truth, as Socrates assumes. Historically, the researcher may recall here that Protagoras is associated with sentences that are considered radical skepticism of any certain knowledge, and which authors such as Sextus Empiricus have elaborated extensively,³³ but from a systematic point of view, an almost diabolical cunning of the sophist is revealed here: he seduces his young listeners by claiming that any content is convertible, and at the same time creates a form of subordination, so that on the epistemological and socio-ethical level a distortion is produced, which, however, comes across as so harmless that it is not even recognized by the unsuspecting recipients. Protagoras even goes so far as to treat his listeners like children to whom one tells a moral tale and asks them the only at first glance harmless question: “But how shall I show it to you by telling a tale, as elders are wont to do to younger ones, or by reciting a treatise?”³⁴ His sophist approach not only shows that the wandering teacher regards every statement as linguistically arbitrarily convertible (an arbitrariness that philosophers like Socrates reject, since they hold the view that the form and content of a statement are not interchangeable), but also that he is not at all concerned with the value of knowledge, but with gaining his own influence. The sophist puts himself in the position of the parent self and addresses the opponent in his child self – this prevents an equal dialogue and creates and maintains power asymmetry, primary goal of his actions. This reminds us again of Socrates' warning that the sophists posed a danger to the soul by reducing its strength and potential and making the addressee weak, as it was soulless.³⁵ Today, often these suggestive techniques are combined with the stratagems that Noam Chomsky (1967; 1989) found in mass manipulation in the media: the recipient of the message is addressed like a child, and resistance is transformed into a bad conscience by suggestive messages of humiliation.³⁶

Sophistry and Narcissism: Systematic and Symptomatic Parallels

What if sophistry was not only a profession, but also a deviation? Schopenhauer's possibly greatest achievement in relation to eristic dialectics is, astonishingly as it may seem, not the work of the same name, in which he subjects the work of sophists to a precise analysis and examines speech situations such as those that Plato described in an entertaining way and classifies them in 38 tricks, but his inconspicuous statement of the sophist as a perpetrator, and as a possibly

³²Plato, Prot. 317c.

³³See Sextus Empiricus. *Grundriss der pyrrhonischen Skepsis*. Ed. by Malte Hossenfelder, Frankfurt 2002.

³⁴Plato, Prot. 320a.

³⁵Plato, Prot. 313a.

³⁶Noam Chomsky (1967). *On Resistance*. In: The New York Review of Books, Dec. 7. 1967, p.1.; Noam Chomsky (1989). *Media Control*. New York 1989.

born perpetrator.³⁷ The philosopher from Danzig is the first intellectual to express the idea that sophistry can be more and significantly different from a perfidious technique of individual influence or mass suggestion, and he is also the first to suggest that this is a natural, instinctive behavior act under the assumption of an antisocial personality – many decades before psychology was even established as a science. Completely inconspicuous, the pessimistic thinker in his classifications of sophistic techniques suggests that some individuals do not need instruction at all because they already practice all unfair tricks by nature and are, as it were, born sophists. Schopenhauer hereby opposes a long and multi-faceted tradition of interpretations of the sophists, which represents Plato and historians such as Philostratus, as well as early Plato research, whose common conviction is that a sophist is not born as such, but through long, intensive training (of course from ethically questionable machinations) becomes such. When going beyond the sophistry topic from strategy to perpetrator, however, it becomes important to recognize what character this perpetrator has, in other words: which typology is subject to the supposedly natural sophistry. This brings us to the symptomatic self-portrayal of narcissism, which combines systematic philosophy and clinical psychology.

The sophist, as exemplified by Plato's *Protagoras*, shows a certain characteristic behaviour and specific techniques, which are: delusion of grandeur, boundary transgressions, aloof behaviour, delusion of being above the law, devaluation of the opponent to enhance their own status, isolation of the opponent, triangulation, as well as a lack of empathy with simultaneous focus on own affects, followed by techniques such as creating problems to maintain control, pathological lying, gaslighting, and the creation of purposeful habits, e.g., "learned helplessness" in the opponent. The same can be said of the narcissistically disturbed character, according to current research by clinical psychologists Mark Walther & Oliver Bilke-Hentsch (2020).³⁸ Like Protagoras, the narcissist tries to relativise everything that does not correspond to his own grandiose self-image and its immanent need to exploit others physically, psychologically, financially and verbally, whereby every resistance and every stop is disgusting to him, as Socrates observes: "Protagoras already seemed to me to be quite morose."³⁹ The first narcissistic traits in the use of language are already evident here, because according to the psychoanalytical definition, narcissism is defined as a state of experience in which only one's own person per se, including one's thoughts and emotions, is experienced as real, while everything that is not part of one's own person has no reality.⁴⁰ For this reason, the opponent is declassified as perceptually disturbed, since a narcissistic speaker cannot ascribe any reality to the experiential worlds of others. In personality psychology, narcissism is also understood as a personality dimension that is characterised by high self-esteem. Eristic dialectics also uses psychological suggestive techniques, which express themselves in the creation and maintenance of power asymmetry, which ultimately serves the

³⁷Schopenhauer (1831), artifice 15.

³⁸See Mark Walter & Oliver Bilke-Hentsch (2020). *Narzissmus*. Stuttgart 2020, p. 32f.

³⁹Plato, Prot. 333e.

⁴⁰Walter & Bilke-Hentsch (2020), p. 32f.

overriding goal of being right in all cases. Interestingly, research on narcissism and antiquity does not go beyond the well-known Greek myth of the youth Narcissos, described by the Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (1-8 CE) as a vain individual who falls in love with his own mirrored image,⁴¹ quoted and interpreted by luminaries such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Sigmund Freud. For all the justified radiance of the myth, it is astonishing that researchers have so far overrated it and regarded it as the supposedly only historical evidence of that personality disorder, although the structural and symptomatic parallels between narcissism and the doings of many sophists are astonishing. In recent clinical psychiatry, psychological narcissism is described as narcissistic personality disorder which affects the person's entire thinking, feeling and acting in the long term,⁴² which raises the question: is the sophist symptomatically identical with the narcissist, are his typical word twists more than linguistic tricks – verbal expressions of psychological maladjustment? Is the continuous use of the artifices *ad rem*, *ad personam*, *ad hominem* and *ex concessis*, as they have been practised in eristic dialectic for centuries,⁴³ perhaps not only a result of training in perfidious oratory, but also a pathological individual psychological need? If so, Schopenhauer's distinction would be very important, for he distinguishes between born sophists and those who have learned it. The born sophist is symptomatically quite similar to the narcissist – the rhetorician who has merely trained himself in eristic tricks can put on the mask of sophistry and take it off again – the born sophist, however, who is a narcissist and thus personality-starved, does not have this freedom of choice. Perhaps the pathological compulsion that is inherent in the narcissist, because he cannot suppress his naturally sophisticated way of speaking and acting, is a reason why eristic dialectics exerts maximum pressure, against the receiver of the message, but starting from such in the sender, destroying not only Plato's ideal of knowledge-promoting dialectic, but every justified interest in healthy social relations.

The concept of elective affinity between sophistry and narcissism emerges when one sees the symptomatic correspondences. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had chosen the term of elective affinity for his novel *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), which represented the thesis that self-chosen connections are often better than naturally found family relationships,⁴⁴ but in the context of a symptomatic equality of sophistry and narcissism one has to admit that this connection is not ethically better, but ethically reprehensible, mentally degrading and socially questionable. The topic of narcissism, however, is currently being viewed with expectant attention in international scientific research, as there are indications that the proportion of people with narcissistic personality structures in the general population is increasing, as Marion Sonnenmoser (2014) states.⁴⁵ According to a representative study by Frederick Stinson et al. (2008), the proportion of

⁴¹See Andrew Feldherr (2010). *Playing Gods: Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Politics of Fiction*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2010.

⁴²Walter & Bilke-Hentsch (2010), p. 32f., with an allusion on ICD-10 and ICD-11.

⁴³See Schopenhauer (1831), artifice 5, 14, 15, 16.

⁴⁴Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1809). *Wahlverwandtschaften*, p. 58; p. 99.

⁴⁵Marion Sonnenmoser (2014). Narzisstische Persönlichkeitsstörung. *Arzteblatt*, 13, p. 567.

narcissistic characteristics (such as superiority, exhibitionism, vanity, sense of entitlement, the weaponizing of speech etc.) has increased considerably in the population in western countries.⁴⁶ The causes of this rapid increase in personality disorder among the general population are still unclear in the scientific debate, as is so often the case, the question arises as to whether this is an epistemological problem, i.e., an increased perception of a phenomenon, or an ontological problem, i.e., a real increase. Maybe we are experiencing an increase in Protagoras' crowd of unprecedented evidence? Could we imagine the bizarre situation that a modern-day Socrates would not find *one* celebrated sophist in the city, as described in Plato's *Protagoras*,⁴⁷ but hundreds, even thousands of self-proclaimed know-it-alls, fearing for their market shares? This is not impossible. But what if the narcissism of sophistry is not only an individual trait, but also intrinsic to the system – to every system, in order to disempower the individual citizen as well as the masses? Let us consider the proximity of narcissism and sadism and leave the level of the individual perpetrator, regardless of whether their number actually increases or not, to take a look at the political dimension of sophistry.

Beyond the Individual as Perpetrator: The Narcissistic Government and its Sophists

Systematic research is aware that Plato's *Protagoras* is not only an exposition of suggestive tricks or of the sophist method as such and their protagonists, but also a lesson in political philosophy, as Cynthia Farrar (1988) already points out.⁴⁸ In her work on the history of ideas of democratic self-understanding, she describes how the basic democratic idea of participation developed into conviction among some thinkers of antiquity and how it led to a practical culture of activity that found its echo in education, training and public life.⁴⁹ The self-justification of the sophists is about strengthening democracy in Athens by making virtue a supposedly teachable element that can be imparted to every citizen's son, i.e., the democratic participation can be achieved through rhetorical training and is therefore an indispensable preparation for fulfilling one's duties as a citizen. The allegedly honorable goal of the sophists, which Protagoras also emphasizes, by answering Socrates in the affirmative: “You seem to me to denote statecraft and to promise that you wanted to train men to be capable men for the state?”⁵⁰, is to be a stirrup holder of the supposedly best form of government, a promotional claim which on the one hand helps to justify the oftenly disproportionate fee claims, and on the other hand again puts the sophist in a very positive light. The self-

⁴⁶Frederick Stinson et al. (2008). Prevalence, Correlates, Disability, and Comorbidity of DSM-4. Narcissistic Personality Disorder: Results from the Wave 2 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 69 (7), p. 1043.

⁴⁷Plato, Prot. 315a-d.

⁴⁸Cynthia Farrar (1988). *The Origins of Democratic Thinking. The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens*, Cambridge 1988, p. 44–98.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Plato, Prot. 319a.

contradiction of these claims lies in the fact that democratic participation can in no way take place through verbal tricks and suggestive messages to the opponent, or only in such a superficial understanding of democracy that it is a public platform for self-appreciation that goes below the factual level, precisely the *epistémé*, acts (which of course could be the case in some places and not only in ancient Athens). But the real contradictions between sophistry as a political form of expression lie deeper and reveal a flaw in the system through the sophist as a perpetrator and possible narcissist.

The narcissistically operating sophist could be an indicator for a thoroughly corrupt society, verbalized only by embellishing phrases, and his technique a proof for a sham democracy, pretending to defend values it doesn't even possess. Chomsky (1989) describes very clearly that false democracies have no interest at all in true knowledge on the part of the citizens and participation at eye level: "An alternative conception of democracy is that the public must be barred from managing of their own affairs and the means of information must be kept narrowly and rigidly controlled. That may sound like an odd conception of democracy, but it's important to understand that it is the prevailing conception."⁵¹ While the linguist's harsh rejection of transparency still refers to western civilizations that like to pride themselves on being a late successor of Athenian democracy, the underlying problem is one that transcends epochs and cultures. Even pre-democratic societies and their intellectuals recognized that there is a systematic connection between sophistry, narcissistic protagonists of the same, and the suppression of truth and justice, which in the worst case of corruption even becomes law. The French nobleman, philosopher and writer Donatien Alphonse Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) believed that the state, through sophistry, together with the installation of instruments of power, ensured that innocence basically stood no chance. Those in power ensured, according to de Sade, that corruption was omnipresent in all its instances – nobility, clergy/church, judiciary, administration, politics, trade – and was always bound to win in every case. This is the plot of his work *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, published in 1791, with the story of two unequal sisters, Justine and Juliette, who, having become orphans at a young age, choose the path of virtue or vice, and of whom only the vicious one succeeds.⁵² Juliette becomes a prostitute and, as such, extremely successful, as she allows herself to be gifted with luxury by rich patrons, while Justine – her name already means "the one who loves justice" – drags herself from one disappointment to the next, while she is only mocked, harassed by gaslighting or even raped by the church and government dignitaries, with whom she seeks protection. The moral of this story – if there is a moral – is that nothing but shallow sophistry is to be expected from the state and the church, and that in the end vice is always preferred to virtue, which must lead a despised shadowy existence, not by chance, but out of logic inherent in the system, since society would never allow innocence to triumph over corruption. De Sade wrote most of his works in prison or in a mental institution, taking into consideration that he had

⁵¹Noam Chomsky (1989; 2002). *Media Control*. New York, p.5

⁵²Donatien Alphonse François de Sade (1791). *Justine*. In: *Ausgewählte Werke* Vol. 1-3. Hamburg 1962.

to answer to criminal proceedings for bodily harm, blackmailing and fraud. His works have been made into films up to the present day, discussed in many ways by philosophers like Pierre Klossowski (1981) and evaluated as memorials to state violence and official sadism.⁵³ For Klossowski it is obvious that de Sade did not want to write a biographical story, even though he himself was a perpetrator at times, but intended to denounce the immorality of institutions by portraying his protagonists as parts of a thoroughly depraved society, which only covers itself with the shameful fig leaf of a sophist rhetoric in order to indulge in the most abominable vices behind it.⁵⁴ This aspect could be elaborated on in view of the violation of civil rights as well as of the violation of the *epistémé*, but in due briefness, the similarity between individual and institutional sadism, which is based on narcissistic self-exaltation and violence, will only be touched upon here.

In summary we can state, the technique of propaganda as a means of influencing the masses dates back to antiquity, as does sophistry, eristic dialectics and black rhetoric, the dark triad of suggestive influence, which Plato even directly regards as an attack on the soul and its highest and noblest goals.⁵⁵ In the Middle Ages, the military ideas of manipulation were supplemented by and transferred into clerical propaganda by the Vatican who wanted to enrich his missionary training for overseas colonies with suggestive, sophisticated techniques, as it was already done in antiquity. Marc Crispin Muller describes, in a preface to an edition of Edward Bernay's famous work *Propaganda*, that in 1622 pope Gregory XV. founded the "congregatio ad propagandam fidei" (assembly for the propagation of the faith) to train missionaries to use the proper form of sophistry to spread the gospel, along with the privileges of the church and its dignitaries, throughout the world and especially in the so-called new world.⁵⁶ The concept and technique of propaganda, enriched by the cumulative sophist experience of Protagoras' contemporaries via Schopenhauer to the present day, has gained not only in dissemination over the centuries, but also in sophistication and amplification by the latest applications. It may sound frightening, but the interrogation protocols of the CIA go into exactly the same techniques of sophisticated suggestion that cause learned helplessness, which have been described thousands of years before.⁵⁷ What has changed in the 21st century is the technical, mass media reach of the methods of eristic dialectic – and the possibility of influencing the recipient of the message ever more widely and permanently. The strategies of temporarily influencing the receiver – through artifices, distraction and self-aggrandizement of the sender – have historically given way to behaviourist strategies of operant conditioning and even strategies of changing the receiver (mind control). All this is as harmful today as it was in Plato's time, when the philosopher stated in his

⁵³Pierre Klossowski (1981). *Justine und Juliette*. In: Bernhard Dieckmann, François Pescatore (Eds.): *Lektüre zu de Sade*. Basel, Stroemfeld 1981, p. 49f.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵See Plato, Phaidon, 70c-72d.

⁵⁶Muller (2005). Preface. In: *Edward Bernays, Propaganda* (1928), ed. by M. C. Muller, New York 2005, p.9.

⁵⁷See Benedict Carey (2014). *Architects of C.I.A. Interrogation Drew on Psychology to Induce Helplessness*. *The New York Times*. *The Times Company*. Retrieved 11 December 2014

Protagoras that the human soul is in danger if one deals too much with sophists,⁵⁸ voluntarily or involuntarily. What if the state takes on the role of the narcissistic sophist?

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⁵⁸Plato, Prot. 313a.

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