

Who's Afraid of the Sophists? Against Ethical Correctness¹

BARBARA CASSIN

Translated by Charles T. Wolfe, revised by the author and by the editor

SOPHISTIQUE, subst. A. Ensemble des doctrines, ou plus exactement attitude intellectuelle commune des principaux sophistes grecs (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.). B. (Nom commun.) Se dit d'une philosophie de raisonnement verbal, sans solidité et sans sérieux.

SOPHISTICS, substantive noun. A. The set of doctrines, or more precisely, the shared intellectual attitude of the main Greek sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.). B. (Common noun.) Used to refer to a philosophy of verbal reasoning, lacking solidity or seriousness.

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I. THE OCCASION

The set of doctrines or teachings associated with the individuals known as the sophists is termed *sophistike*, in French, *sophistique*. The expression is lacking in English, which puts one in the position of either using the adjectives “sophistic,” “sophistical,” or of using the dismissive expression “sophistry.” As I shall be arguing for a systematic role of these doctrines, I will ask your indulgence and introduce the neologism “sophistics” for now. The question is, why should one be interested in sophistics today?

As occasional causes are by far the most significant and the most efficacious,² I would like to explain first of all where my own interest in sophistics stems

from. It arose from the encounter of two trajectories which were rivals in all senses of the word. The first phase of study, both jubilant and confused, took place under the sign of Martin Heidegger. Because everything possessed a renewed intelligibility, everything also fit neatly into the palm of one's hand. The history of philosophy was philosophy itself, which the question of Being enabled one to scan and rework into epochs and turnings, with a hitherto unequaled skill which knew when to be self-effacing. It is very difficult to rid oneself of the idea that philosophers today do anything else besides rework Heidegger's gesture, even the anti-Heideggerians who sought their training in Immanuel Kant, with a different point of entry than the *Kantbuch* (Heidegger 1997). In order to move out from this circumscribed territory, no less is required, doubtless, than (a) a redefinition of philosophy throughout its history, in such a way that this widening of the scope does not produce a mere analytic restriction or moral rigidity which can immediately be traced back historically³ to the technical and technological nature of our epoch, and (b) probably some new conceptual personae⁴ in the Deleuzian sense. But the most frequent approach, which Deleuze himself initiated or at least made use of contemporaneously (using the Stoics, Spinoza, and Bergson), is to draw attention to the readings Heidegger failed to perform, or did not perform, inasmuch as they are held to be strategically impossible.

My own growing rigid, in this context, has to do with the determination of the origin and the dawn. The Greek morning which Heidegger arranged for us is monomaniacal and kleptomaniacal. It robs an entire array of texts and possibilities so that they may fit under the aegis of Parmenides' poem. Heidegger's *Parmenides* of 1942–43 reads *polis* merely as *pelein*, the old Greek verb for *einai*: if the *polis* in itself is only the "pole of *pelein*," then "it is only because the Greeks are an absolutely non-political people" that they could found the *polis*, and did (Heidegger 1982, 142). The first reading that I found impossible to perform using Heidegger alone, in the truly grandiose perspective of Parmenides' unveiling, was Gorgias' *Treatise of Non-Being*. Approximately a half-century after the dawn, this treatise provides a full-fledged demonstration of the mechanisms or strategies thanks to which Parmenides' "Poem" conforms to Heidegger's dream. It is a text which critically exceeds ontology in its nascent state. Thus there was a different way of being pre-Socratic.

In order to confirm this diagnosis, it proved necessary for me to undertake the study of Greek, and ever more Greek, not so as to arrive at the bareness of meaning itself by digging through the thicket of semantics. It was a matter of acquiring the tools with which to respond in kind: amphibological appropriations of an emerging syntax and the extraordinarily imaginative rigidity of the various grammaticalizations. This was my counter-apprenticeship, then: philology, with its ceaseless equivocations between the rights of the text and the rights of the interpreters, as taught tirelessly by Jean Bollack and Heinz Wismann, between Lille and Paris.

Now, certain texts are more corrupt than others, and these are the ones which are ultimately rejected or deemed unusable by the tradition, whether by chance or by choice, in a pattern which runs from the doxographer to the scribe and on to the great scholar, the German philologist. From Parmenides to Heidegger, there is a kind of textual Darwinism, a process of selection of the triumphant tradition which ends up defining our vantage-point on philosophy and its history. As for the remainder, the tradition only allows us to accede to it through a paleontology of perversion. For example, we are left with Anaximander, Heraclitus, Democritus, and, paradigmatically, Gorgias' *Treatise*, which pushes ontology too far and hence cannot be treated indulgently as a token piece of rhetoric; in other words, we are left with all the figures who were pre-Socratic in a different way.

Of course, it turns out that the canonical texts, too, have to be treated in the same fashion, perhaps due to some contagion. This occurs in their heterodoxical moments, when they are obliged to confront the "others": witness the extreme difficulty of book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1984b) or Plato's *Sophist* (1973b). It also appears in the very singularity of the works that are created, torn between denials and inventions. Hence the philological passion, which considers that all of eternity may not be enough time to understand a sentence adequately. This passion attaches the same importance to all textual objects. This attachment proves to be particularly necessary in order to decipher what is left over, the remainder—here, sophistic.

This proved to be the moment when my object of inquiry was chosen: a limping, bald *kairos*,⁵ a true philosophical-philological centaur.

For this choice to be deemed successful, the object had to enable me to bring to fruition a series of appealing projects which would be difficult or even impossible to carry out otherwise. The claim I will be making in what follows may seem startling, even if it is generally (or generically) characteristic of those who are called, and call themselves, philosophers. However, I can temper the overbearing arrogance of the claim with a caveat, and declare that it will be made "shamelessly," to use Francis Ponge's term for the crafty *hubris* of the Sophists (Ponge 1961, 209–10). The arrogance of the claim lies in the hypothesis that the chosen object, sophistic, is a good tool, maybe even the best of the available tools to produce something like a new narrative of the history of philosophy—the tale of a new morning which makes one want to count the fingers of the dawn. Sophistic produces a new delimitation of the entity called "philosophy" in relation to the other entities it constructs (sophistic as rhetoric, and then as literature).

The following remarks, then, will take the form of a philosophical and literary stroll, which responds to an aspect of things that does not belong to our ordinary habits (but which, once one responds to it, is as good as they are at monopolizing our attention). The stroll gives itself the right to stop, along the

course of time, and collect texts of a different lineage than that which runs from Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle to Hegel, Heidegger, or Habermas. Once these texts have been gathered up, they begin to resonate with one another. This should surely enable us to glimpse how artificial the border between the rational and the irrational is, and perhaps to reorganize the cosmos of philosophy, starting from a richer, more complete, more contemporary, or otherwise effective point of view.

II. SOPHISTICS AS HISTORICAL FACT AND STRUCTURAL EFFECT

As the state of the corpus of translations and stubborn retranslations of the same ancient texts reveals, we have until quite recently, in France in any case, been prisoners of the image that antiquity sought to project of itself, namely, a succession of moments of excellence. Yet my choice of sophistical doctrine as an object of research does not, at least initially or not solely, stem from an antiquarian zeal for little-known texts which require a great deal of philological and historical work. Nor, thereby, does it originate in an interest in the margin where these roughly crossed-out texts lie, an interest which would make the margin into an area of research, legitimizing a militant pathos in favor of accursed thinkers, against debarments and exclusion. Hence I will not be proposing a “rehabilitation,” and especially not one of these rehabilitations which are grounded, by means of a circular argument, in the modifications and improvements they enable one to introduce into the persistent frame of the most traditional of all histories.

Indeed, the singularity of sophistical doctrine is to be already, inasmuch as it is a historical fact, a structural effect, that is, an effect of the structure. The “doctrine of the sophists” is a philosophical concept, whose model is truly provided by the real practice of those who called themselves, and were called, sophists (individuals such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Antiphon). This is definition A in André Lalande’s *Vocabulaire* (1991). But it is also used in philosophy to refer to one of the possible modalities of non-philosophy. This is definition B, which is as magisterial as it is mysterious: “a philosophy of *verbal reasoning*, lacking any solidity or seriousness.” I will frequently be working with this definition.

This is Plato’s starting-point, and the point where he welds together the two halves of the problem: sophistic doctrine, which is a historical reality, is at the same time artificially produced by philosophy. The essence of this artifact is simply to construct the sophist as the negative *alter ego* of the philosopher: his bad Other. They have resembled each other ever since the Stranger’s comment in the *Sophist* that the sophist resembles the philosopher “as the wolf does the dog, as the most savage resembles the most tame” (231b).⁶ They are so much

alike that even when one reaches out with both hands to catch one, one catches the other. Socrates' cathartic midwifery (maieutics), his practice of refutation, ends up belonging to the *genei gennaia sophistikê* (which one translates as "the genuine and truly noble art of sophistics," ignoring the emphasis which cements the bond). Conversely, at the end of the dialogue, when all dichotomies must be recapitulated, the final arborescence provides us with the same pair, when the issue is how to describe the demagogue or speech-maker: "wise man or sophist?" The decision is only reached when Theaetetus states a thesis: "We posited him as not knowing" (268c). In any case, the sophist, who is an "imitator of the wise man" (268c), is his paronym to exactly the same extent as the philosopher himself is.

If we consider the Platonic dialogues as a whole, we can indeed discern the figure of sophistics, which will henceforth belong to the tradition. It is devalued on all grounds; ontologically, because the sophist is not concerned with being, but seeks refuge in non-being and what is accidental; logically, because he is not in pursuit of truth or dialectical rigor, but merely opinion, seeming coherence, persuasion, and victory in the oratorical joust; ethically, pedagogically, and politically: his goal is not wisdom and virtue, for the individual or for the city, but rather personal power and gain; the sophist is even devalued on literary grounds, since the figures of speech he makes use of, his style, are merely the bulges of an encyclopedic vacuity. If one makes use of the standard of being and truth in order to judge the teaching of the sophist, it must be condemned as pseudo-philosophy: a philosophy of appearances and a mere appearance of philosophy.

On this basis, however, another dimension of the *Sophist* comes to light which shakes up its strict organization: the artifact itself becomes a producer of philosophy. The sophist is the other of the philosopher, whom philosophy never ceases to expel from its domain, and even from humanity itself, as we will see with Aristotle, because the philosopher in turn defines himself as (merely) the other of the sophist, an other whom he pushes further and further into a corner. Philosophy is the child of wonder, and, according to the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "all humans naturally desire to know." Yet "people who are puzzled to know whether one ought to honor the gods and love one's parents or not need punishment, while those who are puzzled to know whether snow is white or not only need to look" (Aristotle 1984d, book 1, 11:105a). The sophist exaggerates, as Protagoras does regarding the gods, Antiphon regarding the family, and Gorgias regarding that which is and that which one perceives. He always asks one question too many, he always derives one consequence too many. Due to this insolence, philosophy is literally beside itself. The love of wisdom is forced to transgress the limits that it has assigned itself, and to make gestures which surely do not belong to the rest of its procedure, such as punishment. In what follows, I should like to analyze some of these

gestures, as a goal of my research. The doctrine of the sophists is indeed an operator which serves to circumscribe and define the scope of philosophy.

Thus the point of view I have chosen makes use of a philosophico-sophistical perception (Novalis, in number fifteen of his *Logological Fragments I*, suggested the term “philosophistize” [*philosophistieren*] [Novalis 1960, 526]),⁷ the nature of which may be conveyed by the term “effect.” It is an effect, first of all, because sophistic is an artificial creation, a by-product of philosophy (as the difficulty with terminology itself shows). But it is an effect, second, because sophistic, a fiction of philosophy, reverses the direction of things and shocks philosophy, never ceasing to have an effect on it. This sums up the structural version of an infinitely complex history of ideas which, in my view, historians of philosophy are wrong to ignore.

III. THE SOPHISTICAL EFFECT

My work over the last ten years has focused on showing how sophistical doctrine obliges philosophy to reflect on itself, and reflect itself, starting from three moments, three privileged bodies of text, which enable one to express the sophistical effect and reconstitute a history of the limit.

A TREATISE AGAINST A POEM

The confrontation between Parmenides’ “On Nature, or On the Entity”⁸ and Gorgias’ “On Non-Being (or, On Nature)”⁹ shall provide us with our primal scene. As Heidegger has shown, but not *only* as he has shown, everything hangs on the way in which being and saying are connected (recall Lalande’s definition: “a philosophy of verbal reasoning”): “Nothing is; if it is, it is unknowable; if it is and it is knowable, it cannot be communicated” (Aristotle 1984c, 980b 4).

The three theses of Gorgias’ *Treatise* present themselves as a reversal of Parmenides’ “Poem,” which, from Plato to the present day, has been taken to say, firstly, that there is being, since “Being is” and “non-Being is not,” and secondly, that this Being is essentially knowable, since “being and thinking are one and the same.” Thereby philosophy was able to embark on the right path, to know being *qua* being, and diversify itself commercially into doctrines, disciples, and schools. This series of reversals should not, however, be viewed as an idle, insignificant game, for it is a radical critique of ontology.

Gorgias’ strategy, as displayed in his first thesis, is to have us realize that Being, which is the Parmenidean hero just as Ulysses is the Homeric hero, is never anything besides an effect of the Parmenidean Poem. By following the way in which, at the starting-point of the Poem, the “word” of the “path” (“Is”) (in Freeman 1948, 42) suffices to secrete the full subject, which is identified

thereafter as the article (*the entity*), by means of a series of infinitives and participles, the sophist dissects the way in which syntax creates semantics. If there is a “sophism,” it resides in the “is” and its ontological treatment, since the mere statement of the identity of being, which leads one to confuse the copula with existence, derives its entire worth from an amphiboly and a homonymy.

The second postulate of the Poem—which Heidegger translates paratactically as “being, thinking, the same” (1982, fragment 3)¹⁰—marks the mooring-point of truth as unconcealment, and then as adequation. Here the catastrophe is perfect. It is enough for me to think something, and moreover, to speak it, for that thing to be. By that token if I say “war-chariots battle on the open sea” (see Freeman 1948, 129),¹¹ then war-chariots are battling on the open sea. There is no room for non-being, or for errors and lies. It is Parmenides’ ontology alone, taken at face value and pushed to the limit, which guarantees the infallibility and efficaciousness of the discourse and thereby is sophistical.

That being is a speech effect now takes on a twofold meaning: we are not simply faced with a critique of ontology—your purported being is nothing but an effect of the way you speak—but with a claim which is characteristic of “logology,” to use a term of Novalis (1997, 56) and also of Dubuffet (1970, 115). What matters from now on is not a being which would supposedly be already there, but the being produced by the discourse. One must assess the magnitude of the shift in landscape, from the primal scene onwards. The safest identity principle is no longer formulated as “Being is” or “The entity is” but, to quote from Aristotle’s “On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias”: “he who speaks, speaks” (1984c, 980b 4). The presence of Being, the immediacy of Nature and the evidence of a speech which aims to express them adequately all vanish at the same time; the physics discovered by speech makes way for the politics created by discourse.

Indeed, it is here, thanks to the sophists, that we reach the dimension of the political as *agora* for an *agôn*: the city as the continuous creation of language. The discourse of the sophists is to the soul what the *pharmakon* (poison and remedy) is to the body: it induces a change of state, for better or for worse. But the sophist, like the doctor, knows how to use the *pharmakon*, and can transmit this knowledge. He knows and teaches how to move, not according to the bivalency of the principle of non-contradiction, from error to truth or from ignorance to wisdom, but according to the inherent plurality of comparison, from a lesser state to a better state. In the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras, who professes virtue, states this through the mouthpiece of Socrates, who then defends him: “one has to effect a change from another condition to the better; only, whereas the physician produces a change by means of drugs; the Sophist does it by means of speeches” (Plato 1973c, 167a). Wise and good orators like him “manage so that useful, in place of poor things, seem and are just” (167c).

The entire rhetoric of the sophists is thus a vast performance which, time after time, by means of praise and counsel, produces the consensus required for the social bond. This consensus is minimal, even minimalist, because far from requiring a uniform unity, the sophistic consensus does not even require that everyone think the same thing (*homonoia*), but only that everyone speaks (*homologia*) and lends their ear (*homophônia*). In this way, it is hinted that the final motor [ressort] of political discourse is homonymy (“that the sentence have a meaning for each of the meanings of each of its terms”), which alone can have an effect on “the metaphysician” as much as on “the cook,” to speak with Ponge.¹²

At this point, the distance that has been achieved from the Heideggerian dawn begins to sink in. In the philosophizing Greece of *alētheia*, the invention of the city is non-political, because the political *qua* political is in no way political; rather, it is always subordinate to Being, the True, and the Good. But in a philosophicizing Greek, where the ontological immediately reverts to, backtracks towards the logological, the *logos* enables us to grasp the very immanence of the political, in its condition of possibility, in a perception which is more Aristotelian and Arendtian than it is Platonic and Heideggerian. “Humans live together according to the mode of speech” (Arendt 1986, 90): the specificity of the political lies in the competition of the *logoi*, governed by the norm of taste (in the sense this term has had since Kant), which “can only ‘woo the consent of everyone else’” (Arendt 1961, 222) in the midst of a plural condition. Arendt emphasizes that this is why doing “political philosophy,” that is, “to look upon politics from the perspective of truth . . . means to take one’s stand outside the political realm” (Arendt 1972, 330). Under the aegis of the first statement, namely, Antiphon’s assertion in *On Truth* that “one citizens” (*politeuetai tis*) (Antiphon 1989, fr. B, col 1) no longer refers to nature except as something that has escaped from a private crevice into the public realm, the autonomy of the *logos* which creates the legal sphere and the autonomy of the political are henceforth intertwined.

THE LOGOS OF A PLANT

All of Aristotle’s regulation of language, in which modernity is invented, may justifiably be seen as a rejoinder to sophistic: how can language be tamed, how can it be rendered ethical, both prior to and during its rhetorical-political life?

The response or comeback to the primal scene can easily be located: it is the demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction which is performed at the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Gamma 4, a demonstration which is scientifically impossible, since the issue is the first principle, yet can be carried out dialectically in the shape of a refutation of the opponents who claim to deny it. Now, refutation is the paramount weapon of the sophists; Aristotle,

following Socrates, borrows it here for the occasion. If Gorgias' treatise is read in the way we just proposed, it stands *in toto* as a refutation of Parmenides' poem. It starts with the speech of the other, as enunciative procedure and thematic statement, and brings to light its catastrophic consequence. Ontology taken literally means logology, or in other words, if Parmenides, then Gorgias. Quite symmetrically, the demonstration by refutation starts with the opponent's statement of the principle, if only so as to express his denial, and brings to light the unsettling consequence that the opponent obeys the principle at the very moment he denies it. Sophistics taken literally is Aristotelian; if Protagoras speaks (which sophists normally do), he can only speak the way Aristotle does.

The real dynamic of the refutation lies in a series of equivalent relations which, once they are stated, are as self-evident as ontology itself: to speak is to say something that has a meaning, and this meaning is the same for oneself and for another. Thereafter, indeed, I need only speak ("Hello") for the principle of non-contradiction to be proven and instantiated in the process: it is impossible for the same (word) to have and not have the same (meaning), at the same time. All I need to do is speak, or, alternately, "so long as the opponent says something" (1984b, Gamma, 4 1006a 12–13). Aristotle finalizes the procedure by ensuring that this necessary and sufficient condition is present in the very definition of man, and excluding all those who do not fall under his demonstration from humanity, from the outset, "for such a man, as such, is like a plant, from the outset" (14–15). The requirement of meaning, once it is equated with the aim of univocity in this fashion, is first of all a formidable war machine against homonymy. All those who refuse to submit to this requirement have been reduced to so much silence or noise, something prior to language, ever since Aristotle. They are free to inquire into "what is in the sounds of the voice and in words" (Gamma, 5, 1009a 21–22), into drivel or nonsense (*blabla*), or in other words, into the signifier inasmuch as it does not signify. This freedom will not even extend to the conventional sphere of human language.

From Parmenides to Gorgias, and from Gorgias to Aristotle, let us grant that the sophist has been check-mated. But much is to be learned from the game, up until the present day.

It is up to us, in particular, to decipher the ambiguous status of psychoanalysis in light of this teaching—this speech which one pays for, this *pharmakon* which is bought and sold, just as the sophists were reproached for. For it is obvious that Sigmund Freud, then Jacques Lacan, occupy the site that Aristotle assigned to the recalcitrant sophists, the site of the signifier. Yet there is a crucial difference, which changes everything: they occupy this site as Aristotelians. Thanks to psychoanalysis, even drivel, even homonymy fall into the embrace of meaning. Freud's definition of the "pun" (one of the categories of

which, let's not forget, is the "sophism") as "sense in nonsense" (Freud 1976, 45) stands as sufficient witness that speaking for one's pleasure or, as Lacan puts it, "speaking to no purpose" (*parler en pure perte*) (Lacan 1982, 157) is today a sophisticated activity which has been embraced or taken over by Aristotelianism.

It is also up to us to grasp in what way Aristotle's gesture in the *Metaphysics* is repeated in front of our own eyes. Meaning, consensus, and exclusion is precisely the structure of what Karl-Otto Apel calls "the *a priori* of the communication community" (Apel 1980, 225). The basic question for Apel, who views himself as following in the footsteps of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Peirce, but is really the follower of Aristotle, is "the condition of possibility of meaningful discourse or meaningful argumentation" (Apel 1987, 3). It is the same problematization of the notion of an ultimate ground; just like with the principle of all principles, one must both ground and cease to ground. The resolution of the aporia is also the same: one takes a step back, a regress towards the transcendental condition of human language. The proof-strategy is the same: an opponent is required, be it Karl Popper or Protagoras, who is refuted by showing him that "the rules of the transcendental language-game" are such that he has "always already implicitly acknowledged their validity" (Apel 1981, 926–27). In other words—those of Aristotle, precisely—"If one is to destroy the *logos*, one must surely have a *logos*" (1984b, Gamma 4, 1006a 26). Lastly, and above all, one finds the same exclusion of the radical, evil other, who persists in denying the "meta-institution of all possible human institutions" (Apel 1981, 926), whether it is termed language-game or decision of meaning, and who must pay for this refusal by "losing his own identity as a meaningful agent," namely, suicide or dementia (Apel 1981, 926). In short, Aristotle's plants today would be headed for the morgue or the asylum. But, as you will have understood, the point of contention of this exclusion remains the same: by making an entire dimension of speech philosophically and ethically inaudible, one has confused otherness with nothingness.

FROM THE GOAT-STAG TO THE NOVEL

The consequence of the decision of meaning is twofold. First, and most radically, as we have seen, there is the exclusion from the community of all those who "speak for the pleasure of speaking," in the terms of Gamma 5 (Aristotle 1984b, 1009a 21–22). The sophist, whom Aristotle and Apel find so disagreeable, is not human. But there is a second consequence which is more subtle, that has to do with the topology of meaning sketched out by Aristotle's statement of equivalence. To speak is to say being; such was Parmenides' thesis, and such, again, *mutatis mutandis*, is the ordinary regime or daily lot of Aristotelian language. Ordinarily, indeed, when one speaks, the meaning of the word expresses the essence of the thing. This is the case when the thing exists;

the essence of entities is the meaning of the word that refers to them—if “man” means “animal with two feet,” then, providing man exists, man is a two-footed animal—and it is precisely in this that the ontological necessity of excluding “idle talk” is rooted, all the way to Heidegger. Now, faced with the sophist, the Aristotelian response in kind opens up a radically new possibility. One is no longer forced to speak of something which exists in order to mean something; one can very well speak of the “goat-stag” (which is the great example in *De Interpretatione* [Aristotle 1984a, 1, 16a 16]) without putting ontology at risk. One can speak *non-being* because one can *speak* non-being, because with the language of possibility comes a meaning which is no longer bound to reference. This is in fact why truth values are nothing more than a question of *sun*, syntax, and synthesis between a subject who is or is not, and a predicate which is or is not. Thus we may utter the truth when we speak about things which do not exist (the statement “A goat-stag is not a cow” is true), things which, when one speaks about them, continue not to exist. Aristotelian semantics, for its part, produces parallel worlds in which true sentences assign non-existent predicates to non-beings—stemming not from the false which is, but from the true which is not. From the ontology which has thus been reassured by Aristotle, the possibility flows of an assumption of logology: by speaking of things which have no existence, and therefore, in Aristotle’s terminology, no essence or definition, by discarding the physical or phenomenal reference, one has opened up the possibility of promoting meaning alone, meaning itself. Just as Parmenidean ontology had always already become sophisticated logology, here, on Aristotelian ground, sophisticated logology is assigned to a new dwelling-point: literature, as a case which is legitimized by the interpretation of the *legein ti* as *sêmeinein ti*.

In the wake of rhetoric, which had already chosen the expression “to speak to” over the expression “to speak of,” it is an entirely different corpus which becomes more intelligible, that of the second wave of the sophists, still Greek yet already Latin, and this marks the inception of the novel. If the novel is considered in this light, it shows itself to be an extremely original response to philosophical prohibition. For the novel is self-consciously a *pseudos*, and presents itself as such; it is a discourse which forgoes any ontological adequation and follows its own demiurgical path, namely, speaking for the pleasure of speaking rather than speaking in order to mean something, and thus producing a world-effect, a novelistic “fiction.” And the popularity of novels, which resumes the foundational tradition of the Homeric poems, ends up constituting the cultural avatar of a political consensus, extended to the limits of the inhabited world by means of the *pax Romana*. As Dio Chrysostom said, not everyone sees the same sky, but even the Indians know Homer (1946, 7–8).¹³

Thus the paradigm of truth has been transformed. From now on, sophistic no longer has to do battle with philosophical authenticity, but rather with the exactness of historical fact. It is now the gaze of the historian which brings the

accusation of the *pseudos* to bear against sophistic and its literary kin. Lucian's *How to Write History*, in particular, bears witness to the existence of this new conflict: the historian as mirror is completely opposed to the poet, who is entitled to "overthrow the fortress of the Epipoles with a stroke of the pen," and defines himself by not being a novelist (Lucian 1959, 53, sec. 38; translation modified). However, Lucian practices the art of the sophists on sophistic itself; in *The Genuine History*, his irony ends up jeopardizing his own practice: "I will tell the truth on one point, which is that I tell lies" (Lucian 1913, 253, sec. 4; translation modified). Here, "genuine" history takes up the liar's paradox again, and against the history of the chroniclers and the faithful account of events, it responds with the unmatched power of invention.

When confronted with philosophy, the early sophists preferred a consensus-building discourse to that which sought to conform to the entity, or to the being of the entity. This very shift from adequation to political and cultural consensus also impacts on the shift in the relevant opposition: the later sophists had to confront history rather than philosophy. We have thus moved from ontology to the human sciences, and from the art of the sophists to literature.

IV. ETHICAL CORRECTNESS

The epicenter of the history of philosophy, once it is rewritten under the influence of sophistic as the history of the delimitation of philosophy, becomes the problem of the regulation of language. Ordinary philosophy (of which I speak with the same respect as of ordinary language) musters up all its forces, at all levels and by all the means at its disposal—Platonic, Aristotelian, Kantian, Heideggerian, Levinasian, analytic, Habermasian, Foucauldian and even Perelmanian—to reinforce this regulation ethically. As ideology is lacking, we are given moral lectures instead. As a result, from Allan Bloom to Vaclav Havel, the consensus that sophistic should be the prime target has reached remarkable dimensions, extending as far as politics.

Allow me to return once more to the mutual demarcation of the space between the philosopher and his bad other. Its most tangible effect is to relinquish the distinction between good and evil, the foundation of ethics, and hand it over to the most slippery genre, that of resemblance; as Friedrich Nietzsche noted, "the boundary between good and evil is blurred—that is the Sophist" (Nietzsche 1968, 231, §427). As a result, the two major themes which philosophy develops in order to distinguish the good side from the bad side of resemblance are cancelled out by sophistic, in such a way that ethics is displaced.

The first theme is that of the mask of "hypo-crisis" which one slips on. We are familiar with the accusation of flattery and deceit which runs throughout Plato's *Gorgias*: rhetoric and sophistry are *eidôla* which "slip beneath" justice

and legislation. But generally one fails to notice that Protagoras, who proudly describes himself as showing his face, literally undoes this accusation, when he shows, at the end of his myth, why the only mask one need wear is indeed that of justice:

As for the other excellences [. . .] if someone wishes, for instance, to be good at playing the flute or some other art, while he is not, he is mocked and becomes angry, and those who are close to him come and reproach him for his folly. If, on the contrary, the issue is justice and the political virtue in general, when a man who is known to be unjust, when this man ends up saying the truth about himself in public, this frankness which previously was viewed as wisdom, is in the present case considered to be madness, and one states that all must declare themselves to be just, whether they are or not, and that he who does not put on the mask of justice is mad. (Plato 1973a, 323b)

The social bond is created by pretending it exists, and when philosophy reproaches the sophists for being hypocritical, this hypocrisy is none other than the essence of political virtue. Hence the sophisticated *alter ego* is the one who drags ethics onto the political terrain.

The second elaboration in lieu of a distinction is, in Aristotelian terms, that pertaining to intention, *proairesis*. The sophists once again “slip” into “the same form as the philosopher” (Aristotle 1984b, Gamma 2, 1004b 17–18), but this time, the difference between the two has to do with “their choice of a way of life” (24–25). The intimate character of intention makes it even harder to grasp the difference. This is seized upon by Latin rhetoric and the second wave of sophistic in order to lead the moral problematic to its other point of reversal. “Philosophia enim simulari potest, eloquentia non potest” (Quintilian 1922, XII, 3, 12).¹⁴ In the second part of the sentence, Quintilian forces one to reevaluate the first part definitively. He leaves the question of intention to philosophy, both as regards its contestable criterial status, and its concretely or effectively ungraspable character. This is why philosophy always “may be counterfeited,” whereas eloquence, once again, as always, produces the effect which is unfailingly *index sui*. Philosophy never relinquishes its claim to unmasking sophistic by banking on the concept of intention; sophistic never ceases to distinguish itself from philosophy by emphasizing the accounting of effects. The consideration of effects can match that of intention because the effect is no longer at the mercy of a dichotomy: faced with the polarized duplicity of intention, there is or there is not an effect, *de facto*, precisely. When one responds to the question of intention with the effect, one has shifted the grounds of the ethical problematic, the definitional shield of philosophy, onto another terrain, that of aesthetics.

This twofold destabilization or upsetting of ethics is obviously what leads some to cry wolf. The most common name for the wolf today is “relativism.” This underscores in eminently philosophical, that is, Platonic fashion that the ethical upset is dependent on the refusal to subject discourse to the criterion of the verdict of truth. Unfortunately for those who end up reiterating his views, Joseph Moreau is one of those who has maintained this most consistently. For example, with regard to the media in particular he denounces “the great failing of a sophisticated civilization,” one (like ours) defined by “technological power and the power of the word.” He regrets the absence of any function in this “sophisticated” civilization “which could regulate the use of technology and *logos* and without which technology is in the service of unlimited appetites, and *logos* allows the justification of unavowable interests” (Moreau 1987, 14). This should be taken quite literally. Moreau considers that “sophistic reason” is responsible in particular for the demise of the gold standard in economics: “To be sure, gold is just an idol, but an indispensable idol in the absence of universal good faith. We are merely beginning to see the damage that this sophistic challenge to common sense and honesty can cause” (Moreau 1987, 16).

What is interesting in Moreau’s argument is that he is intelligent enough to plead guilty at the right moment, thereby justifying the impression one might have from the outset. One feels annoyed, but also stifled by his position, which I would venture to term “ethical correctness.” As he writes, “one cannot avoid being accused of intolerance, when one invokes the right of truth, faced with those who proclaim the sovereignty of opinion. However, the accusation of intolerance is unjustified, for if I assert that truth must live up to absolute demands, of which one must take account, I do not thereby claim that I am in possession of it, or that I must impose my view at any cost” (1987, 17). This reflection enables one to distinguish two ways of being an anti-relativist in the current debate. One is more “crude” or intolerable than the other, because it is dogmatic and non-critical. A position is dogmatic when it operates as if truth were not merely a regulative idea, a site, but also a content that must be respected, that one must make people respect. François Furet’s reaction against the “denunciation of European culture” he finds characteristic of political correctness most likely falls under this category. Furet regrets that this new political vulgate leads one, on the intellectual level, to “relativize all works of art and of the spirit, to wreck the idea of the universality of truth, without which the notion of education itself loses its meaning” (Furet 1992, 84).

Dogmatism and relativism become symmetrical dangers for the second kind of anti-relativist, who takes care to leave the site of truth empty. Allan Bloom, waging war against political correctness, thus specifies that “there are two threats to reason, the opinion that one knows the truth about the most important things, and the opinion that there is no truth in them; . . . the first asserts that the quest for the truth is unnecessary, while the second asserts that

it is impossible" (Bloom 1990, 18). Hence the right attitude, with due classicism, is the Socratic knowledge of ignorance.

Alain Badiou's modality of anti-relativism makes for a radically different perspective, insofar as he strives both to demarcate himself from the consensual discourse on ethics and to make room for a structural perception of sophistic. One should note, by the way, that it is hardly inconsequential that such different standpoints come together on this issue. In *Conditions* (1992; see also Badiou 1989), Badiou reenacts a Platonic gesture, faced with "modern sophistry" (Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) and its "contemporary" form (Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, and Jacques Derrida). There is no philosophy without sophistic, and no philosopher who does not define himself or herself as an opponent of the sophist ("every definition of philosophy must distinguish it from . . . sophistic") (1992, 59). However, it is not only the definition of philosophy in general which is dependent on sophistic, but also the distinction between good and bad philosophy: "Philosophy must never give way to anti-sophistical extremism. When it nourishes the dark desire to do away with the sophist *once and for all*, philosophy goes astray. This is precisely what defines *dogmatism*, in my view: claiming that the sophist should not exist, simply because he is a perverse twin of the philosopher. No, the sophist *must simply be assigned to his place*" (Badiou 1992, 73).

Faced with "disaster" (64, 72), with "dogmatic terror" (72), which lies in declaring that "the sophist must not be" and hence decreeing the "eradication of its other" (75), the "ethics of philosophy," on the contrary, maintains "the sophist as its opponent" and "preserves the *polemos*" (74): "At all times, the sophist is required for philosophy to keep hold of its ethics. For the sophist is the one who reminds us that the category of Truth is empty. To be sure, he only does so in order to deny truths, and in this regard he must be fought. But this fight takes place on the ground of ethical norms" (Badiou 1992, 76).

For a dogmatic Platonism, the first type of anti-relativism, the sophist as such is a danger to ethics. For a "Platonism of the manifold" (Badiou 1989, 85), which refuses to give up the category of truth as understood through sophistic (which then becomes ethically necessary, as "operation" and as "void" [Badiou 1992, 74]), to keep a firm hold on philosophy can only mean to withdraw the manifold "from the authority of language" (Badiou 1989, 86), and not to be obliged to "recognize the constitutive character of linguistic variation" (87).

In my opinion, it is exactly at this point that a more intelligent form of terrorizing rears its head, if we are to believe the philosophical rewriting of the history of philosophy. Indeed, it teaches us that the margin, the degree of freedom separating the act of assigning a place from the act of eradication, is perilously slim. How might one separate the initial gesture, which is good, from its chain of effects, which are bad? From Plato to Habermas, the issue is always Book X of the *Laws*, where the place that is assigned to those who speak as atheists is prison, followed by death without burial. In book Gamma

of the *Metaphysics*, he who denies the principle of non-contradiction is a plant, whose place is outside of humanity. From this standpoint, the difference between morals and moralism, or ethics and morals, regardless of those chiasmas with added value, has yet to be fulfilled.

Anti-Platonism seems like such an outdated notion! But anti-sophistics, too, seems so outdated! Haven't we long moved beyond these exchanges of threats? Neither the Heideggerian problematic nor the return to Kant seem to me sufficient. They fail, in any case, to prevent the French scene, within philosophy and without, from reducing ethical discourse to something dangerously inane.

NOTES

We warmly thank the publishers of *Le Débat* for their permission to publish a translation of this essay. *Ed.*

1. Translation by Charles Wolfe of "Qui a peur de la sophistique? Contre l'*ethical correctness*." First published in French in *Le Débat* 72 (November-December), 1992, and again in French in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1, 1994. Minor amendments have been made to the text and endnotes for its appearance in English, in discussion with the author and in conformance with *Hypatia's* referencing style.

2. In French, "les causes occasionnelles étant de loin les plus significatives." Cassin's reference is to Malebranche's concept of occasional causality—see, for example, Malebranche (1997, 448). Malebranche rejected the view that nature, bodies, things, and human will could be true causes, since nature would then be worshipped in place of God. On his view there is no necessary connection between the will and its supposed effects. Writes Malebranche, "Effort then is one thing, and *efficacy* another" (See Church 1931, 89, 97, 99). *Ed.*

3. On the use of the term "epochally" (in French, *historialement*), see the interview "Françoise Dastur By Herself" in this volume. *Ed.*

4. See, for example, "Conceptual Personae" (Deleuze 1994: 61–83). *Ed.*

5. *Kairos*: the right time, the critical moment. The *kairos* is always represented as a beautiful young man, who is entirely bald on the back of his head but has one lock of hair at the front, to signify that it must be caught "at just the right moment," and that it is always already almost too late. This gives rise to the expression, in French, "seizing the moment by its hairs" (*saisir l'occasion par les cheveux*). The reference to limping evokes the centaur Chiron, who limped. Chiron was Nietzsche's master, who spoke of limping from one foot to the other, where one foot is philology and the other philosophy.

6. Translations given from Greek texts are Barbara Cassin's own, in discussion with Charles Wolfe and the editor. *Ed.*

7. Cassin refers to the first paragraph of fragment 15, which begins, "Philosophistieren ist dephlegmatisieren—Vivificieren." The paragraph has been omitted from Stoljar's English translation of fragment 15. *Ed.*

8. For a full translation of the Parmenides, see Freeman (1948: 41–46). *Ed.*

9. For a full translation of Gorgias, see Freeman (1948: 127–38). *Ed.*

10. Heidegger's translation is translated in English in Krell and Capuzzi's partial translation of Heidegger's *Parmenides* as "For thinking and Being are the same" (Heidegger 1975, 79). Cassin's discussion refers to Parmenides' fragment 3, which appears as "For the same thing can be thought as can be," in Nahm (1964, 93). Wright suggests this is literally "the same thing is for thinking and for being," and may be understood as "what can be thought can exist." He comments, "The sentence is highly controversial. Other interpretations suggest "knowing and being are the same," or "to think means that what you think exists" (Wright 1985, 79). *Ed.*

11. Gorgias' fragment 82 is translated as "Many things thought about are not realities: we can conceive of a chariot running on the sea, or a winged man," in Freeman (1948, 129). *Ed.*

12. I am paraphrasing Francis Ponge's formidably dry statement (Ponge 1984, 40).

13. Translated as "For example, it is said that Homer's poetry is sung even in India, where they have translated it into their own speech and tongue. The result is that, while the people of India have no chance to behold many of the stars in our part of the world—for example, it is said that the Bears are not visible in their country—still they are not unacquainted with the sufferings of Priam, the laments and wailings of Andromachê and Hecuba, and the valor of both Achilles and Hector" (Chrysostom 1946, 363). *Ed.*

14. Translated as "For philosophy may be counterfeited, but eloquence never," in Quintilian (1922, 407). *Ed.*

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