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THE SCANDAL OF SOPHISM

On the Epistemological Seriousness of Relativism

Daniel Boyarin

As its subtitle indicates, my essay concerns the epistemological seriousness of relativism, a mode of thought whose seriousness is often—much too often—in question. To begin, I would like to quote a statement of received opinion about Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias*. In an essay purporting to advise students on how to get the most out of college, the conservative pundit David Brooks wrote recently:

Read Plato’s “Gorgias.” As Robert George of Princeton observes, “The explicit point of the dialogue is to demonstrate the superiority of philosophy (the quest for wisdom and truth) to rhetoric (the art of persuasion in the cause of victory). At a deeper level, it teaches that the worldly honors that one may win by being a good speaker . . . can all too easily erode one’s devotion to truth—a devotion that is critical to our integrity as persons. So rhetorical skills are dangerous, potentially soul-imperiling gifts.” Explains everything you need to know about politics and punditry.¹

Despite a century of research findings and explication to the contrary (since Nietzsche!), this way of thinking about the place of Gorgias (and of Sophism

1. David Brooks, “Harvard-Bound? Chin Up.” *New York Times*, March 2, 2006.

generally) in our culture is still dominant.² Accepting the caricature drawn by Plato, George and Brooks seem only able to understand Gorgias as a charlatan who was cynically aware that what he taught was nothing but a means to achieve victory in debate, without regard for truth (and in service of the adept's own power and pleasure).

It is this same genre of Platonism, it seems to me, that motivated Cardinal Ratzinger to summarily dismiss relativism as intellectually contemptible and morally dangerous. The closest he comes, in his preelection homily, to discussing relativism with respect to intellectual life is his characterization of it as a lack of intellectual integrity. Rather than a set of arguments or a kind of theory or even a stance, relativism is for him evidence of a character flaw, or else the flaw itself. "Relativism, that is" (he begins his definition), "letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine'" is not itself a doctrine, but only an indecisiveness or lack of will in a world where doctrines are copious and fast proliferating. It is a remarkable thing to find a scholar of Joseph Ratzinger's learning and status presenting a philosophical position in competition with his own as having no goal but to satisfy "one's own ego and desires." And it is not as if a commitment to "recognizing something as definitive," which he valorizes, could have nothing at all to do with ego or desires. The cardinal's homily caricatures—even (I hope it is not too disrespectful to say) slanders—its intellectual opponents, but in this mode of critique, it is following a distinguished precedent: Plato's. The practice of slandering adversaries as seekers after egocentric pleasure and power is a key technique of Plato's dialogues, notably the *Gorgias*.

The same precedents that motivated Cardinal Ratzinger motivate other contemporary epigones of Plato, for instance George and Brooks. The problem is endemic even to the most respectable academic philosophy. Although stated in a more sophisticated manner, the view of the French philosopher Alain Badiou is not much more nuanced than Ratzinger's in its understanding of the place of rhetoric: "Philosophy today, caught in its historicist malaise, is very weak in the face of modern sophists. Most often, it even considers the great sophists—for there are great sophists—as great philosophers. Exactly as if we were to consider that the great philosophers of Antiquity were not Plato and Aristotle, but Gorgias and Protagoras."³ Badiou's phrase "historicist malaise" is shorthand for his view that truth is unchanging from age to age, that what was true in Aristotle's time is true in our own, that if Aristotle said things that are false, from our present perspective, that is because he was wrong, then as now; we know better now what

2. For a good summary of what we know about Gorgias, see Scott Porter Consigny, *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

3. Alain Badiou, "The (Re)Turn of Philosophy *Itself*" in *Manifesto for Philosophy Followed by Two Essays: "The (Re)Turn of Philosophy *Itself*" and "Definition of Philosophy,"* ed. and trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 116.

is true than he did. Ratzinger’s outlook, as expressed in his homily, is the same, except that for him it is because of revelation and church teaching or tradition that we now know more than even the greatest Greek rationalists knew. But on the general point, an atheistic Platonist like Badiou can find himself in full agreement with a Christian Platonist like Ratzinger. In the circumstance, we may well wonder whether there is not something that the likes of Gorgias and Protagoras, so slandered by Plato and centuries of Platonists, have to teach us today. The Greek Sophists may well offer us an alternative to the Hobson’s Choice (or Hobbesian choice) between an absolutism that hears no voice but its own and a hedonistic, egotistical “dictatorship of relativism.”

Among other contemporary thinkers who buy wholesale Plato’s slander of the Sophists is, importantly, Emmanuel Levinas. As Susan Shapiro writes of him:

Levinas’s early writings elucidate the deceptiveness of rhetoric through comments on Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*. In this view, rhetoric is considered an illusory and shadowy knack with speech that imitates, haunts, and would supplant being or truth. As such, it is the other of philosophy residing within it as its double. The task of philosophy might be understood as the critique of rhetoric and its separation from properly philosophical discourse. This splitting between rhetoric and philosophy is certainly a familiar gesture and citing Plato as the locus classicus for this opposition is also common.⁴

Levinas indeed takes the most classically Platonistic of approaches to philosophy—and to rhetoric and Sophism, philosophy’s “others.” In his book *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues:

Our pedagogical or psychagogical discourse is rhetoric, taking the position of him who approaches his neighbor with ruse. And this is why the art of the sophist is a theme with reference to which the true conversation concerning truth, or philosophical discourse, is defined. Rhetoric, absent from no discourse, and which philosophical discourse seeks to overcome, resists discourse. . . . But the specific nature of rhetoric (of propaganda, flattery, diplomacy, etc.) consists in corrupting this freedom. It is for this that it is preeminently violence, that is, injustice. . . . And in this sense justice coincides with the overcoming of rhetoric.⁵

4. Susan E. Shapiro, “Rhetoric, Ideology, and Idolatry in the Writings of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 254–78; here at 254.

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 72–74. It needs to be

said, however, of both Badiou and Levinas (and perhaps Cardinal Ratzinger as well) that these crude caricatures of rhetoric and Sophism hardly encompass all their views on the subject. See, in particular, Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 161–69.

This tradition of understanding Sophism, which might be said to begin as early as Parmenides, holds that only a justice that knows its own truth absolutely (and brooks not a moment of doubt) is qualified for the name “justice.” We might consider as in the same tradition the claim made by Cardinal Ratzinger (and many others) that only religious knowledge that knows its own truth absolutely (and brooks no doubt) can count as religious knowledge or as a basis for religious commitment.⁶ These parallel notions, I think, underlie some of our most intractable ethico-political dilemmas. We seem to feel that, in this context, there are only two possibilities open to us: (1) the determined imposition of the will of one passionate group, when in power, on all others, or (2) the retreat of all into a society of indifferent subgroups, each of which claims its own version of truth, incommensurable with the others. The dangers of the former possibility are palpable, while the latter seems to involve an evacuation of both meaning and meaningfulness. A pallid live-and-let-live form of life (as offered by most versions of liberal religion and, more generally, liberal pluralism) can ultimately offer no contest to a form of life based on certainty about truths known to be absolute. Exploring an alternative epistemological position might help us to recover a sense that liberal pluralism is, first, not the effect of a lack of commitment to values, and second, not doomed to be overrun by polities more absolutely committed to their own beliefs.

Reversing Levinas, then, I would like, though with some hesitations, to suggest that justice may coincide with the *overcoming of philosophy*—or, at least, a particular notion of philosophy—and with a reinhabitation of the uncertainties of relativism, Sophism, and rhetoric.⁷ Rhetoric is not merely a *technē* (a verbal skill, as Plato claimed) but an epistemology. Sophists such as Gorgias and Protagoras were intellectuals championing a humane and human-centered worldview, according to which the access to knowledge was equally open (or equally closed) to all. The Sophists’ goal was not the discovery of objective truth (even were there such a thing), but the maintenance of discussion among differing voices about open questions important to their culture at large.

6. This position is, interestingly, that of both many proponents and many opponents of religion.

7. I claim no originality in making this claim. Many others, notably in the pragmatist tradition, have been working along these lines for some time. My contribution, if I have one, is a particular way of reading the Sophists in the context of this discussion. See, for instance, Henry S. Levinson, *Santayana, Pragmatism, and the Spiritual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), a marvelous book brought to my attention by Sheila Davaney. In a

justly celebrated essay, Richard Bett has called into question the characterization of the Sophists as relativists, a characterization that has been held by the vast majority of scholars until now. Bett’s contention, though, is premised on his further claim that Protagoras’s “the human is the measure” fragment underlies all understanding of the Sophists as relativists. My reading of the relevant texts is quite different from that of Bett and perhaps, therefore, a contribution to the debate. See Richard Bett, “The Sophists and Relativism,” *Phronesis* 34.2 (1989): 139–69.

Gorgias vs. Parmenides

Among the most important “pre-Socratics” were Parmenides and Gorgias, though the classification is a misnomer (and not only because the term ought to be “pre-Platonics”). The former is taken generally to be one of the fathers of philosophy, if not *the* father; while the latter is claimed as the progenitor of rhetoric and Sophism.⁸ Neither, of course, would have recognized these terms or understood the contrast that we make between them.

What is meant in saying that Parmenides was already a philosopher is that, in the extant fragments of his work, he appears to make a distinction between that which is true or real (*aletheis*) and our perceptions or received opinions (*doxa*). He further claims, as Plato will do, that while *aletheis* persuades us automatically (as it were) to believe what is right, *doxa* virtually forces us to believe things that are wrong. That Parmenides makes this distinction between persuasion and compulsion is clear. As Mi-Kyoung Lee puts it:

In his poem, Parmenides lays claim to a kind of knowledge not attained by ordinary mortals, the way to which is revealed to him by a goddess who presents him with a choice between the way of persuasion and the way of δόξα or ordinary human opinion (DK 28 B1.28–30, B.2 4–8); the latter she says is deceptive and should be avoided. Parmenides’ special twist on the theme is that truth must be attained by the active use of reason.⁹

In other words, Parmenides was perhaps the first to promulgate the notion of *rational compulsion* and to argue that it in effect it is not compulsion at all (in the way that rhetoric is), but rather persuasion.

Parmenides’s little work *On Nature* is divided into two parts. The first discusses the world of “truth” or “reality,” the realm of *logos*, while the second concerns itself with the world of illusion or *kosmos*, which is the realm of the senses and of the erroneous opinions that human beings found upon them:

The one: that it is and it is impossible for it not to be. This is the path of persuasion, for it accompanies Objective Truth [*aletheia*]. The other [*doxa*]: that it is not and it necessarily must not be. That, I point out to you, is a path wholly unthinkable, for neither could you know what-is-not (for that is impossible), nor could you point it out.

8. According to other doxological traditions, it was Empedocles, the supposed teacher of Gorgias, who “invented” rhetoric. Richard Bett, ed., *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4; Sextus, *Against the Logicians* L.6.

9. Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology After Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 39.

The foundation for philosophy, as it would be understood and practiced by Plato, is expressed by Parmenides in this way:

The same thing is there for thinking of and for being. . . . It is the same thing, to think of something and to think that it *is*, since you will never find thought without what-is [Being], to which it refers, and on which it depends.

There should be a perfect correspondence, it would seem, between rational thought and the real, objective structure of Being—of the “what-is” we call the universe.

The goddess (Athena) who speaks to Parmenides recognizes that a rational argument establishing what is true or real ought to persuade anyone simply and completely but does not always do so (and perhaps, she adds, truth does not persuade very often, or even ever). She distinguishes between *logos* and *kosmos* in order to contrast the exclusively logical, rational character of truth (*logos*) as against the *kosmos* of the words expressing it. The Greek *kosmos* means that which is ordered or harmonious and, by extension, anything that is adorned (compare our word *cosmetics*). The goddess says:

Here I stop my trustworthy speech [*logos*] to you and [my] thought about Objective Truth. From here on, learn the subjective beliefs of mortals; listen to the deceptive ordering of my words [*kosmos*].

Robert Wardy comments aptly on this passage that, “just as a painted face deceives the onlooker, so the goddess’s phrase suggests the disturbing possibility that a *kosmos* of words . . . might mislead precisely in that these words wear an attractive appearance of superficial order masking essential incoherence.”¹⁰

The goddess goes on, then, to describe such a *kosmos*, and what she describes is a construction that would have been familiar to anyone who knew the “orthodox” philosophical positions held by Parmenides’s contemporaries. The construction is, in Athena’s words, “stunningly complex and complete” but nevertheless a fabrication, a *kosmos* of mere words, as any account of the world (other than the goddess’s own *logos*) must be. The reasons, according to the goddess, for uttering such falsehoods, for constructing such a *kosmos*, is “so that no one will outstrip you in judgment, so that no mortal belief will outdo you.” Now a contradiction in Athena’s (which is to say, Parmenides’s) position becomes apparent. On the one hand, she speaks of an absolute truth that everyone would immediately recognize as such when its *logos* is laid out by rational argument; but, on the other hand, she seems to speak of an equally persuasive falsehood that persuades by the same means in the

10. Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and Their Successors* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.

absence of a criterion to tell the difference. While Parmenides is insisting that the power of *logos* as truth is so transparent that it needs no force, no authority, to make it so, he puts this argument into the mouth of a goddess—the goddess of wisdom, no less—thereby belying his claim. Moreover, truth/reality is defined as that which is persuasive, but the *kosmos*, being deceptive, is also likely to persuade; and no criterion has been offered for telling the difference between one persuasive argument and another. Parmenides found a worthy opponent in Gorgias, who, perceiving this contradiction, chose to live within it rather than seek an escape.

On Nature; or, What Is Not

Gorgias’s title, *On What Is Not; or On Nature*, is parodic of Parmenides’s title.¹¹ (Douglas MacDowell cleverly suggests a modern analogue in the form of a text entitled *Thirteenth Night; or, What You Won’t*.)¹² Nature was generally thought of as that-which-is. Indeed, Parmenides’s pupil Melissus wrote a book called *On Nature; or On What Is*. Gorgias sets out, it seems, to overturn Parmenides on the grounds of something we might call common sense. Gorgias’s tenets in this text are traditionally described as threefold. Here is Sextus Empiricus’s summary:

Gorgias of Leontini belonged to the same troop as those who did away with the criterion, but not by way of the same approach as Protagoras. For in the work entitled *On What Is Not* or *On Nature* he sets up three main points one after the other: first, that there is nothing; second, that even if there is [something], it is not apprehensible by a human being; third, that even if it is apprehensible, it is still not expressible or explainable to the next person.¹³

The interpretation of these sentences has been much contested, and many have described them as nonsense and “sophistry.”¹⁴ Richard Enos, the historian

11. For the Greek texts of Gorgias and Protagoras, I cite Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, Griechisch und Deutsch* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1966). For translation, I am citing the excellent work of Michael Gagarin, and Paul Woodruff, *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists*, ed. and trans. Gagarin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), having closely consulted as well with Hermann Diels and Rosamond Kent Sprague, *The Older Sophists*, ed. Sprague (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972); and for Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*, the edition of Douglas M. MacDowell (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982). Finally, for Sextus Empiricus, I cite *Against the Logicians*, ed. and trans. Richard Bett.

12. Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 11.

13. Sextus, *Against the Logicians*, 15. There are many problems with the text of the testimonia to this work, which is known from two ancient sources: *Against the Logicians* of Sextus Empiricus, as cited here, and from (pseudo-) Aristotle’s *Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 979a11–980b21. For the general interpretation advanced here, these textual issues are not directly relevant.

14. Sextus, *Against the Logicians*, 15 n. 35. They have been taken as nonsense or “sophistry” by most historians of philosophy (such as E. R. Dodds, ed. and trans., *Gorgias: A Revised Text* [1959; Oxford: Clarendon, 2004], 7–8) until quite recently.

of rhetoric, has offered an interpretation that renders them coherent and compelling. It would seem, at first glance, that Gorgias is denying the existence of the empirical, physical world; not only would this be an absurd position, however, it would contradict everything else we know about Gorgias's thought. According to Enos's account, Gorgias is asserting, rather, that there is nothing but the physical world. What he is denying is existents in the philosophical (Parmenidean) sense—essences, ideas, or forms. Gorgias claims that no essences exist but only the physical reality that we see and touch:

Platonic notions of ontological “essences” . . . were absurdities to Gorgias. He viewed humans as functioning in an ever changing world and manufacturing ideas that lose their “existence” the instant they pass from the mind of the thinker. Accordingly, ideals attain existence only through the extrapolations of the mind and are dependent upon the referential perceptions of their creator. As such, they cannot exist without a manufactured antithesis or anti-model. By their very nature, they can form no ideal at all since each individual predicated ideals based on personal experiences.¹⁵

The latter two of Gorgias's three points are closely related to the first. Based on his fundamental understanding that the only objects of human cognition are sense perceptions, Gorgias argues that, even if there were essences or idealities, there is no way that humans could perceive and understand them. In other words, we have here a statement that the “*human media* of understanding—sense perceptions” put limits on the extent of human knowing.¹⁶ Beyond the positive experience of humans lie only extrapolations of the mind—a system of representation or signification in which nothing exists except by virtue of that which it is not, a system similar in that respect to those that de Saussure describes. Gorgias's third tenet is a further statement about the inability of human language to communicate even sense perceptions, let alone whatever truths about reality that it might have been able (again, contrary to plausibility) to divine. Obviously, Gorgias's rhetorical, or Sophistic, thought leads us in directions very different from those in which philosophy leads. Plato desired to discover, and believed that he could discover, truths that would be always true—true without reference to speakers, hearers, or situations. Gorgias's thought leads us to understand that we must allow “for the contingencies of interpretation and human nature that are inherent in any social circumstances, which inherently lack ‘ideal’ or universally affirmed premises.”¹⁷ Gorgias's views reflect a strong theoretical opposition to philosophy, which was a signifying practice then in its youth.

15. Richard Leo Enos, *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1993), 81–82.

16. Enos, *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle*, 82; emphasis in the original.

17. Enos, *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle*, 73.

I think that it has not been emphasized enough, in the critical literature, how precisely Gorgias’s three points dog the steps of Parmenides. Gorgias’s three denials are exact reversals of each of Parmenides’s three affirmations. Where Parmenides holds that *logos* “is and it is impossible for it not to be,” Gorgias maintains that there *is* nothing—*nothing* in Parmenides’s sense of *is*—at all. Where Parmenides says that *logos* is persuasively true and objectively knowable, Gorgias counters that, even if there were something to know, human beings do not have the capacity to know it. And finally, where Parmenides concludes that *doxa* (which is “what-is-not”) is both “wholly unthinkable” and inexpressible, Gorgias concludes that *logos*, even if it were apprehensible (which it is not), would be inexpressible and inexplicable. However elusive the grounds of Gorgias’s opposition to Parmenidean philosophy have seemed down the centuries, it is clear that Plato understood them. As George Kerferd observes, the field on which Plato chose to take issue with Gorgias and the other Sophists was that of

their failure to understand that the flux of phenomena is not the end of the story—one must look elsewhere for the truth which is the object of the true knowledge, and even for the understanding of the flux and its causes we have to go to more permanent, secure and reliable entities, the famous Platonic forms. . . . Indeed, when elsewhere Plato suggests, as he does repeatedly, that the sophists were not concerned with the truth, we may begin to suppose that this was because they were not concerned with what *he* regarded as the truth, rather than because they were not concerned with the truth as *they* saw it. For Plato, though he does not like to say so, antilogic is the first step on the path that leads to dialectic.¹⁸

This analysis suggests a kind of bad faith on Plato’s part.¹⁹ Knowing that his opponents were not charlatans, he nevertheless portrayed them as such, in the service of his absolute conviction that only his way of seeking truth was legitimate. Rather than impugning their results, he chose to impugn their characters. Plato was in serious theoretical disagreement with Gorgias’s positions, but instead of choosing to argue with them rationally via his own methods of dialectic, Plato chose to caricature the man and his thought. In later tradition, Gorgias is given to say that, while he enjoyed Plato’s dialogue named after him, he had never voiced any of the sentiments or sentences assigned to him in that text (Atheneaus, *Deipnosophistae* 11.113.2).²⁰

18. G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 67.

19. See, however, Rosemarie Kent Sprague’s discussion of this point in her review of Kerferd (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* 103 [1983]: 189–90).

20. ὡς κοιλῶς οἶδε Πλάτων ιαμβίξειν. Remarkably, MacDowell, on the page after quoting these words, takes Plato’s characterization of Gorgias as “gospel truth” (Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 10).

The *Encomium of Helen*

Gorgias's most famous text, the *Encomium of Helen*, stands at a crux in the development of Greek (and thus, Western) discourse and textuality.²¹ The *Encomium* stands on the frontier between poetry and prose, and also between magical language and *technē*.²² It is important to emphasize, as Susan Jarratt eloquently does, that seeing the discourse of the Sophists, and especially Gorgias's great text, as liminal in this way does not mean that it is actually transitional from one state to another, nor that it represents progress with respect to what came before and underdevelopment with respect to what would come later. The *Encomium* is foundational, however, in that it expressed a set of philosophical dilemmas that we have not yet escaped from or found solutions to—dilemmas having to do with agency, persuasion, seduction, and force. As an example of *technē*, Gorgias's text had to reflect on the conditions of its operations and especially on their moral effects. Thus, as Jarratt says:

In order for Gorgias's rhetoric to escape the accusation of amoral manipulation, it would need to bring the conditions under which persuasion was effected before the audience itself as a subject for consideration. In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias engages in just such a public exploration of the power of *logos*—a force coming to be seen in the mid-fifth century Greek *polis* as rivaling the fate of the gods or even physical violence in its power.²³

Jarratt reads Gorgias as saying that *logos*—meaning, in this case, persuasive speech or (as it will later be called) rhetoric—is a drug and, like other drugs, can bring death and disease or life and health. While Gorgias, in his text *On Nothing*, denies the possibility of discovery and communication of any objective truth, he nevertheless believes that we do communicate with each other. “In other words,” as Jarratt writes, Gorgias “recognizes and inquires into the psychological conditions of assent for the individual who participates in the rhetorical scene of democracy. In choosing Helen to exonerate from blame, he suggests that the private, internal process of granting assent to the deceptions of language can have a public impact.” Jarratt's most significant point is that, according to Gorgias,

this process is not guided by the “rational” intellect. In his story of Helen's abduction, language is parallel with forces of violence, love, and

21. Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 (Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*). To the best of my knowledge, Gorgias's is both the first prose encomium (which disturbed Isocrates, who claimed that it was not “truly” an encomium) and the first encomium of a woman.

22. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 16.

23. It is interesting, and perhaps telling, that Jarratt leaves out erotic desire from this equation. Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 57.

fate, all of which exceed the bounds of rational containment. Gorgias calls that emotional experience in the space between reality and language “deception” (*apate*). *Though once again a Platonic concept of commensurability between word and thing will interpret this term pejoratively, Gorgias empties it of its moral charge, like Nietzsche in his redefinition of “lies.”*²⁴

Vessela Valiavitcharska has recently contributed a new and original reading of Gorgias’s text. She begins by showing that most interpreters (whatever their other positions vis-à-vis Gorgias’s thought) are in agreement that, “for Gorgias *logos* (including his own) is at best incapable of representing any sort of truth or reality and, at worst, is bound to work in concert with deception.”²⁵ As an example of this approach to Gorgias, she adduces Charles Segal, who in a famous paper on Gorgias wrote that his “art is *deliberately* opposed to ‘truth’ and produces a *logos* which is τέχνη γραφείς, οὐκ ἀληθεία λεχθείς; but the rhetor uses the deception of τέχνη not because he necessarily spurns the truth, but because most men (οἱ πλείστοι) possess and communicate only δόξα and would not know truth if they had it.”²⁶ Although Valiavitcharska tends to lump Segal’s reading together with others’, it seems to me that his represents an extreme. He charges Gorgias with knowing that truth *is*, that there is truth, and thus with “deliberately” deceiving the reader or listener. Moreover, Segal writes from the quite Platonic assumption (shared by Valiavitcharska) that *doxa*, received or generally held opinion, is in itself deception. But Valiavitcharska, unlike Segal, wants to turn Gorgias into a virtual Plato: “I will argue the opposite view: that in the *Encomium* Gorgias does not see his own art as deception, nor does he think that it necessarily rests on opinion (δόξα), but he sees an intrinsic connection between truthful speech (ἀληθῆς λόγος) and correct speech (ὀρθὸς λόγος).”²⁷ In one sense, I think that Valiavitcharska is right—Gorgias does not see his art as deception—but it seems to me that Gorgias’s *Encomium* does not, as Valiavitcharska would have it, propose a solution to the problem it poses, but that, rather, via paradox, it exposes the impossibility of doing so. Gorgias sets out to deepen our appreciation of a problem forever with us.

I would like to build on these readings of the *Encomium* toward an interpretation of it as being (like Gorgias’s text *On Nature*) a parodic response to Parmenides. The *Encomium* appears to me, first, a critique of the binary opposition between persuasion and compulsion, and, second, a critique of the notion that logic can compel assent or belief. The question that Gorgias raises, the dilemma

24. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists*, 55, emphasis added. See also Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, “Gorgias, Aeschylus, and *Apate*,” *American Journal of Philology* 76.3 (1955): 225–60.

25. Vessela Valiavitcharska, “Correct *Logos* and Truth in Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*,” *Rhetorica* 24.2 (Spring 2006): 147.

26. Charles Segal, “Gorgias and the Psychology of the *Logos*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962): 112; emphasis added.

27. Valiavitcharska, “Correct *Logos*,” 149.

that he sets, is whether persuasion differs from force—whether, that is, there can be a rhetoric that leaves its audience free to choose between opposed positions, thus rendering the audience subject to moral and legal judgment. Gorgias’s test takes the form of an elegant paradox. Given that Helen is already in Troy at the outset of the *Iliad* and that Homer does not show us how she got there, the question of her culpability is obviously raised by the epic itself. Gorgias puts the question obliquely: “Who it was or why or how he took Helen and fulfilled his love, I shall not say. For to tell those who know something they know carries conviction, but it does not bring pleasure.” Instead Gorgias investigates Helen’s motivations for journeying to Troy. It is characteristic that fundamental questions of will and culpability are debated in antiquity on the bodies of women (and especially raped women; Lucretia is another example)—a point that should not be let slide.²⁸ Gorgias wishes to exonerate Helen of any blame that has been attached to her person and name, and he calls the attitude of those who blame her a “single-voiced, single-minded conviction.”

In the first paragraph of his text, Gorgias twice mentions “truth.” In the first sentence, in a list of *what counts as “ornament”* [κόσμος] to *what*, he says that wisdom is ornament to mind, excellence is ornament to action, and truth [ἀλήθεια] is ornament to speech. Given these parallels, then, Gorgias’s own speech, the very text that we are reading, must be adorned with truth to be good. Note that he uses the term *kosmos* to refer to the truthfulness of a *logos* and is, in this use, being deliberately provocative: Parmenides had used *kosmos* to name the false or merely decorative (*cosmetic*) aspect of rhetoric. Gorgias cannot mean *kosmos* in this negative sense, given the other examples of *kosmos* (wisdom of mind, excellence of action) that he lists. The text becomes quickly more complicated as, by the end of the first paragraph, we are enjoined to praise a speech that has the *kosmos* of truth—Gorgias had just listed truth as the *kosmos* of speech—and he furthermore asserts that any speech blaming Helen would be an untrue, lying speech [τοὺς δὲ μεμφομένους ψευδομένους]. By freeing the slandered woman from blame, Gorgias intends to produce a speech that has the *kosmos* of truth.

To accomplish this purpose, he adduces four possible causes for her actions. (1) She may have been forced by gods, acting on (in service to) their own desires. (2) She may have been being forced (raped) by a man. (3) She may have been persuaded by speeches [λόγοις πεισθεῖσα]. And (4) she may have been captivated by ineluctable desire [ἔρωτι ἀλοῦσα]. The first two are cases of compulsion [Ἀνάγκης], which even on Parmenides’s view would free a person from respon-

28. This discussion will be developed further in the first chapter of a book in progress, where I also will discuss Gorgias’s other important rhetorical text—his defense of Palamedes—and consider further the issues of gender raised by these texts.

sibility. The question that especially interests Gorgias is whether persuasion by speech is different from compulsion, in which case Helen’s free choice to leave Menelaus for Paris would condemn her. Gorgias argues, rather, that persuasion by speech is identical with compulsion:

If speech [*logos*] persuaded and deluded her mind, even against this it is not hard to defend her or free her from blame, as follows: speech is a powerful master and achieves the most divine feats with the smallest and least evident body. It can stop fear, relieve pain, create joy, and increase pity. How this is so, I shall show; and I must demonstrate this to my audience to change their opinion.²⁹

That last sentence, usually glossed over by commentators, is both exceedingly puzzling and exceedingly significant. The Greek reads: τὰ ὅσα δὲ ὡς οὐτως ἔχει δείξω, δεῖ δὲ καὶ δόξῃ δειξάαι τοῖς ἀκούουσι. Although Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff take the last clause to mean “change their opinion,” this paraphrase only smooths over the ambiguity. Rosemary Kent Sprague, translating more literally, offers, “it is necessary to offer proof to the opinion of my hearers,” which, to be sure, yields the sense of Gagarin and Woodruff’s translation, but not nearly as unambiguously. Instead of taking the dative in which the word *opinion* is cast as indirect object, Douglas MacDowell, on the other hand, translates the dative instrumentally: “I must prove it by opinion to my hearers.” MacDowell’s seems to me an attractive option, if not an ineluctable one, and I will accept it for my purposes here. Gorgias seems to be saying, at first glance, that he needs to do two separate things: prove the matter by means of logic, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, prove it by way of opinion. This seems to be how Charles Segal reads the passage, thus justifying his position that Gorgias knows that there is absolute truth but also knows that he must deceive the *hoi polloi* in order to persuade them. This interpretation of the words would lend support to those who accuse Gorgias of insincerity.

I would like to suggest a different interpretation of the relationship of the two clauses, namely that the second clause explicates the first. Gorgias is saying: I must prove this, and, moreover, do so via the opinion of my listeners (more literally, “through opinion to my listeners”)—i.e., by using what my listeners already believe.³⁰ This reading, which in any case makes better sense of the text, is important (though perhaps not crucial) for my argument, because this interpre-

29. Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 8–9.

30. This construal of the syntax is accepted by both Sprague and Gagarin/Wodruff in their translations, even though they construe the sentence differently in other respects, as I have already noted.

tation has Gorgias refusing to make a distinction between Truth (in Parmenides's exalted sense) and opinion. The proof that Gorgias goes on to construct follows best, it seems to me, on this interpretation. He argues that, since human beings do not and cannot possess memory of the past and understanding of the present and foreknowledge of the future, they cannot but depend on opinion. He argues, then, that since belief is precarious and unconfirmed [ἡ δὲ δόξα σφολερὰ καὶ ἀβέβαιος οὐσα], those who employ it have precarious and unconfirmed success. And since, in the case of Paris and Helen, "persuasion expelled sense; and indeed persuasion, though not having an appearance of compulsion, has the same power," Helen is blameless (12). This argument appears intended as a direct challenge to Parmenides's distinction between persuasion and compulsion. Not only is Parmenides's "rational compulsion" just compulsion *simpliciter*, even ordinary persuasion is mere compulsion by other means. In which case, Helen as a woman seduced is as blameless as she would be had she been raped. The grounds for her exoneration are the same: logos can be compulsive in just the way that physical force can be. After arguing that sexual desire can be compulsive as well, Gorgias announces that he has succeeded in his original aim: "to dispel injustice of blame and ignorance of belief." In the process, so he says, he has produced a speech [λογος] and a plaything [παίγνιον]—by which term, I would cautiously suggest, he means a paradox.

The paradox is formed step by step. First, Gorgias persuades us, his audience, that rhetoric disables the power to make decisions as completely as physical force does and that, to put it sharply, every seduction (including the seduction of Helen) is a rape. But if Gorgias successfully persuades us on this point, he undermines any moral force that his own practice of the art of persuasion can claim and thus also its power to exonerate, to be an *encomium*, at all. For, like a seducer himself, he must, on his own admission, prove his point by way of belief or opinion as much as by logic. But let me, for the sake of clarity, reframe the paradox. Segal argues that the text is an encomium of Helen but also an encomium of *logos* (rhetoric) and thus a "kind of advertisement of [Gorgias's] skills."³¹ However, just insofar as the text succeeds as a defense of Helen, it must fail as an advertisement for the moral value of rhetoric; yet to accomplish the latter is as much Gorgias's stated aim as to achieve the former. He has said that he wishes to display the *κοσμος* of speech, its truthfulness—having already argued that rhetoric is a drug, the use of which constitutes coercion (whether for good or ill), rather than persuasion. His text is thus a self-consuming artifact—a "plaything," as he calls it, though not because he is not deadly serious in his enterprise. The *Encomium of Helen* is among the greatest of ethical and political inquiries extant from antiquity, yet its approach is via a paradox that swallows its own tale [*sic*].

31. Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos,"

If we are not to take Gorgias as a moral nihilist or a cynic in the modern sense (as many do, to be sure), his text needs to be read in this paradoxical fashion. For Gorgias makes a set of assertions that seem mutually incompatible: (1) that the excellence of speech is truth, and that he intends to tell truth and dispel falsehood; (2) that he must prove his argument by using *doxa*; (3) that *doxa* is not reliable (and it was by *doxa* that Helen was compelled and is therefore blameless); and (4) that he has succeeded in his task. If he is not simply conceding that he is a deceiver, that his first statement of intent was a lie, and that all speech is deceit—as many interpreters, most notably Segal, would have it—then the paradox, even the *aporia*, of the relation of speech to truth is *the point of the text*. If Gorgias's text persuades us that Helen is innocent, it does so by convincing us that persuasion is the same as compulsion. But our own having been persuaded that this is the case must then be equally a matter of compulsion and equally based on opinion or belief, and thus equally unreliable. In which case, Helen may well be guilty. We cannot know truth; nothing *is*; and even if we did know the truth, and even if something *was*, we could not communicate that to others.

Inter alia, this reading of the *Encomium of Helen* has the beneficial effect of making that text fully compatible with *On Nature*. Through both parody and paradox (and the paradox is the therapy of—not an antidote for—the orthodox), Gorgias's text makes a brilliant case for undecidability.³² He is, I think, following his own advice to “demolish one's opponents' seriousness by humor, and their humor by seriousness,” but in this dialectic he is *both protagonist and antagonist*.³³ He thus shows the way toward a kind of dialogism in which a thesis and antithesis are not in a dialectical relation leading toward synthesis, but rather in a relation in which each calls the other into question, leaving both forever in place. Neither pole ever takes precedence over the other. Self-refutation is raised, by Gorgias, to an epistemological principle.

From a generic point of view, then, Gorgias's text seems most closely related to Zeno's paradoxes or the “paradox of the liar,” and Gorgias was of course a familiar of Zeno's.³⁴ An even stronger comparison would be to the famous paradoxical law case that Aulus Gellius says was brought by Protagoras.³⁵ According to the story, Protagoras took on a pupil in rhetoric who promised to pay for his lessons but only after winning his first court case. Since the student seemed eventually unwilling to pursue a legal career, thus leaving Protagoras unpaid,

32. Regarding parody, see Consigny, *Gorgias*, 30.

33. “As to jests. These are supposed to be of some service in controversy. Gorgias said that you should kill your opponents' earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness; in which he was right.” Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1419b 4–5.

34. For an example of the use of paradox in *philosophical* argument, see Jon Moline, “Aristotle, Eubulides and the Sorites,” *Mind* 78, n.s. 311 (July 1969): 393–407.

35. Aulus Gellius, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, trans. John Carew Rolfe, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1:405–409).

the teacher sued the pupil and claimed that, win or lose, he would collect his fee. If the student, Euathlus by name, lost the case, he would by law have to pay; and if he won, he would fulfill the terms of the contract with Protagoras and be required to pay on that basis. Euathlus countered that, in either case, he would not have to pay; for if he won, the court would absolve him of payment; while if he lost, the contractual terms would release him from paying. The court, according to some reports, retired and did not return for a hundred years. On one interpretation, Protagoras's goal in this wily scheme was not to win the case and collect his fees but something much more important; namely, to demonstrate his finding that, as Seneca paraphrased it, "Protagoras declares that one can take either side on any question and debate it with equal success—even on this very question, whether every subject can be debated from either point of view."³⁶ Likewise Gorgias, a contemporary of Protagoras, demonstrates by means of his *paignion* (his plaything, his toy) the deeply paradoxical nature of the distinction, so crucial to Parmenides, between persuasion and force.³⁷ Some support for this conjecture about the meaning of *paignion* may be found in the report that Monimus of Syracuse, one of the early Cynics, wrote "trifles [*paignia*] blended with covert seriousness," and that these *paignia* were "early examples of the 'seriocomic' style."³⁸ In any case, Demetrius reports the existence in Gorgias's time of a seriocomic style; and on the evidence of the *Encomium of Helen*, we might well say that Gorgias brought it to perfection.³⁹

In his antiphilosophical discourse, his parodic and paradoxical campaign against Parmenides, Gorgias is suggesting that Truth, in the Parmenidean sense, is itself a coercion; for if it persuades automatically, as Parmenides claimed, then there is no distinction between persuasion and force. Gorgias himself appears to have a relativist notion of "true *logos*" as the product of weighing alternatives and choosing which of them seems best under current circumstances. That sort of relativism would be contiguous with the thinking of Protagoras of Abdera, the other great Sophist of the fifth century, to whose writings I now turn.

36. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:375.

37. John Poulakos has already noted that by calling the speech a *paignion*, Gorgias would have been undermining its possibility of service simply as an advertisement for himself and for rhetorical training (John Poulakos, "Gorgias' *Encomium* to Helen and the Defense of Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 1 [Spring 1983]: 3).

38. Bracht R. Branham, and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, introduction to *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 10–11.

39. Demetrius, *Demetrius on Style: The Greek Text of Demetrius De Elocutione*, ed. W. Rhys Roberts (Hildesheim, Germany: G. Olms, 1969), 151.

Protagoras’s Pragmatism

Protagoras was an explicit antiphilosopher of the sort mocked by Badiou, and a relativist of the sort to which Joseph Ratzinger condescends. “Making the weaker cause the stronger”—that classic (and scandalous) term of Sophistic art—is Protagoras’s formulation (Corax and Tisias, to whom the phrase is sometimes attributed, being surely legendary). “Making the weaker cause the stronger” has generally been interpreted as making, by rhetorical means and from cynical motives, the worse decision or course of action seem the better of two being considered. So fraught with fraudulence had this term become that Aristophanes made it his charge against Socrates in *The Clouds* (and, of course, in that play Socrates is portrayed as precisely a Sophist). There is more than a hint in Plato’s *Apology* (18b) that this charge was a major cause of the trial of Socrates only a year or so after production of Aristophanes’ play.

For Aristotle, “making the weaker cause the stronger” is synecdochic of the entire rhetorical, Sophistic, eristic enterprise:

The *Art* of Corax is made up of this topic; for example, if a weak man were charged with assault, he should be acquitted as not being a likely suspect for the charge; for it is not probable [that a weak man would attack another]. And if he is a likely suspect, for example, if he is strong, [he should also be acquitted]; for it is not likely [that he would start the fight] for the very reason that it was going to seem probable. And similarly in other cases; for necessarily, a person is either a likely suspect or not a likely suspect for a charge. Both alternatives seem probable, but one really is probable, the other so not generally, only in the circumstances mentioned. And this is to “make the weaker seem the better cause.” Thus, people were rightly angry at the declaration of Protagoras; for it is a lie and not true but a fallacious probability and a part of no art except rhetoric and eristic. [1402a]⁴⁰

By glossing this passage, we can arrive, against Aristotle’s grain, at a more sympathetic reading of the topos that he assaults. For Aristotle, rendering the weaker cause or case the stronger is a kind of lie. To assume so, however, as the tradition of authoritarian philosophy generally does, is to assume that we can and do know in advance which of two causes is the better. Aristotle must assume as well that the Sophist or rhetor also knows which is the better cause; and thus it is that the practice of rhetoric is said to consist of slyly overturning the truth with a lie, making the weaker cause *seem* the better one.⁴¹ It is this understanding of Sophistic

40. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George Alexander Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 210.

41. Cf. the discussion of epistemological confidence in Mark Douglas Given, *Paul’s True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 34.

rhetoric that has motivated philosophical disdain for Sophism from Plato's day to the present.

However, Aristotle's statement contains a bit of an interpretive puzzle. In the beginning, he discusses a *topos* or enthymeme, allegedly formulated by Corax. But then Aristotle speaks of "people" being "rightly angry at the declaration of Protagoras," apparently in reference to an incident that, later, Diogenes Laertius would narrate as the cause of Protagoras's deportation and consequent death. However, τὸ Πρωταγόρου ἐπάγγελμα is not a declaration; it is a practice, and moreover it is attributed by Aristotle (or so it seems) to Corax rather than to Protagoras. Presumably, then, Aristotle refers to some declaration, of Protagoras that is associated with (or productive of, or derived from) the practice of making the weaker cause the stronger.

As George Kennedy points out, there are two candidates for a declaration of Protagoras's that could have aroused the ire of the Athenian *demos*.⁴² Not choosing between them, but reading the two together as pieces of a theoretical whole, will further my exploration here. The first of this pair is the (in)famous opening sentence of Protagoras's lost treatise *On the Gods*, as reported by Diogenes Laertius and a host of ancient witnesses (Plato is the earliest of these but affords only an allusion or partial quotation [*Thaetetus* 162d]). The fullest version of the statement, as formulated in Diogenes, reads: "Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life."⁴³ According to Diogenes (and Philostratus), it was owing precisely to this statement that Protagoras was exiled from Athens.⁴⁴ Edward Schiappa, however, shows that there is little reason to credit this story. Moreover, he demonstrates (following Werner Jaeger) that this fragment is not a statement of agnosticism or atheism, as it is frequently taken to be, but rather the statement of a human-centered (or anthropological) origin for religion, denying only that theology provides knowledge useful for deciding philosophical matters.⁴⁵ In the literature on this fragment, most to the point (or to my point) is Jaap Mansfield's insight that, "as soon as an important thinker says that the notion of 'gods' is epistemologically irrelevant as far as he is concerned, this cannot but

42. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 210 n. 254.

43. Regarding the phrase "obscurity of the subject," Schiappa writes: "What Protagoras had in mind as 'the obscurity of the subject' is difficult to say. *Adēlotēs*, translated above as 'obscurity,' can also imply uncertainty, to be in the dark about, or not evident to sense. One can imagine a number of reasons why the gods are a 'subject' too obscure to reason about confidently" (Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991], 143). Diels

and Sprague, *Older Sophists*, 20. Schiappa has compared this last phrase "the shortness of man's life" with Empedocles' claim that life is too short to acquire knowledge of "the whole." Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 143.

44. Diels and Sprague, *Older Sophists*, 4, 6.

45. Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 144–48.

have far-reaching consequences for his notion of ‘man’.⁴⁶ Moreover, given that the content of Protagoras’s statement is epistemological, the shift in the notion of “man” involved also must have to do with human knowing or not-knowing. In Badiou’s terms, the statement must involve a “truth procedure.”

Which brings us to Protagoras’s “man is the measure” fragment, the second of the statements attributed to him that could have angered the Athenians. The notorious fragment reads: “Of all things, the human is the measure; of that which is, that it is, and of that which is not, that it is not.”⁴⁷ A myriad of philological and philosophical issues are involved in interpreting this passage properly.⁴⁸ But for my argument here it is crucial only to note a close relation between, on the one hand, the denial that there is human knowledge of gods and, on the other hand, the insistence that subjective or relative human perception is the only criterion for knowledge.⁴⁹ If we take the two statements together (which is rarely done), we can see an epistemological theory, though perhaps an inchoate one, begin to emerge. Since the gods are epistemologically irrelevant—there may very well be gods, but we do not know anything about them—there is no criterion other than human perception by which judgments can be made.⁵⁰ In other words, the focus of each of Protagoras’s two most famous statements is epistemological and moves toward avowal of a kind of indeterminacy principle. In any given forensic contest or metaphysical inquiry, since (1) we know nothing of the gods and (2) human experience is the measure of truth, there can be no determination of absolute truth by means of logic alone. Understanding these two statements together, it is clear why Protagoras “was the first to say that on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other.”⁵¹

It is worth risking anachronism to observe how close this position is to the “critical legal” canon of indeterminacy. In Michael Dzialo’s formulation of

46. Jaap Mansfield, “Protagoras on Epistemological Obstacles and Persons,” in *The Sophists and Their Legacy*, ed. G. B. Kerferd (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), 43.

47. καὶ ὁ Π. δὲ βούλεται πάντων χρημάτων εἶναι μέτρον τὸν ἄνθρωπον τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν, in Sextus’s formulation. Once again, we have as well an earlier Platonic citation of the principle. Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 258.

48. For which, see Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 117–33. My book in progress on this subject will go into these issues in detail.

49. For this distinction, see Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 129–30.

50. Protagoras continued to worship the gods and follow other religious observances: one might imagine, then, at Athens, an early version of Pascal’s wager; but if

so, it would seem to have been more sophisticated than Pascal’s. On perception as knowledge and its relation to the Protagorean dictum according to Plato, see *Thaetetus* 152A–160D.

51. The translation I have provided of Καὶ πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις (Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 9.51) is traditional. Schiappa discusses at length the problem that this translation reduces “all sophistic teaching to rhetoric” (Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 90), by which he means rhetoric as sort of a charter for debating societies that maintain any assertion is arguable. I do not want to reduce the complexity of Schiappa’s compelling discussion, but suffice it to say that by the end of it Protagoras’s statement is shown to make a profound philosophical point (Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 91–100). Schiappa also finds Protagoras on the side of Heraclitus against Parmenides (Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos*, 92).

it, “legal doctrine can never determine a legal outcome because every argument in favor of a particular outcome can be met with an equally valid counterargument.”⁵² Risking anachronism, again, in a good cause, I think it is safe to say that Aristotle would not have embraced this modern canon. For Aristotle, there is generally a weaker cause and a stronger, and he sees a direct entailment between Protagoras’s epistemology—or rather, the two snippets we have been considering—and the Sophistic practice of making the weaker cause the stronger. What is that entailment? I want to answer this question in a way that credits, rather than discredits, Sophism. A Sophist presumably would say that, in any given disagreement, one side or the other may *appear* to have the stronger case at the outset. Aristotle does not acknowledge the problem of appearance—of *apparent* strength and *apparent* weakness in arguments; hence he misses what should be an obvious reading of Protagoras’s remark about strong and weak causes. Protagoras is at least as likely, and probably more likely, to have meant that rhetoric, properly practiced, makes a cause that *appears* weak *at first* seem, in the end, the stronger of the two under consideration.⁵³

An excellent example of this practice would be Gorgias’s defense of Helen which, “by introducing some reasoning into the debate” [λογισμὸν τινα τῷ λόγῳ δούζ], seeks to overturn the “single-voiced, single-minded conviction [ὁμόφωνος καὶ ὁμόψυχος] [that has] arisen about this woman.”⁵⁴ We can ascribe serious ethical and political force to this Protagorean practice, for it can bring into doubt what appears to be, but may well not be, a truth. The truth that Protagoras would reveal, however, is not, as it would be for Parmenides or Plato, the real truth, the really real, or *episteme*. The truth that a Sophist labors to reveal is truth as seen from the perspective of an educated *doxa* and in the interest of an educated judgment being made about probabilities in a given situation. As Johan Vos has shown, Sophistic practice “says nothing about the true or intrinsic values of the arguments. An argument can be weaker simply because the majority do not accept it or because the opponent has better argumentative skills.”⁵⁵ Following this reasoning, there is no need to suppose that the “weaker cause” is

52. Michael G. Dzialo, “Legal and Philosophical Fictions: At the Line Where the Two Become One,” *Argumentation* 12.2 (May 1998): 217.

53. Thus, I disagree with Poulakos when he writes that “the familiar depiction of the sophists as teachers of poeticized prose and performative skill seems warranted. Indeed, they did not claim that the weaker argument *is* the stronger argument; only that they could make the weaker argument *appear* stronger. That they should have done so is not a sign of questionable designs on unsuspecting audiences, but a mark of the well-defined motivation to deceive—a motivation tied to the pleasure of speak-

ing” (John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995], 45). *With friends like this, who needs enemies*, I can imagine Protagoras protesting.

54. Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 2.

55. Johan S. Vos, “To Make the Weaker Argument Defeat the Stronger: Sophistical Argumentation in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts*, ed. Anders Eriksson, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Übelacker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 217–18.

the ethically, theologically, or politically less worthy one. In a situation of epistemological uncertainty, the weaker cause—for instance, raising the poor out of poverty—might demand the attentions of a rhetorician to make it stronger than the cause of laissez-faire economics. Rhetoric, like any other practice of speech (including dialectical argumentation), is in itself ethically neutral. The “weaker cause” is not necessarily the philosophically weaker one, let alone the one ethically inferior. To say, then, as commentators from Aristophanes and Plato forward have done, that rhetoric makes for a fancy and fallacious defense of inferior causes is, at best, parodic of Sophistic theory and practice. The scandal of the Sophists, as I have called it, is that they have been so consistently slandered.

The practice of Sophism and the Platonic reaction to it are well described by Richard Enos:

Gorgias was the beneficiary not only of the theory of probability but also of a philosophical tradition that would establish tenets for support of his anti-Platonic view of rhetoric. A generation before Gorgias, Zeno formalized the notion of securing contrary conclusions from shared premises and established the dialectical method of arguing from contrary positions (Diogenes Laertius 8.57.9.25; Plato *Sophista* 216A, *Phaedrus* 261D; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1355A–B, *Topica* ff.). This system of inquiry proceeds from premises that are not agreed upon; the conclusions result in a choice of probable positions. Thus, contrary to the dialectic of Plato (*Parmenides* 128A; *Phaedrus* 261 D,E, ff.), conclusions expose contradictory positions in relative degrees of strength. The apparent incompatibility of these paradoxical and antithetical positions prompted Plato to dismiss such notions as avoiding a quest for absolute knowledge (*Phaedrus* 261D) and attempting to confuse appearance with reality. Plato’s objection to the philosophical implications of Gorgias’s rhetoric concentrated upon the charge that such inquiries did not seek knowledge as a realization of virtue (*Gorgias* 455A). Consequently the inherent worth of rhetoric could in no way compare with that of the “art” of philosophy, which avoids deception and seeks truth (*Phaedrus* 262B,C) by examining knowledge of first principles (*Phaedrus* 272D). Plato saw an unbridgeable gap between the examination of certain knowledge leading to virtue and the “deception” inherent in the relativism of sophistic rhetoric.⁵⁶

Or as Jarratt puts roughly the same point: “Under the epistemology attributed to Protagoras in *Thaetetus* and revealed by other fragments, *dissoi logoi* are unavoidable outcomes of any group discourse.”⁵⁷

Relativism, it should be clear even from this brief glance at its intellectual

56. Enos, *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle*, 77–78.

57. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists*, 49.

origins, has a much more ancient and dignified pedigree and purpose than Cardinal Ratzinger allows it. Relativism appears, indeed, to antedate the notions of absolute truth that mobilize his attack on it. Moreover, far from being a counsel to follow every wind that blows (which is the basic metaphor in Ratzinger's characterization, or rather caricature), relativism is a counsel to weigh competing alternatives painstakingly and then choose the best one—not because it is absolutely true, but because it seems the best to the careful, good, and serious people doing that weighing and taking those pains. If asked to advise undergraduates how to get the most out of their educations, I would not suggest, as David Brooks does, reading the *Gorgias* of Plato—a text that teaches absolutism (by means of its rational arguments) and slander (through the example of its own rhetoric). An undergraduate would do much better to read Gorgias himself (along with Protagoras), whose fragmentary texts develop rationales for broadly cooperative and carefully deliberative processes in situations of uncertainty, which are the situations, after all, in which human beings typically live. I mean processes like jury trials, legislative debates, and indeed papal elections, in none of which the assumption of absolute truth can be anything but a hindrance. What we need is a Sophistic model of relativism that does not devolve into an *I'm OK, you're OK* tyranny over all commitment and passion, yet that provides, at the same time, an alternative to tyrannies of commitment—of commitment to any of the very many varieties on offer of the One and Only Absolute Truth.