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## Definition and Division in Plato's *Sophist*

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### I Introduction

In Plato's late dialogues *Sophist* and *Politicus* (*Statesman*), we find the chief speaker, the Eleatic Stranger, pursuing the task of definition with the help of the so-called method of division. This procedure, together with that of collection, had been described in the well-known passage which comes late in the dialogue *Phaedrus*. After delineating the pair of procedures, Socrates there goes on to claim that he himself was a lover of 'divisions and collections' and that he called those who followed the procedures dialecticians.

A major preoccupation of many of the earlier dialogues, where Socrates is chief speaker, is that of finding the answer to the question: What is it? Plenty of indications are given of what makes for a satisfactory answer to such a question. A good definition of F must give that one thing which is common to all and only Fs, and which is that *through* which all the Fs are F. A definition must give the 'what it is', the essence of F, i.e. that which explains why all the Fs are F. These connections between definition, essence, and explanation are well known. In *Republic* the nature of dialectic is expounded at some length. In addition to many contested features, including the requirement that dialectic be pursued entirely by the intellect with no input from the senses, that it must use hypotheses in a certain way and reach an unhypothetical beginning—the knowledge of the Form of the Good, readers find a familiar feature reiterated, and said now to belong to the method of dialectic: *it's the enquiry which attempts, for each thing just by itself, to grasp what that thing is* (533b2–3). A page later: 'do you call dialectical

the person who grasps a *logos* of the being of each thing? . . . Of course' (534b3–7). In *Republic*, then, for all its grander and more elaborate metaphysical ambitions, dialectic still involves, at least in part, that search for the essence described and pursued in the earlier dialogues. What *Republic* adds (*Rep.* 537c) is the point that the dialectician must be *sunoptikos*, capable of an overview of reality, of discerning the structure of the whole.

So it is natural to ask whether the earlier ideas of what makes a good definition are retained in stretches of argument found in *Sophist* and *Politicus*, the dialogues which approach their targets using the method of division. Does a correct definition-by-division, expounded in a long formula (incorporating the genus and all the sub-branches down to the thing defined), satisfy the requirements on a definition with which a reader of the earlier dialogues of Plato has become familiar? In particular, is there still a conviction that a good definition must give the essence of the thing defined, in a manner connecting essence with explanation?

However, there are major and well-known problems in evaluating the method as practised in the two dialogues, but especially so in the *Sophist*. The project of defining the sophist/sophistry (these are taken to be equivalent in effect) occupies the outer parts of the work. Replete with humour, mockery, and absurdity, seven definitions in all are provided, each presented as giving *what the sophist is*. They are (D1) a paid hunter of young men who purports to teach excellence; (D2) a travelling salesman of knowledge; (D3) a stay-at-home retailer of products for the soul, whether produced by others, or (D4) by himself; (D5) a combative controversialist who deals in disputation for money; (D6) an educator who separates better from worse, revealing contradiction through cross-questioning; and finally (D7) a producer of images in men's souls, an imitator of the wise person, who is aware of his own ignorance when teaching via private cross-questionings. The first five locate sophistry in one or other branch of acquisitive art (*technē*); the sixth makes the sophist a kind of cleanser of false opinions, while the seventh (after the long and philosophically far more satisfying interlude on not-being and falsehood) declares the sophist to be a certain kind of producer of images.<sup>1</sup> I investigate below some of the many scholarly responses to this

<sup>1</sup> For D1–D6 see the résumé at *Soph.* 231c9–e6. Most commentators regard D6 as portraying the method of Socrates, and not, therefore, as to be read as any kind of account of a sophist. However, Crivelli (2004) denies D6 is supposed to portray Socratic method, while Taylor (2006) holds that it does, and thereby portrays Socrates as a sophist.

bewildering display of the much-vaunted method of division. I divide scholars into a ‘no-faction’, those who hold that we should not try to discern, in any or all of the dialogue’s definitions, a positive outcome to the investigation into what sophistry is (Ryle, Cherniss), and a ‘yes-faction’: those who think an outcome is to be found (Moravcsik, Cornford, and others).<sup>2</sup> I shall conclude that in spite of the appearance of many answers (Moravcsik) or one answer (Cornford, Notomi), the reader is not to think that any of the definitions give the (or a) correct account of what sophistry is. But while I side with the no-faction, my reasons differ from those of Ryle and Cherniss, who, in their different ways, located the failure in the nature of the method of division. In my view the failure lies not, or not primarily, in the method of division itself, but in the object chosen for discussion and definition. Sophistry, the sophist: these are not appropriate terms to be given a serious definition, for the simple reason that a sophist is not a genuine kind that possesses an essence to be discerned.<sup>3</sup> If we try to carve nature at the joints, we cannot hope to find that part of reality which is sophistry, for there is no such genuine kind as sophistry—especially not under the genus of *techne*, art, skill, or expertise.

## II Preliminaries on the Method of Division

Here is how the method of division is described in *Phaedrus*. After a brief description of ‘collection’ Socrates goes on to describe another procedure, division, as:

Soc. The reverse of the other, whereby we are enabled to divide into forms, following the objective articulation {literally: according to the joints}; we are not to attempt to hack off parts like a clumsy butcher . . . (*Phaedr.* 265e, tr. Hackforth)

Soc. Believe me, Phaedrus, I am a lover of these divisions and collections, that I may gain the power to speak and to think; and whenever I deem another man able

<sup>2</sup> The views of Moravcsik, Cornford, and Notomi are discussed in the text of section III; those of the ‘no-faction’ in note 17.

<sup>3</sup> I use ‘genuine kind’ to indicate something with a wider extension than that of ‘natural kind’ familiar from Locke, Putnam, etc. I use it to mean the kind of entity which Plato would allow to have an *ousia* (essence) or *phusis* (nature) of its own (cf. *Tht.* 172b). Virtues, senses like hearing and sight, and crafts like angling would be recognized as genuine kinds in the intended sense.

to discern an objective unity and plurality, I follow in his footsteps where he leadeth as a god . . . those who have this ability I call dialecticians. (ibid. 266b)

*Taxonomy or Definition?*

As announced in the above passage of *Phaedrus*, the method seems designed to produce a synoptic view of a whole as it is divided into its natural parts. The method is apparently fitted to the goal of displaying a taxonomic, classificatory scheme, showing how an abstract whole has internal divisions; what those subdivisions are and how they are related to each other and to the whole.<sup>4</sup> So is the method one of taxonomy, that is, finding all the species of a genus, and showing their interrelations? So it seems in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates' two speeches had made a start on displaying the different kinds of madness, *mania*, and locating love as one of these. Or is its goal definition: the careful delineation of a single species, found by successive subdivisions of a very general kind? Even if we do not go so far as Pellegrin<sup>5</sup> in finding a complete dichotomy between the *Phaedrus*' use of the method for taxonomy, and that in *Sophist* and *Politicus* for definition, it must be agreed that the use in *Sophist* and *Politicus* is predominantly for definition, not taxonomic classification.<sup>6</sup> That is, it is interested not in delineating the whole tree-structure, but in locating its target—the kind under investigation—at the end node of just one branch. But this is especially puzzling, for several reasons. First, when the method is introduced at *Phaedrus* 266, in connection with discerning all the kinds (branches) of madness, the terminology suggests that classification—that is, setting out the whole structure, with all the branches—is its prime use. Second, this fits well with the burgeoning interest in a synoptic understanding, and with the explicit interest in the interrelations of kinds both described and manifested in the central part of the *Sophist*.<sup>7</sup> And finally, recall the opening of the *Sophist*.

<sup>4</sup> *Gorgias* 463a–c, often thought to be an early appearance of the method of division, presents the interrelations of two pairs of four arts or pseudo-arts.

<sup>5</sup> Pellegrin (1986) p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> It is true that at some points, e.g. 266a–d, a rather elaborate taxonomy is offered, but overwhelmingly the focus is on dividing down until a definition of the sophist is reached. See especially 264d11–265a2 for a description of the procedure's aim.

<sup>7</sup> I do not discuss the complex passage at 254c–e, where the ES presents a cryptic and much contested account of dialectic. See Gomez-Lobo (1977) and (1981), with Waletzki (1979). I accept the overall conclusion of Ackrill (1997, p. 96) (against Ryle) that this passage shows that Plato saw 'at least a close connection between division and the philosophical task of mapping the interrelations of concepts'. Cf. n. 17.

The query posed by Socrates to the Eleatic Stranger, which sets the agenda for *Sophist* and *Politicus*, concerns these three: sophist, statesman, philosopher. Socrates asks what view the people of Elea take on the question: Do we have here three names for just one kind, or is each different from the other? (*Soph.* 217a). The question is made to arise from curiosity about the Stranger himself, and from Socrates' odd claim that real philosophers wander from city to city like the *Odyssey's* gods<sup>8</sup> in disguise, appearing sometimes as sophists, sometimes as statesmen, and taking on other guises too because of the ignorance of the onlookers (216c–d). In linking the *Sophist* dramatically with the *Theaetetus* (a dialogue full of intertextual references to the *Apology* and whose closing lines recall the impending trial of Socrates), Plato has reminded the reader of the fatal consequences of confusing philosopher with sophist.<sup>9</sup> What we expect, then, is a systematic exploration of the relations between the three types. And the method of division, which can lay out a map of interrelated kinds, displaying interconnections in a particularly helpful way, might seem well suited to the project of displaying the relations between the three. Instead, however, the method is used—at least ostensibly—primarily to 'define' the sophist and the statesman in their respective dialogues; it is not used to explore and display the relations of one to the other, for which at best a few hints are given.<sup>10</sup> Why not? Once again, I shall argue that the answer lies in the nature of the objects of enquiry, sophist, and statesman, and their relation to the philosopher. In particular, I shall argue that sophistry at least is not a genuine *techné*.

#### *Some Questions of Terminology, Logic, and Ontology*

Plato designates the procedure that of dividing *kat'eide* or *kata gene*; dividing into (or according to) forms or kinds. Below I defend the translation of *kata* 'into'; first some points about the terms *eidos* (form), *genos* (kind), and *meros* (part). An exchange between Moravcsik and Marc Cohen<sup>11</sup> explored the question whether these terms should be taken extensionally or intensionally: are what gets divided classes or properties or what? But, as both authors agree, neither a fully extensional nor a fully intensional reading of the key

<sup>8</sup> *Odyssey* 17, 485–7.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Frede (1996), Long (1998), Sedley (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Hints in final division at 268c–d, cf. section IV; also 253e–254a, a passage which does distinguish sophist from philosopher but not via a division, referred to in VI below.

<sup>11</sup> Both in Moravcsik (ed.) (1973).

terms is possible.<sup>12</sup> In addition, it is clear that Plato often uses the terms *eidōs* (form) and *genos* (kind) interchangeably, and in particular that he uses both labels for his method—dividing *kat'eide*, and dividing *kata gene*—without intending any distinction between them. That the terms *genos* and *eidōs* may be used interchangeably rules out what might otherwise be an attractive line of interpretation of the ontology of division—one whereby *gene* are classes and *eide* the properties according to which classes are divided.

The term part (*meros*) is also used, like *eidōs* and *genos*, for the product of a division, and like them, for something that can itself be further subdivided. *Pol.* 262–3 contains a famous distinction drawn by the Stranger (hereafter ES) between *eidōs* and *meros* (form and part), such that any *eidōs* is also a *meros*, but the converse does not hold. ‘Barbarian’ (says the ES) names a part (*meros*) of the human kind which is *not* also a form, presumably because it does not pick out a genuine kind, but is a label for all non-Greek races, ‘unlimited in number, . . . and sharing no common language’. Later I shall exploit this distinction into terms which name forms, i.e. genuine kinds, and those which do not, by arguing (as I have already indicated) that Plato may well have expected the reader to reflect that ‘sophist’, too, does not name a genuine kind. But in *Sophist* itself the results of a division may be labelled forms and parts (*eide* and *mere*) interchangeably.<sup>13</sup>

To turn to the meaning of *kata* in the locution: dividing *kat'eide* or *kata gene*, or *kata mere*, found in *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, and *Philebus*. This is commonly translated ‘according to forms’ (or kinds, or parts, depending on the term following *kata*). Though this is a perfectly common meaning for *kata* with accusative, indeed more common than the well-attested distributive sense of ‘into’, I am convinced that the translation ‘into’ is to be preferred.<sup>14</sup> But not a lot hangs on this, since division of a whole into

<sup>12</sup> An extensional reading is ruled out by the fact that the ‘kinds’ *being*, *same*, and *different* would be only one kind if kind = class, since *ex hypothesi* anything which is is also the same (as itself) and different (from everything else). A fully intensional reading is difficult, given the terminology of parts; footed creature is part of creature, but if we stick with intensions, the converse is true: *creature* is a part of the intension *footed creature*.

<sup>13</sup> 223c6–7 is a particularly clear example.

<sup>14</sup> Confirmed by *Phdr.* 265e quoted above: division is *kat'eide* (into forms) according to the articulations (*kat' arthra*). See LSJ, s.v. *kata* B II, and Kühner–Gerth II.1, p. 323 n. 5. It might be objected that we divide according to some distinguishing mark or property, and the result of the division is something marked off by that distinguishing mark; and further that forms, *eide*, fit the former role better than the latter. Hence, the argument continues, dividing *kat'eide* should be translated *according to forms*. But we have already seen that Plato does *not* reserve the term *eidōs* for the principle of division. See also next note.

forms (or kinds) is never a *de novo* division, rather, it is a division of a whole into *its* forms (or its kinds), just as the butcher divides a carcass into its parts, according to the joints, i.e. the place at which the limbs join.<sup>15</sup> Correct dividing into forms is presented as a matter of *discerning* pre-existing distinctions in the subject, and, to that extent, dividing according to those distinctions. But it is this very presumption that raises the most acute difficulties for understanding the method of division, especially as demonstrated in *Sophist*. For the metaphor of cutting up a carcass into parts according to its joints strongly suggests both that the divisions are objective, and (though less definitely) that there is only one correct way to divide a given subject-matter. But when the Stranger claims to discern divisions in *Sophist* and *Politicus*, these often seem arbitrary, whimsical, or designed to make a particular point. And, as we shall see, not only do the different definitions of sophistry locate it in different branches of *techne* (first in the acquisitive and later in the productive branch), but, more seriously, two quite different first cuts in the concept of *techne* are made in the two dialogues. In *Sophist* we are told that all *technai* are either acquisitive or productive; in *Politicus* that all are either practical or theoretical.<sup>16</sup> To sum up, Plato characterizes division as into kinds or into forms, using these terms interchangeably. Correctly done, and on an appropriate subject-matter, the division follows the objective articulation of the subject-matter; that is, we divide a kind into its pre-existing sub-kinds or forms.

### III Obstacles to Finding a Successful Outcome in the Search for the Sophist via the Method of Division

In this section I explore and criticize a range of views that claim to discern a successful outcome to the search for the sophist.<sup>17</sup> On one view, that of

<sup>15</sup> It might be objected that it *does* matter how we translate *kata*, since that *according to* which we divide (a distinguishing property, say) cannot be the same as that *into which*, the result of the division, the part (whether understood extensionally or intensionally) marked off by the property. But it is clear that Plato is happy to use the same term for the principle of division as for the result of division. For a clear example see *Pol.* 262, where dividing number by the odd and the even yields two forms, the odd and the even. See Cavini (1995) on the logic and terminology of *diairesis*.

<sup>16</sup> See section V below.

<sup>17</sup> Ryle (1966) and Cherniss (1944) are among those who deny a positive outcome. Ryle found the outer core of the *Sophist* with its definitions by division so tedious that he concluded that for Plato

Moravcsik, the presence of six or seven *logoi* of the sophist (Moravcsik eschews the word ‘definition’ here) is explained by their being, each of them, a *correct unique characterization of sophistry*. Just as there are several correct ways of uniquely identifying the number two, so also with sophistry. ‘The existence of a plurality of divisions is in no way an argument against their being grounded in reality’ (Moravcsik 1973, p. 166). If such a development in Plato’s views on definition had indeed occurred, such that he no longer searches for the single essence, but for one or more unique characterizations, this would be of considerable interest. But the evidence of the *Sophist*—the six or seven ‘definitions’ of the sophist—does not vindicate this claim by Moravcsik, as I now show.

The problem for Moravcsik’s view is that several of the definitions contain inconsistent elements. The major inconsistencies are (a) in the content of the teaching/peddling ascribed to the sophist and (b) more seriously, in the branch of *techne* in which sophistry is located. On the first point, the first four *logoi* explicitly confine the subject of the sophist’s dealings to matters concerning virtue, and this is echoed in the fifth *logos* where the focus is on *antilogike*, the art of controverting, and the subject-matter is confined to matters of justice and injustice. But the run-up to the seventh *logos*, despite it being a development from the notion of the sophist as controversialist, explicitly extends his range to speaking and controverting on *all things*. The argumentation has many oddities—I mention one of them below—but for now we notice simply the flat inconsistency in the alleged field of the sophist. If it be replied that the subject-matter of sophistry is not essential to it, it remains strange that this inconsistency is so prominent, and it remains true that inconsistent characterizations cannot all be correct ones.

A more important inconsistency derives from the initial division of *techne* into acquisitive and productive—a division I explore later—together with

‘constructing kind-ladders’ was a mere propaedeutic to genuine philosophy, i.e. dialectic as seen at work in the central section of the dialogue. But in so doing Ryle rode roughshod over the difficult passage at 253c–e. Against Ryle, Ackrill (1997) convincingly demonstrates that 253c–e, in the heart of the central section of the dialogue, presents the method of division as a seamless whole with the investigation of the greatest kinds which forms of the central part of the *Sophist*. Cherniss held that in the *Sophist* and *Politicus* the method is ‘a useful means of narrowing the field of search but the formal method alone may lead one to any number of definitions of the same thing unless one has the additional power of recognising the essential nature that is being sought’. (Here Cherniss quotes *Soph.* 231c–232a.) He concludes that ‘diagnosis appears to be only an aid to reminiscence of the idea’.



the fact that Definitions 1–5 locate sophistry within acquisitive *technē*, while the seventh proclaims it to be a branch of productive art.<sup>18</sup> If, as the evidence suggests, all divisions are intended to be exclusive, even where not exhaustive, it follows that sophistry cannot be truly characterized both as a branch of acquisitive art and as a branch of productive art.

But are divisions intended to be exclusive? While this has been denied,<sup>19</sup> the evidence in the *Sophist* and *Politicus* strongly suggests that Plato envisages that one and the same kind cannot appear on both sides of a given division. Consider, for instance, the initial division of *technai* into acquisitive and productive. The very definition of acquisitive art at 219c1–8 includes the clause ‘does not produce (*demiourgei*) anything, but. . . .’ In other words, to be acquisitive is to be not productive. Excluding ‘producing’ from the acquisitive art is striking, especially since the ES tells us that one kind of acquirer, the stay-at-home retailer of D4, may make the products he sells. The very practice of asking, ‘Are we to place X in A or B?’ strongly suggests that these are seen to be exclusive; the interlocutor is never offered the option of finding the desired kind in both branches of a given division. If I am right that division is always exclusive, Plato cannot have held that sophistry belongs in both the acquisitive and productive branches of *technē*.

But the ES makes it quite plain that the seventh and final attempt starts in a different branch, the productive, even though the discussion of the sophist as a producer of images (D7) emerges from the idea of him as an expert in refutation (D5), allegedly a branch of acquisitive art. He does so at 265a8, remarking that earlier the sophist had put in an appearance for us in various parts of the acquisitive art. (This is the oddity I mentioned above.) Those who believe we are to see some truth about the nature of the sophist in all seven (or even in all but the sixth) cannot surmount this difficulty: however tricky a character the sophist is, sophistry cannot have incompatible properties. I conclude that by having the ES emphasize that the last definition starts from a different branch of *technē* from the earlier ones, Plato is signalling that something is amiss, and at the very least that we are not to see all seven (or all except D6) as true characterizations, let alone definitions, of ‘the sophist’. Of course, each might have been correct as a characterization of a *type* of

<sup>18</sup> See section I for a résumé of the seven definitions. I ignore for now the problematic sixth definition of the sophist as a practitioner of the *elenchus*, which places sophistry in a third branch of *technē*, the separative.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen in Moravcsik (1973), p. 189.

sophist. Indeed, the different definitions remind us of the very different kinds of intellectual who get labelled ‘sophist’ in earlier dialogues. Definitions 1–4, which present the sophist as a paid teacher of virtue, and as a seller of knowledge of a variety of kinds, recall Protagoras, Hippias, and others from *Protagoras*. D5, the sophist as *antilogikos*, one who engages in disputation, invokes those very different types, the brothers in the *Euthydemus*. Henry Sidgwick noted how little in common the first group (‘windy declaimers’ or ‘professors of conduct’) have with the ‘shifty disputers’ of the second type, apart from the mere label ‘sophist’.<sup>20</sup> Bearing this in mind, we might well expect the ES to offer us different, and even incompatible accounts of different *types* of sophist.

But this is not how he presents his findings. As noted above, sophistry is consistently treated as the *endpoint* of a division, as something to be divided down to, not as a generic kind whose branches are to be discerned. The definitions present themselves as definitions of ‘the sophist’, and not of various types of sophist. So the problem for Moravcsik’s view remains: the seven accounts cannot all be true characterizations of ‘the sophist’—which is how they are presented.

What of the other line which finds a successful outcome, discerning it in the last definition only? This is the view favoured by Cornford,<sup>21</sup> and by Notomi (though the latter’s discussion is highly nuanced and finds a different role for the six earlier divisions).<sup>22</sup> The diagram below shows this last ‘definition’, together with the ‘cuts’ leading to it.

I briefly rehearse many puzzling features of this last definition, to display how unlikely it is that it is supposed to represent the essence of sophistry. First, all the earlier aspects of sophistry as acquisitive and specifically agonistic are dropped. The second puzzle arises from the distinction at 235d–e between

<sup>20</sup> Sidgwick (1872). See also Irwin (1995), who accepts much of Sidgwick’s position but seeks to find more common ground than Sidgwick allows between the two groups of sophist.

<sup>21</sup> Cornford (1935, p. 187): ‘the first six divisions actually, though not formally, serve the purpose of a collection preliminary to the seventh. They bring before us the types to be surveyed before we can fix on the really fundamental character of Sophistry.’ He also speaks of discovering ‘the really fundamental trait, the generic form that will finally yield the correct definition of the essence of Sophistry’ and of ‘the final serious analysis of the essential sophist’.

<sup>22</sup> ‘[T]he first five definitions represent at least some aspects of the sophist’s art, and hence they can be regarded as true appearances seen from certain viewpoints . . . The final definition . . . will be the true appearance, namely the likeness of the sophist, which the philosophical inquiry finally attains’ (Notomi 1999, pp. 277–8). In places (e.g. pp. 85–7, 300) Notomi shares my reservations about whether sophistry is a *techné*; elsewhere (pp. 43, 46) he is content to speak of the essence of sophistry.

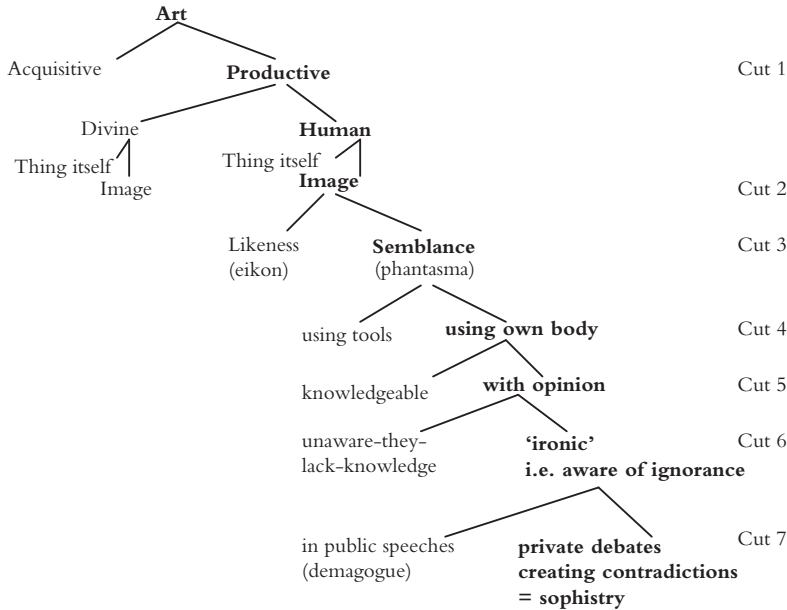


Diagram showing the seventh ‘definition’ of the sophist/sophistry (*Sophist* 265a–268d) after Bluck (1975).

two types of image, likenesses and semblances, a distinction whose import is disputed; it would take us too far afield to discuss it fully. Some suppose that it is meant to correspond to the distinction between production of true images (including true *logoi*) and false ones. But though the placing of the sophist in the latter branch—the production of falsehoods—would fit this interpretation, it is not, I think, what is intended.<sup>23</sup> It is highly problematic, for that reading, that *within the semblance-producing branch*, we find a kind of imitation which proceeds from knowledge. For how could a species of imitation which proceeds from knowledge lie in a division whose hallmark is that it is the production of falsehoods? This has been inserted to hint that the wise person (*sophos*) and the *politikos* are to be found in this nearby branch, the ‘knowledgeable’ one, so it remains a puzzle that knowledgeable persons are found in the semblance-producing branch. Surprisingly little mileage is gained from

<sup>23</sup> 260c–d tells against it. There the ES argues from the existence of deceit and falsehood to the possibility of images in general (and not of just one subset of images). This strongly suggests (though it does not entail) that it is *false* statements/beliefs, not statements/beliefs in general, which are regarded as images.

the distinction between two types of image-making, and by cut 5 the ES seems to have forgotten that the branch which gets divided into those who know and those who don't is itself a branch (and the 'worse' one at that) of image-making. (See 267e5–7: 'the sophist was not among those who know but among those who imitate'.) The next-but-last cut, cut 6, divides the remaining branch of imitators into those who are aware of their lack of knowledge and those who are not, and the triumphant discovery of the sophist is that he is one of the aware-he-lacks-knowledge ones, the one who speaks in private, while his public-speaking counterpart is labelled demagogue.

These last moves bring starkly into focus a point I believe to have been not far below the surface throughout the attempts to define the sophist. It reminds us of the point stressed earlier, that it is hard to separate sophistry from philosophy, at least in the guise of Socrates. For the final definition of the sophist seems to fit Socrates almost equally well, as we shall see. It's strange to find sophists placed firmly in the branch of 'aware-they-lack-knowledge imitators' since some sophists (Protagoras, perhaps, and Hippias) were portrayed by Plato as unaware that they lack knowledge. Furthermore, many genuine strivers after truth, who are no sophists, fit the description 'aware of their own ignorance' and the label *eirōnikos* inevitably calls to mind the figure of Socrates, especially when this practitioner is described as 'carrying on in private and with short speeches, compelling the person he is talking to to contradict himself' (268b3–5). In fact it becomes clear that at none of the cuts in this division is the practice of philosophy firmly distinguished from that of sophistry on our intuitive understanding of Plato's distinction between them. That is, there is no explicit reference to what from earlier works we have been led to hold is a key difference between true philosophy and sophistry, that the former undertakes its investigations seriously and aiming to discover the truth, while the latter is careless of truth but aims instead at prestige, victory, or money. Instead, the so-called distinguishing features at each of the cuts fit some philosophers as well as sophists.

For however we construe the distinction between the two types of image, it seems the philosopher as much as the sophist can produce the 'semblance' type of image (cut 3); both sophists and philosophers use their bodies, not an implement (i.e. they speak) (cut 4); philosophers can get things wrong, as well as have knowledge (i.e. they can be on both sides of

cut 5), and those who lack knowledge, like Socrates, are aware of their own ignorance (cut 6).<sup>24</sup> Being ignorant but creating the impression of being an expert: is that not just what befell Socrates (*Apology* 23a), whose ability to refute the experts gave the impression that he himself possessed knowledge? Yet here it is given as the defining mark of a sophist!

#### IV Is Sophistry a *techne*, Distinct from that of Philosophy?

The fact that frequent allusions to or reminders of Socrates are found within the divisions defining the sophist has met with a variety of responses from scholars. A particularly challenging one is given by C. C. W. Taylor.<sup>25</sup> He holds that Plato firmly dissociates philosophy, now seen as the comprehensive knowledge of true reality, from Socratic practice, which Plato now sees as more akin to sophistry since it shares with it sophistry's distinctive mark, the production of contradiction by questioning. Among many reminiscences of Socrates he discerns in the earlier divisions, Taylor points particularly to the label *goēs*, magician or illusionist, which is prominent in the lead-in to the final division of the sophist as a producer of images of a certain kind.<sup>26</sup> Taylor surmises that Plato now regards Socrates' unaccountable power to identify false beliefs, in his practice of examination of people's beliefs, as mysterious. In this Socrates is akin to the sophist as a kind of *goēs*, though the sophist's magic is to instil false beliefs, while that of Socrates is to rid men of them.<sup>27</sup>

The novelty of Taylor's reading is his suggestion that Socrates is now being classed as a sophist and by implication not as a philosopher (since Socrates lacks the knowledge which now, according to Taylor, Plato sees as the philosopher's hallmark). Taylor has certainly mounted a powerful case, but a major problem with his account is that he accepts the apparent

<sup>24</sup> Notomi (1999, p. 297) disagrees. He writes, 'while the ironical sophist conceals his ignorance, the philosopher openly admits it'. This requires understanding the difficult clause at 268a4 to mean that the sophist *pretends* to know things he suspects he does not. Cornford translates neutrally: 'has the air in the eyes of the world <of being knowledgeable>'. No doubt Plato held that sophists (unlike Socrates) deliberately fostered the belief that they were wise, but the point is not explicitly made at cut 6.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor (2006).

<sup>26</sup> For *goēs* in *Sophist* see 234c5, 235a1, a9, 241b6. Note that at *Pol.* 303c actual *politikoi* (i.e. non-ideal ones, not real *politikoi* at all, in fact) are also labelled *goētai* and *sophists*.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor (2006), p. 167.

premise of the work, that philosophy and sophistry is each a distinct *technē* with an essence of its own. I believe that the data he marshals can be accounted for differently, and that we are not obliged to conclude that Plato's message is that Socrates is now seen as that distinct kind of expert, a sophist, and not after all a philosopher.

My alternative account points up the major false start, which we need to notice: the assumption that sophistry is a *technē*, with an essence distinct from that of philosophy. As indicated above, I believe the frequent allusions, in the course of the divisions, to Socrates and his practices are there to show us that if you approach the attempt to define sophistry in so unprincipled a manner, starting from unquestioned assumptions about its being a *technē*, then it can indeed seem similar to philosophy, at least as practised by Socrates.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to two salient features of the attempt to define the sophist. First, the assumption that sophistry is a *technē* is unquestioned, despite the well-known denial of this in the famous *Gorgias* passage (462–3), where it is classed, along with rhetoric, as an *empeiria*, a knack, not a *technē*, and despite the very weak ground offered for its being a *technē*.<sup>28</sup> Second, no explicit or even implicit attention is paid to the question of how one *technē* is to be distinguished from another. And yet these are issues in which Plato has throughout his oeuvre shown considerable interest.<sup>29</sup> So it is doubly surprising that no rationale is offered for sophistry being a *technē*, that no rationale for the different cuts of the genus *technē* is given, and that little or no use is made of the important points about the nature of a *technē* that appear in earlier dialogues.

## V Plato on the Criteria for Being a *technē*

What is a *technē*? It is a reasoned capacity to achieve a (worthwhile) goal. Qua possessing a *technē*, the expert must understand the causes of success or

<sup>28</sup> The ES gains Theaetetus' agreement that sophistry is a *technē* in a particularly weak exchange. Asked whether the sophist is an *idiōtes* (amateur) or a *technites* (craftsman), Theaetetus replies that, with the name sophist, he could hardly be an amateur; the reply plays on the *-istes* ending of the word. Contrast 268b10.

<sup>29</sup> Irwin (1977), p. 71 and p. 288, n. 19 with references; Sedley (2003), p. 43 among many treatments.

failure, and as such must be able to teach the expertise to another.<sup>30</sup> So a key feature of a *techne* is that it has a goal. If there is such a thing as the essence of a *techne*, the account of the essence must make reference to the goal.

Does sophistry have a goal essential to it? We know from earlier dialogues that a major complaint against the sophists was that they pursued their intellectual discussions not for the sake of the truth but for the prestige they gained from the defeat of opponents, and the fees paid by a host of paying pupils attracted by this prestige. We know also that Plato regarded their intellectual pretensions as, by and large, unfounded. All these points emerge implicitly, with wealth featuring in D1–4 (sophistry as a kind of hunting, then of merchandising), victory as well as money in D5, while the unfounded nature of the intellectual prestige is prominent in D7.<sup>31</sup> Does any of these give a unique goal for sophistry? No. Characterizing the sophist as someone hunting rich pupils (D1) or as someone aiming to sell his intellectual property to rich young men (D2–4) does not distinguish him from genuine experts, such as doctors or geometers, who take paid pupils whom they instruct in their *techne*. D5, the combative controversialist who deals in disputation for money, combines the goals of defeating the opponent in controversy with money-making; it is only this last point that distinguishes him from Socrates, whom we are surely intended to recognize in the adjacent *adolesches* (chatterer), since this is how Socrates has described himself at *Theaetetus* 195b–c. Neither goal—money nor victory—is distinctive of a sophist, though both are goals associated with them by Plato. Most serious of all, and not previously remarked, the seventh definition—the one many hold to be definitive—singularly fails to reveal a goal of the sophist, as I now argue.

The last definition proceeds from a well-known but problematic analogy between painters and sophists, on the ground that each produces a kind of image. The images the sophists produce are identified as false beliefs about matters of justice and virtue, and in particular the false belief that the sophist himself is an expert on these matters.<sup>32</sup> An immediate disanalogy here is that

<sup>30</sup> *Gorg.* 465a, 501a.

<sup>31</sup> The goal of the sophist in his sixth appearance is education, or rather its essential preliminary, removing a false conceit of wisdom. Since the sixth appearance is explicitly bracketed off, we can pass over it.

<sup>32</sup> 267c: the sophists cultivate the appearance of virtue; 268c1: the sophist is an imitator of the wise man, echoing 233b–c. P. Kalligas (in Karasmanis 2004, p. 224), in his comment on Taylor's article, makes

painters intend their images to be recognized as such: their expertise precisely is that of producing skilful and realistic visual representations which are recognized as such. This is true even if, as the ES fancifully suggests, some painters deceive young persons into thinking their products are the real thing; that cannot be their main goal, and it is bizarre to find it suggested as any part of the painter's art.<sup>33</sup> The suggestion that painters' images may deceive is no doubt made to smooth the way to the claim that the sophist is a producer of images. As just noted, the images in question are the false beliefs acquired by the sophist's audience, and, chief among them, the belief that the sophist himself is a wise man. Hence the designation (offered by Theaetetus, 267c1): imitator of the wise person. So it is crucial to the sophist's success that the images (i.e. false beliefs, especially in his own wisdom) are *not* recognized as such. *But producing deceptive images is not his goal.* His goal is not, *de dicto*, to create false beliefs; rather it is to create a belief in his own wisdom. That the belief is a false one follows from the fact that the sophist is a *sham* wise person. Deception is the means to his goal, but it is not his goal. Once this is spelled out, it becomes clear why sophistry is not a genuine *techné*. There may be a trick or two involved in getting people to think you are wise when you are not, but that does not make it a *techné*. The nub of Plato's complaint against those he labels sophists may be their uncanny ability to appear wise when they are not, but again, that does not mean there is a *techné* whose aim is precisely this.

The seven definitions, then, fail to suggest a consistent goal for sophistry. While the first four gesture at goals familiarly associated with sophists (wealth, victory), these aims are not exclusive to sophistry but may be shared by other experts such as architects, doctors, and dramatists. The final definition, with its emphasis on being a kind of imitator, signally fails to mark a goal (and the analogy with painting is thereby a flawed one). Imitating a wise person, i.e. contriving to be thought wise when one is not, is a means to what, as the discussion at this point reveals, is the sophist's goal, viz. getting a reputation for wisdom, but is not the goal itself.

a different assumption. He takes the reference to the sophists producing images to be referring to their use of certain literary techniques, such as the epideictic model-speeches used by Gorgias and Antiphon. This is an ingenious suggestion, and it would allow the parallel with painters much more force. But it does not do justice to the theme of the deceptiveness of sophists, their attempts to appear wise when they are not.

<sup>33</sup> It is curious that both in the *Sophist* and in the *Republic* this implausible suggestion is made.



Does sophistry pass the test whereby a *technē* must have reasoned procedures, which involve understanding the causes of success and failure? Here we come up against the plethora of characterizations of sophistry in the divisions. Is there a reasoned procedure in connection with being a hunter after rich young men? Hunters after rich young men are not necessarily frauds. For instance, Theodorus, with his variety of mathematical expertises, no doubt attracted a number of pupils impressed by his wisdom, and perhaps they paid him for the instruction he gave. Is he thereby a sophist? Presumably not, since he *is* credited with wisdom. In any case, his *technē* consists in the understanding he has of the subject-matter; his ability to acquire a reputation for wisdom and, with it, rich pupils (supposing he did so) is not what constitutes his *technē*. Turning to the characterization of sophists as *antilogikoi* (experts in controversy or disputation), we have already noted that, in this aspect, their only difference from Socrates comes at the last cut: Socrates *loses* money by his examinations; they *make* money. To judge by their performance in *Euthydemus*, the *antilogikoi* Euthydemus and Dionysodorus do have an understanding of how to refute an opponent, just as Socrates did. So expertise in *antilogikē* is not peculiar to sophistry.<sup>34</sup> Once again, sophistry seems to be used as a label for what, done properly, with the right motives and by a truly skilled person, is a respectable intellectual activity. It does not have a set of techniques and procedures peculiar to itself; rather, according to the treatment in *Sophist*, it is a fraudulent practice of what in other hands is a respectable and genuine *technē*. It fails that test for being a *technē*.<sup>35</sup>

Let us turn to the vexed issue of the subject-matter of a *technē*. Must a single *technē* have a single and well-defined subject-matter? Or must the goal play a part too? At this point we may note an important point about the first cut of the genus *technē*, which is different in *Sophist* and in *Politicus*. Whereas the major distinction in *Sophist* is said to be the division of *technai* into *productive* and *acquisitive*, in *Politicus* we get the far more familiar distinction

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Phdr.* 261b–e.

<sup>35</sup> See, for a contrary view, Kato (1995), pp. 162–72, at p. 165 (*technē*) ‘... functions as the factor which uncovers one after another the various disguises of the sophists’s pseudo-art, and finally discloses its essence as pseudo-art, i.e. imitative art’. Kato is assuming that being a pseudo-art is the essence of sophistry; a strange kind of essence, especially for a *technē*. And I have argued that (in contrast to painting) being imitative is not of the essence of sophistry.

into *practical* and *theoretical*. Now some subjects, such as geometry, may be pursued either theoretically or for practical purposes, as an aid to land-measurement (the literal meaning of geometry). From the fact that theoretical/practical forms the first cut of *technē* in *Politicus*, one might infer that difference in aim (practical versus theoretical) means that pure and applied geometry are different *technai*. But recall *Republic* 7, which rehearses the five *technai*/branches of knowledge that the would-be philosopher-ruler must study en route to dialectic—arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, harmony. There Socrates insists—though with considerable irony—that the disciplines have practical uses as well as their value to the trainee philosopher: their ability to lead the soul towards truth. This suggests that geometry is one and the same *technē* whether pursued for its practical uses or for enlightenment's sake.<sup>36</sup> From Plato's treatments of genuine *technai*, then, it is unclear what role subject-matter has in the delineation of a *technē*.

To sum up: it is clear from the above that producing definitions, and a taxonomy, even of genuine *technai* is a hard enough task, for such a taxonomy needs to find a place for, and to order in terms of importance, the criteria of purpose, of whether the *technē* is practical or theoretical, and of subject-matter, and it also needs to establish, for a genuine *technē*, that it has standards by which success and failure can be measured. It is even clearer that no serious attempt is made in *Sophist* to justify the poorly founded claim that sophistry is a *technē*, nor, a fortiori, to show, by the acknowledged criteria for *technai*, what its essential nature is.<sup>37</sup>

## VI Conclusion

Let us distinguish four questions. First, can the method of division yield a unique definition of the *technē* of sophistry? To this I have already indicated my answer 'No, Plato cannot have intended the reader to think so, because sophistry is no genuine *technē*, indeed it lacks any essential nature.' Second,

<sup>36</sup> The analogy between the parts of difference and the parts of knowledge (*Soph.* 257c–d) also suggests that a branch of knowledge gets its specific nature from its subject-matter (regardless of whether it is employed for practical purposes or not).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. n 28, on the evidently weak 'argument' offered for the sophist being an expert.

can the method yield a unique definition for any *techné* or branch of knowledge? Here my hunch is that, while Plato was convinced there are objective criteria for what is a *techné*, and for what distinguishes one from another, he would have been less sanguine about finding, via the method of division, a unique correct definition, let alone a unique classificatory scheme encompassing all *technai*, for reasons sketched in the previous section. Third, are there *any* kinds for which Plato can have hoped the method of division would yield a definitive essence-revealing definition? All we can say here is that the evidence of the *Sophist* does not enable us to give an affirmative answer to the question, but that does not mean that it did not remain an aspiration; the evidence is that it did. Fourth, what if any enlightenment has the entire discussion in the *Sophist* yielded about the nature of the sophist and the philosopher, and the relationship between them?

An adequate answer to this fourth question would require an extensive study. It would need to set out in detail how, in all parts of the work, Plato is *showing* the reader, rather than formally stating, how close true philosophy is to sophistry in its various guises, how and why they are easily confused, but how at bottom there are crucial differences between philosophy and the various approaches he labels sophistry.<sup>38</sup> The one official statement of the difference is couched in metaphorical terms at 254. There we read that the philosopher—by now identified as the dialectician, the person with the knowledge to discern how kinds combine—clings, through reasoning, to ‘what is’, and is hard to discern given the brightness of reality, while the sophist too is hard to discern but for the opposite reason: he escapes into the darkness of what is not. Suggestive though this description is, it can only be fully understood in the light of a reading of the whole work. In addition to familiar points of difference—sophists aim for wealth and take paid pupils; they desire victory and renown rather than enlightenment, and a seeming refutation which defeats an opponent, not the genuine one which benefits him—a new point emerges in the argumentation from 239 to 264. The newly displayed difference between sophist and true philosopher lies in their respective uses of *aporia*—and here I draw on Frede’s important paper, ‘The Literary Form of the *Sophist*’.<sup>39</sup> Both

<sup>38</sup> Such a study would also need to take account of the *Theaetetus* and *Politicus*, cf. Frede’s paper referred to in the next note.

<sup>39</sup> Frede (1996).

sophists and philosophers make use of *aporia*, but the philosopher ‘does not leave us with this *aporia* [about what is not], but goes on to break the impasse by showing us that we can say, after all, that what is not is, because the claim that we cannot say this turns out to rest on confusion’. As Frede emphasizes, the *aporiai* of the *Sophist* are used constructively, to help us get clear on a subject; this is the hallmark of the philosopher, as against that group of sophists (personified by the brothers in *Euthydemus*) in whose hands such puzzles are used to refute opponents, not to get clearer about the truth of important matters. The dialogue has revealed to the reader a great deal about the contrast between the approach and interests of the philosopher and those of sophists, but it has done so *not* by producing a definition-by-division of the sophist that is intended to be correct. As such, it leaves open the question how high Plato’s hopes were for the method if used on a more promising subject-matter than sophistry.<sup>40</sup>

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