

PLATO'S USE OF 'SOPHISTĒS': NEITHER NOVEL NOR DISTINCT NOR DEROGATORY

Trinidad Silva

Universidad Alberto Hurtado. Chile.

Abstract: In this paper I would like to challenge the received account according to which Plato's conception of the sophist is either novel, distinct or derogatory. I propose that Plato uses common conceptions of the intellectual to create a rather loose identity for the sophist. Through the available evidence, I hope to show that Plato does not assign a new meaning to the label, but rather uses conventional conceptions of the sophist to create his main argument. I claim that apart from the *Sophist*, in other dialogues there is no clear conception of what and who the sophist is, no clarity as to what their activity is, and therefore (although there are reasons to suspect about them and their activity), there are no grounds to condemn them. Stemming from a conceptualization of σοφία in terms of knowledge, the σοφιστής is mainly described as someone who knows many things, or an expert in 'all matters'—a description, we shall see, that precludes finding a single definition. My proposal is that Plato does not construct the hostility against sophists, as some accounts claim, but rather represents this hostility against experts and intellectuals by appealing to popular attitudes against the σοφοί. Importantly, Plato is critical of popular representations of sophists mainly because they are the result of people's misjudgement or ignorance, from which the prejudice against philosophers also stems.

Keywords: Plato - sophist - novel - distinct - derogatory

EL USO EN PLATÓN DE "SOFISTA": NI NOVEDOSO NI DISTINTO NI DESPECTIVO

Resumen: En este artículo me gustaría desafiar el relato admitido según el cual la concepción de Platón del sofista es novedosa, distinta o despectiva. Propongo que Platón utiliza concepciones comunes del intelectual para crear una identidad bastante flexible para el sofista. A través de la evidencia disponible, espero mostrar que Platón no asigna un nuevo significado a la etiqueta, sino que utiliza concepciones convencionales del sofista para crear su argumento principal. Afirmo que, aparte de *El Sofista*, en otros diálogos no hay una concepción clara de qué y quién es el sofista, no hay claridad en cuanto a cuál es su actividad, y por lo tanto (aunque hay razones para sospechar sobre ellos y su actividad), hay no hay

motivos para condenarlos. Partiendo de una conceptualización de σοφία en términos de conocimiento, el σοφιστής se describe principalmente como alguien que sabe muchas cosas, o un experto en “todos los asuntos”; una descripción, como veremos, que impide encontrar una única definición. Mi propuesta es que Platón no construye la hostilidad contra los sofistas, como afirman algunos relatos, sino que representa esta hostilidad contra los expertos e intelectuales apelando a las actitudes populares contra los σοφοί. Es importante destacar que Platón es crítico de las representaciones populares de los sofistas principalmente porque son el resultado del error de juicio o la ignorancia de la gente, de la que también se deriva el prejuicio contra los filósofos.

Palabras clave: Platón - sofista - novedoso - distinto - despectivo

Recibido: 14.01.2020 - Aceptado: 19.08.2020

Correspondencia: Trinidad Silva

Email: grinidad@gmail.com

Profesora de Filosofía antigua. Universidad Alberto Hurtado. Chile

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1424-5039

INTRODUCTION ¹

In previous scholarship, the distinction between philosopher and sophist in Plato has been mainly approached from Socrates' rivalry with a particular group of thinkers traditionally identified as sophists such as Hippias, Prodicus, Protagoras, and Gorgias, among others. Since Hegel, who attempted to restore the position of sophists in the Western philosophical tradition, different accounts have emerged to assess the contribution of sophists.² In these accounts, Plato is not always a reliable witness, for he is said to provide us with a partial or tendentious representation of sophists.³ This is true, except that ‘partial’ only makes sense if we think

1 The present article is part of my PhD research thesis (cf. Silva 2017). The writing and submission of the article was made as part of a larger research project at Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Chile: Proyecto Conicyt PAI Convocatoria Nacional Subvención a Instalación en la Academia Convocatoria año 2018 PAI77180035

2 Roughly, we can identify two predominant approaches. One, started by Hegel, regards the sophists as a school of thought. This is followed, among others, by Jaeger (1946), and Guthrie (1971). Another, started by George Grote, regards the sophists mainly as individuals connected with their historical and socio-political context. This approach is most notably followed by Sidgwick (1981).

3 Cf., for example, Wallace (2007). See also Tell (2011).

that the term ‘sophist’ has a unitary definition or a clear referential use.⁴ But this ignores one aspect that it is at the core of the problem, namely that in the fourth century BCE there is no widely-accepted way of describing, identifying or characterising the sophists or the philosophers, as has been established by Lloyd and Nightingale.⁵ A common approach to Plato’s treatment of sophists often assumes both that ‘sophist’ is a sharp and distinct category and that it has a clear derogatory sense.⁶

In this paper I would like to challenge (at least, if it is to nuance) the received account according to which Plato’s conception of the sophist is either novel, distinct or derogatory. I propose that Plato uses common conceptions of the intellectual to create a rather loose identity for the sophist. By tracing the meaning of σοφιστής in pre-Platonic literature, I will show that σοφιστής is not clearly demarcated from other σοφ- terminology.⁷ Although the examination is far from exhaustive, it provides us with enough evidence to establish that σοφιστής has no widely-accepted application, whether this implies positive or negative connotations, and does not designate one group of experts or class of people. Rather, as with σοφός, it is a broad and adaptable label. Through the available evidence, I hope to show that Plato does not assign a new meaning to the label, but rather uses conventional conceptions of the sophist to create his main argument.⁸ Stemming from a conceptualization of σοφία in terms of knowledge, the σοφιστής is mainly described as someone who knows many

4 Unless we assume the title designates some historical figures, as it is often the case.

5 Cf. Nightingale (1995) and Lloyd (1987).

6 From Hegel (1955 [1892]), most accounts deal with the issue of the meaning and connotations this label carries. Most of them recognize that the meaning in pre-Platonic literature is broad and ambivalent. Among those who believe that it was Plato who conferred the negative connotation are Grote (1888: 35, 37, 52), and Popper (1945: 225). Among those who believe that the negative connotation predates Plato are Guthrie (1971: 92-3). Havelock (1957: 158-9), says that the term is maligned by the influence of Old Comedy. More recently, Wallace (2007: 218) and Tell (2011: 2), have claimed that Plato applied the label to a rival group of thinkers with the purpose of disparaging them. On this, see also Schiappa (1991), Cassin (1995) and Poulakos (1995). Against this view, Corey (2015:3), claims that the label in Plato’s dialogues is distinct, but not necessarily negative or drawn in rivalry with philosophy.

7 See Tell (2011: 25), who argues against the artificial demarcation of σοφιστής meaning something different from σοφός.

8 Counting as evidence are those passages where Plato refers collectively to ‘the sophists’ or someone is introduced as a sophist. I will not assume someone is a sophist by relying on evidence outside Plato. For a discussion of this, see Irwin (1995: 571).

things, or an expert in 'all matters'—a description, we shall see, that precludes finding a single definition. I claim that apart from the *Sophist*, where Plato at the end reaches a novel, distinct and negative definition of the sophist, in other dialogues there is no clear conception of what and who the sophist is, no clarity as to what their activity is, and therefore, no grounds to condemn them.⁹ The present investigation is limited to the scope of these dialogues. My point is that Plato does not construct the hostility against sophists, as some accounts claim, but rather represents this hostility against experts and intellectuals by appealing to popular attitudes against the σοφοί. This does not mean that Plato is defending the sophist; rather, he defends the philosopher on those points where he looks like a sophist. It is only in the *Sophist*, I claim, that we see a clear attempt to differentiate the sophist from the philosopher, and this is achieved by creating a negative account of the sophist, one that can never be ascribed to the philosopher.

I. What and who is a sophist?

Firstly, it should be clear that the line of analysis adopted here is not primarily historical. This is not an attempt to reconstruct historic truth, but to look at what Plato has to say about the σοφιστής. The purpose is to get a deeper and clearer notion of the category σοφιστής in Plato, without treating the question of whether his description is accurate or not. Even though part of the scholarly tradition has embraced Plato's negative stance on sophists without reservations, from the nineteenth century onwards historians as well as philosophers have opened up the discussion to challenge the veracity and factuality of Plato's charges against sophists. This has provided a platform in which to examine the matter by considering the cultural and historical conditions involved, such as the relation of sophists to money and travelling, the role of rhetoric, their outlook in relation to social conventions, etc. All of these features have been revised and confronted so as to determine how justifiable Plato's depiction of the sophist is. The proposal introduced here is not set to test the factuality of Plato's argument. Definitions of the σοφιστής and the φιλόσοφος are loaded with Plato's own ideology and rhetoric, and so it is with his characterization of them.¹⁰

9 Although Plato implies that the fact that there is no clear conception of who they are or what they do is grounds for condemning them.

10 This is not to support the claim that Plato's account can be isolated from its historicity; rather, it does not focus on the question of whether Plato's notion of σοφιστής adjust to historical account of who the sophists are.

The first step into the investigation presents us with a difficulty. In general, to ascertain the meaning of the word σοφιστής, when it is so heavily loaded with references and connotations, demands a complete and careful analysis. Post-Platonic definitions of the term as found in dictionaries and lexicons, both old and modern, offer a similar account. We find a general sense, usually linked to the sophists' expertise and encyclopaedic knowledge, a more specific sense referring to the subject of their teachings, i.e. virtue and rhetoric, and, finally and more importantly, a derogatory sense pointing to the sophist's deceptiveness. The lexicons of Hesychius, Photius and Suda use the same word to define the sophist in one of their entries: ἀπατεῶν, 'cheat', 'rogue', from verb ἀπατᾶν, 'to deceive'.¹¹ At the core of this conception is Plato's last definition of the *Sophist*, by which the sophist's art is described as essentially deceptive (268c8).

Surprisingly enough, if we trace the usage of the word in the ancient textual tradition, we find there is nothing suggesting, at least in its origins, that this is a term of opprobrium—as implied by its later association with dishonesty, ἀπατᾶν. It is possible to make a noun from a verb (σοφίζεσθαι) with the morpheme -τα (nom. sg. -της), which denotes agency. In the process of noun formation σοφιστής is the masculine agent-noun coming from verb σοφίζεσθαι.¹² Just as the agent-noun ποιητής, formed from verb ποιεῖν, 'to make', translates generally into 'maker', σοφιστής, formed from verb σοφίζεσθαι 'being or becoming σοφός', would be fairly translated into 'sage' or 'knower'. Not far from what the adjective σοφός designates, 'wise', 'expert', 'clever', the noun σοφιστής mainly designates the person who is σοφός, i.e. a wise, expert, or clever person. From the above, the question arises not so much as to what a σοφιστής is, but rather as to who the σοφιστής is. The list includes poets, musicians and rhapsodists, diviners and seers, the seven wise men and pre-Socratic philosophers. Significantly, unlike φιλοσοφός, the label has a much more widespread use and well-established meaning in the literary tradition of the fifth century BCE, as most instances found in pre-Platonic literature show.¹³ Concerning the question of who the σοφιστής is, it may refer specifically to poets, as in Pindar (*I.* 5.28)), but in the *Histories* of Herodotus the general sense of 'teacher' or 'sage' is associated with a number of different 'experts', such as the statesman Solon (1. 29. 3), the soothsayer Melampus (2. 49. 6) and the philosopher Pythagoras (4. 95. 10). Negative tinges in the use of sophists are found in Euripides: we can

11 Hesychius, Σ 1372; Photius, Σ 528, 21; Suda Σ, 812.

12 For a study on this see Fraenkel (1910).

13 Cf. Kerferd (1981) and Guthrie (1971).

point specifically to titan Prometheus (*PB* 61-2; 944-6), the cunning thinker, or Thamyris (*Rh.* 924), the daring poet, always bearing in mind that the label includes anyone who shows expertise in some craft, such as the warrior Tydeus. Importantly, the negative tinges associated with the name σοφιστής may as well be attributed to σοφός when describing the intellectual, the expert or the clever, and condemning their arrogance. We cannot establish that the σοφισταί designate a distinct class. At least as observed in Aristophanes, the σοφισταί are lumped together with all kinds of experts, including philosophers (*Cl.* 332-5). The negative overtones that the title σοφιστής carries in this context can be explained as part of a larger phenomenon, namely the comic purpose of deriding the class of intellectuals, among which are found philosophers such as Socrates, and poets such as Euripides. This sort of permeability between the titles σοφός, σοφιστής and φιλοσοφός finds the clearest example in the Hippocratic corpus. The author of *On Ancient Medicine* (20. 1-4) describes natural philosophers as σοφισταί, and immediately after relates them to the kind of inquiry characteristic of φιλοσοφία. Perhaps the only case pointing to a more distinct use of the label σοφιστής in association with the art of rhetoric is in Thucydides (3. 38. 7) but being the only attested instance of the word in the author, it is risky to assert it as a regular use.

II. The Platonic Sophist: The Indefinable

When we get into the notion of sophist in Plato, we can hardly avoid preconceptions. These involve beliefs about the specific meaning of the label and the negative connotations attached to it (e.g. 'cheater', 'trickster'), the particular group of people to which it refers (e.g. Protagoras, Hippias, Gorgias and Prodicus) and the kind of activity that the label designates or is associated with (e.g. rhetoric). But the truth is that the evidence is not sufficient to establish what and who exactly the sophists are within the dialogues. By Plato's own admission, this label is difficult to define, and it is not reserved for a class of people, but for many different individuals who compete with one another (cf. *Prot.* 318d). Surprisingly enough, there is also not sufficient evidence to argue for a systematic rivalry between the sophist and the philosopher across Plato's dialogues. Of course, it is impossible to deny that dialogues such as the *Gorgias*, the *Euthydemus*, the *Lesser Hippias* and the *Protagoras* all provide a comparison between the sophist and the philosopher at a dramatic level. It is clear that Socrates, championing philosophy, competes with individuals who are reputed σοφισταί. But this is different from claiming that Plato defines philosophy and the philosopher as opposed to sophistry and sophists, or that he creates a systematic rivalry between them. Of course, the different views

adopted depend on what counts as evidence; sometimes sources outside the dialogues are used to establish that someone is a sophist or behaves like a sophist, which ‘may rest on views about the nature of sophistic doctrine or the sophistic movement that ought not be accepted without question’.¹⁴ Here I will limit the evidence to what Plato says of the sophists. From the available evidence, we see that the philosopher is drawn in contradistinction to many other intellectuals, but direct and explicit comparisons between the sophist and the philosopher are only few. In at least two relevant dialogues in which Plato intends to define philosophy and the philosopher, the comparison is drawn in opposition to the lovers of the body (*Phaedo* 68c1), the lovers of sights and sounds (*Rep.* V) and the lovers of honour and money (*Rep.* IX). That sophists might have been considered within either of these groups can certainly be discussed but cannot be safely established. Far from being sharply defined, σοφιστής in Plato refers to different kinds of people and carries both positive and negative connotations.

Perhaps a regular feature of the notion of σοφιστής in Plato is its resistance to definition. Plato himself poses the difficulties of defining a sophist. This is the starting point and the central thread of the dialogue *Sophist* (cf. 218b ff.), but the issue is also addressed in other dialogues. Although etymologically it may seem easy to assert what a σοφιστής is (*Prot.* 312c5, *Soph.* 221d3), Plato contests the idea by proving that σοφιστής is a loose category, potentially to be confused with the φιλοσοφός and the πολιτικός (*Soph.* 216c8, 217a3 ff.). This phenomenon partly responds to the fact that sophists cannot be related to one specific area of expertise (*Prot.* 312d4 ff; *Soph.* 233c6), but more importantly to the way they operate, i.e. by imitation (*Soph.* 267e1, 268c1; *Stat.* 303c3).

In what follows, I would like to address the following aspects, all of which touch upon traditional representations of sophists in Plato: (i) the definition of ‘sophist’; (ii) the sophists’ area of expertise; (iii) the class of the sophists; (iv) the sophist’s reputation. By addressing these aspects, I intend to elucidate some of the key issues involving the conceptualization of the sophist in Plato. By the end of my discussion, I hope to show that Plato plays with popular conceptions of the σοφιστής (which also capture attitudes against the σοφοί) to demonstrate that there is essentially very little clarity around who the sophist is, what he does and whether he is good or bad. Indeed, this lack of clarity is essential to defining the figure of the sophist in the dialogue *The Sophist*, and it gives Plato the opportunity to distinguish what people think a sophist is (an apparent sophist) from a real sophist.

14 Irwin (1995: 571).

III. The Problem of Definition

If, following Socrates in the *Meno*, we accept that a definition is obtained from identifying the distinct quality of a given thing, we might well accept that something that defies definition may have no identifiable distinct and universal quality.¹⁵ This is what Plato seems to believe about the category σοφιστής, a category that resists delineation because there seems to be no qualities and/or no group of qualities common to all and only sophists. It is the apparent indefinability of the category σοφιστής that is at the heart of the visitor's quest in the dialogue *the Sophist*. 'But the tribe which we now intend to search for, the sophist, is not the easiest thing in the world to catch and define' (218d3-4).¹⁶ However, this could be objected by arguing—as an average Greek citizen could—that the meaning of σοφιστής actually appears to be quite clear; by definition, a σοφιστής is 'someone who is in possession of σοφία'. Plato is aware of this and so he raises the question about the definition of the sophist in the *Protagoras* (312c ff.) and the *Sophist*. This will prove problematic for Plato for, as shown in the *Sophist*, the sophist is said to have no (real) σοφία although the name suggests he does. The visitor from Elea says to Theaetetus: 'Well, shall we suppose the sophist is a layman [ιδιώτην], or completely and truly an expert [παντάπασιν ὡς ἀληθῶς σοφιστήν]?' (221d1-2).¹⁷ The adverb ἀληθῶς aims to emphasize the literal meaning of σοφιστής as 'a man of wisdom', and Theaetetus, picking up on this, responds: 'He's not a layman at all. I understand what you're saying: he has to be the kind of person that the name sophist indicates' (221d3-4). Of course, Plato does not seem to believe the issue at stake is only nominal (i.e. σοφιστής is not just a name); the question is much more complex than that because there is actually a way to explain why those people that are called sophists are known as sophists in the sense of 'expert' or 'knowledgeable'. As Theaetetus asserts, although the sophist cannot be said to be an expert, he cannot be said to be a layman (ιδιώτης) either (*Soph.* 221d3).

Apart from the *Sophist*, there are other dialogues in which Plato raises more or less explicitly the problem of the identity of the sophist. As mentioned above, there is an attempt to define what a sophist is in the *Protagoras*. After admitting that from Protagoras' teaching he will become a sophist, Socrates

15 Cf. *Meno* 72c1ff.

16 It is worth noticing that although the *Sophist* works with collection and division rather than definition in the fashion of the Socratic dialogues, it is the apparent lack of an essential and unique quality that makes him indefinable.

17 Throughout the paper, translations of the Platonic dialogues are those of Cooper and Hutchinson (1997).

asks Hippocrates to give a definition of the term σοφιστής. Assuming that this is not an easy enterprise, Socrates says: ‘As to what exactly a sophist is, I would be surprised if you really knew’ (312c1). Hippocrates, however, manages to give a general account based on what he seems to believe is the etymology of the word: ‘as the name suggests, he is someone who is knowledgeable in σοφά things [τοῦτον εἶναι τὸν τῶν σοφῶν ἐπιστήμονα] (312c5-6).¹⁸ Hippocrates comes up with a formula that seems to fit nicely with the meaning of a σοφιστής, by associating the σοφ- component with σοφία and the ιστ- with ἐπίστασθαι.¹⁹ But Hippocrates’ definition is not only based on a false etymology; if we accept a certain correspondence between σοφία and ἐπιστήμη (*Theaet.* 145e6; cf. 2.3), the definition is also circular. ‘A sophist is a knower of wise things, or, in effect, a knower of knowledge’.²⁰ Socrates seems to be bothered by neither of these things. Although the definition will prove insufficient, Socrates seems to have no grounds to reject the general characterization of a sophist as a ‘knower’. As Kerferd points out, ‘when the young Hippocrates in Plato’s *Protagoras* says that σοφιστής means “he who knows wise things” as if from σοφά and οἶδα (312c), he may have been a bad etymologist, but he understood the earlier meaning of the word’.²¹ Moreover, both the redundancy and the ambiguity of Hippocrates’ definition seems to play in favour of Socrates’ own characterization of the sophist elsewhere as it points to the encyclopaedic knowledge claimed by some reputed σοφισταί.²²

Socrates rejects Hippocrates’ definition on the ground that is ‘too general’.²³ According to the Socratic criteria for definitions established elsewhere, we seem to be missing, *that by which* a sophist is a sophist: ‘A proper definition of sophists would spell out a feature that all and only sophists have, and that makes them all sophists’.²⁴ But ‘knowledgeable about wise things’ can be said about painters and carpenters and, in sum, about any other expert.

18 Trans. adapted.

19 The etymology is false. The - ιστ- of σοφιστής is added to the stem to make an agent noun while the - ιστ- of the ἐπίστασθαι is not a component, but part of the stem. See Denyer (2008: 75).

20 Cf. Coby (1987: 29).

21 Kerferd (1950: 9).

22 Cf. *Euthyd.* 271c5; *Soph.* 233c6, *Hipp. Min.* 368b2.

23 Cf. Denyer (2008: 74-5) who goes through all the conditions of Socratic definitions as discussed in the *Euthyphro*, *Laches* and the *Meno*.

24 Denyer (2008: 75).

To narrow down the definition, Socrates presses Hippocrates into saying what the sophists' knowledge is *about*.

IV. The Sophists' Area of Expertise

For the purpose of making Hippocrates aware about the power and effect of Protagoras' teaching, Socrates is interested in determining what the sophist's area of expertise is. That is why the definition 'expert' unqualified is not useful. 'And if someone asked, 'What about sophists? What wise things do they understand [Ὁ δὲ σοφιστὴς τῶν τί σοφῶν ἐστίν;]?'—what would we answer? What are they expert at making?' (312d4-5). The conversation resembles the exchange between Socrates and Gorgias in the *Gorgias* (449d ff.). There too Socrates is keen on determining the subject matter of rhetoric, i.e. about what (περὶ τί) the knowledge of rhetoric is.²⁵ And Hippocrates, like Gorgias, says that this knowledge is about speech (*Gorg.* 449e1): the sophist makes people clever speakers (δεινὸν λέγειν; 312d7). But speech is not a defining aspect, for there is a speech for every field of knowledge. Socrates then persists with the question 'about what' (περὶ ὅτου; 312d9, περὶ τίνοϋς; 312e3), until Hippocrates' is led into fallacy by including in his answer the premise that needs to be proven, producing something like 'the sophist knows about those things that he knows'. As he fails to establish what (τί) and about what (περὶ ὅτου) is this knowledge that the sophist possesses and teaches, the question is left unanswered.

It is worth asking why the question related to subject-matter is relevant. Socrates in the *Apology* establishes that σοφία unqualified, that is, absolute σοφία, belongs only to god (23a5-6). Σοφία, unless divine, has to be qualified and a way to do this is determining its subject matter, i.e. to say what σοφία is about. In general, we find three answers to this question in the dialogues; the σοφιστῆς' expertise is (i) about all things (*Soph.* 233c6; *Euthyd.* 271c5) and specifically (ii) about virtue (*Apol.* 20b4; *Laches* 186c3; *Meno* 91b3, *Gorg.* 519c5; *Prot.* 319a4; *Soph.* 223a3) and (iii) speech (*Prot.* 312d6; *Crat.* 403e2; *Phaedrus* 257d6; *Tim.* 19e2; *Theaet.* 167a6).²⁶ In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates' refers to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, previously introduced as a 'new addition to sophists' (271c1), and describes their expertise as follows: 'you ask what is their σοφία —it will surprise you, Crito—they are simply σοφοί about all [πάσσοφοι]' (271c5). The claim of encyclopaedic knowledge somehow contains the other two, but it does not affect them if proved wrong, for it can

25 As will be shown, sophistry and rhetoric are presented as almost the same practice in the *Gorgias*.

26 Corey (2015) proposes that 'teacher of *aretē*' is Plato's regular definition.

still be admitted that the sophist knows *some* things, namely speech and virtue. However, as observed above, since there is a speech or a discourse (*logos*) for every single kind of knowledge (see *Gorg.* 450b1), the answer is unsatisfactory for there is no specification of subject matter.²⁷ The claim that the sophists' knowledge is about virtue, largely examined in the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*, connects to the question of whether virtue is knowable (and thus teachable), which neither of these dialogues can establish conclusively. Mostly, each of these claims seems to be too ambitious or simply impossible. It is not humanly possible to know everything and yet this is what sophists claim to do (*Soph.* 233a3ff).²⁸ The sophists' claim to knowledge is thus often characterized as super-human or divine.²⁹ In the *Apology*, Socrates' compare his ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία with the claim of being wise in superhuman wisdom which refers to Evenus' expertise in ἀρετή (20b4). Such a remarkable undertaking deserves Socrates' admiration, and in this spirit, he praises Protagoras more than once (*Prot.* 319a10; 320b5; 348e2). Here it may be worth recalling Hippolytus' words to his father when discussing the possibility of teaching φρόνησις: 'A formidable σοφιστής this [δεινὸν σοφιστὴν εἶπας], who is able to force insensate fools to show sense' (*Eur. Hipp.* 921). The production of a speech that covers every subject also seems like a super-human achievement. In the *Euthydemus*, when looking for that knowledge that combines both the making and the use of what is made, Socrates proposes the art of the speechmaker. 'For indeed the men who make the speeches, when I meet them, do seem to me to be super-σοφός [ὑπέρσοφος], Clinias, and their very art seems to be something divine and lofty' (*Euthyd.* 289e1).

From the examples above, we obtain two relevant characterizations of the sophists in Plato. First, to the extent that they claim to have access to knowledge that is beyond human (absolute or divine knowledge), we get the image of the sophist as a magician, an enchanter, a wizard, a prophet or a juggler (*Crat.* 397a1; *Symp.* 203d8; *Laws* 908d7; *Soph.* 235b5, 241b6). We might want to wonder whether the characterization of sophists as magicians is necessarily

27 This is explicit in *Dissoi logoi* DK 90 8(3).

28 See *Rep.* 10. 596c-d and *Soph.* 233d9 for a characterization of sophists as 'makers of everything'.

29 The philosopher is also considered divine (see *Soph.* 216c1). Although the philosopher aspires to obtain knowledge of the whole, there is a fundamental difference with the kind of knowledge the sophists boast, a sort of omniscience, encompassing all possible subject sand arts. As Rosen (1999: 158) asserts: 'philosophy is concerned with the whole, and not simply with this or that art'.

unfavourable.³⁰ This becomes particularly relevant considering that Socrates is more than once presented in this light. Alcibiades in the *Symposium* compares Socrates with the Marsyas (215c) in his power to enchant and possess people with his words. Similarly, in the *Meno* (80b), Meno explains his own state of bewilderment and perplexity as the result of Socrates' 'spell'. This is why he introduces the torpedo-fish analogy, which goes hand with hand with the image of witchcraft. The tone of Meno's joke is not complimentary (see 80b4). In this regard, Socrates may not be too different from sophists: all of them seem to practice incantation through words. But this is only true when assessing the performance of the speaker from the point of view of the audience's response. Like the audience of a magician, most of Socrates' interlocutors turn out to be both amazed and baffled when witnessing his performance. But then again, one can be confused and baffled by reading conspiracy theories involving aliens or Darwin's theory of evolution. This means that a fair assessment should include not only the response of the audience, but also the approach and intention of the speaker. And considering these elements, Socrates appears more like a show spoiler than a magician. Romilly spells out the difference: 'Whereas the magic of the sophists aimed at producing illusion, Socrates' magic rests on the obstinate destruction of all illusions. It is the magic of implacable truth'.³¹ The characterization of sophists as enchanters or magicians in Plato relates to both the distorted conception sophists have of themselves (they think they know what they do not know), and the use of their abilities regardless of the truth. This second point becomes relevant later in the context of the analysis of the *Sophist*, but it is worth addressing it now. What makes the sophist comparable to a magician in Plato is his lack of commitment to truth. This is what ultimately allows him to display the full potential of his capacity without any restriction, 'for the sake of the show'. As a result, the sophist may use as many resources and as many facets as he deems convenient for the success of his performance. An example of this appears in the *Euthydemus* in relation to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (288b6-8).³² Through the dialogue we can see that this constant shifting makes the progress of the conversation impossible; the argument either turns in a circle or is reduced *ad absurdum*. But most important of all, by proving themselves skilled disputers, they show the wrong disposition to find the truth, which is crucial for philosophical activity. As Socrates declares:

30 To see a full account of the evaluation of magic from philosophy and medicine in the course of the fifth century, see Lloyd (1979).

31 Romilly (1975: 36-7).

32 In the *Euthydemus* sophistic is also comparable to religious mysteries (277d7).

‘they have become so skilled in fighting in arguments and in refuting whatever may be said, no matter whether it is true or false’ (272a8-b1). It is noteworthy that τέχνη is attributed to sophists. To the extent that sophists claim to be experts in certain areas of knowledge, they can be compared to other craftsmen (*Apol.* 20a6; *Rep.* 596d1; *Prot.* 311e2; 312d4; *Soph.* 222a2). This is especially significant considering that philosophy is not commonly compared with other crafts. Except in the *Republic*, the status of philosophy as an activity prevents it from being conceptualized as either τέχνη or σοφία. Of course, a thorough analysis of Plato’s conceptualization of philosophy might demonstrate that he ultimately considers it to be a craft (comparable to medicine)—dialectic being the highest craft, but in the context of the present analysis what comes to our attention is the contrast with sophistry. In this regard, there are two aspects that make the comparison between sophistry and other crafts relevant: the sophists’ claim to knowledge and the sophists’ claim to teaching.

V. The Sophistai

The doxographic tradition has provided us with a number of names listed as sophists. Within the tradition of ‘old sophistic’ we find Protagoras, Xenocrates, Gorgias, Lycophron, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Hippias, Antiphon and Critias, most of them attested in Philostratus’ account *The Lives of the Sophists* and the *Suidas Lexicon*.³³ Of these, Plato makes explicit references to the following as sophists: Prodicus (*Lach.* 197d3; *Sym.* 177b4; *Euthyd.* 277e4); Protagoras (*Crat.* 391c4, *Prot.* 311e3); Gorgias (*Hipp. Maj.* 282b4); and Hippias (*Hipp. Maj.* 282e8).³⁴ He also identifies Dionysodorus and Euthydemus (*Euthyd.* 271c1), Miccus (*Lysis* 204a5), who is introduced as a friend and supporter of Socrates, and Evenus (*Apol.* 20b8) as sophists.³⁵

It is striking that Plato also compares Diotima to a sophist (*Symp.* 208c1) and identifies the god Hades (*Crat.* 403e2) and Poros (*Symp.* 203e1) as sophists. When reaffirming the doctrine according to which the mortal loves and strives for the immortal, Diotima is said to respond ‘like a perfect [τέλειος] σοφιστής’.³⁶ In the same dialogue, Poros is a σοφιστής for, as opposed to Penias, he is fully resourceful and knowledgeable. When explaining the etymology of

33 These are the sophists in Diels and Kranz (1951) and Untersteiner (1949).

34 On Protagoras’ evaluation, see also *Hipp. Maj.* 282c.

35 Socrates himself is identified as a sophist by the servant in *Prot.* 314d3.

36 The association between priests and sophists is made at *Crat.* 397a1, when Socrates says that the wisdom about names will be conjured away by either one of the priests or one of the sophists.

'Hades' (Ἅιδης) in the *Cratylus*, Socrates suggests that Hades bind us to come to the world of death by means of his words and charm. 'And, according to this view, he is "the perfect sophist" [τέλειος σοφιστής]' (403e4). His name 'Hades' is said to come from εἰδέναι, because of 'his knowledge of all noble things' (404b2-3). From these examples, I believe that we can safely assume that Plato makes use of the general sense of σοφιστής, which captures the basic meaning of the adjective σοφός as 'knowledgeable', although it is not impossible that Plato labels these figures as sophists deliberately bringing forth some of the negative overtones associated with it. _

When Plato refers to sophists as a group, he generally incorporates the aspect of teaching. Sophists are said to have pupils, (claim to) impart a skill, or (claim to) educate people (*Apol.* 19e1; *Lach.* 186c4; *Prot.* 319a5; *Gorg.* 519c5; *Meno* 91b7; *Rep.* 6. 492d5; *Theaet.* 167a6). As obvious as it might seem, it is worth remarking that teaching is described as requiring the possession of the knowledge of the subject taught. This is especially significant considering that this is not a condition that applies to Socratic *elenchus*, by which he brings out the knowledge of the interlocutor. In the *Apology* Socrates declares that he has never been a teacher (33a5) and in the *Laches* (186c2-5) he makes an explicit comparison between his lack of τέχνη in ἀρετή and the sophists' expert knowledge. Roochnik makes the point: '*Laches* 186c discloses a basic point of divergence to which I return frequently: *unlike the Sophists, Socrates professes no technē*'.³⁷ *It is important to consider this since it links the professional aspect of teaching with the quality of being knowledgeable, which seems to be a crucial element in the definition and characterization of a σοφιστής. In the Cratylus, Socrates says to Hermogenes: 'The most correct way is together with people who already know [μετὰ τῶν ἐπισταμένων], but you must pay them well and show gratitude besides—these are the sophists [...]' (391b9-11).*

However, when σοφιστής is used as a tag to designate a member of this group of teachers, the underlying meaning of σοφός as 'expert', if not excluded, is at least diminished. If we recall the passage in the *Protagoras* where Hippocrates is trying to give a definition of σοφιστής, we see that Socrates is not content with the idea of the sophist being this expert with no specific field of expertise. The question seems significant because Hippocrates expects to become a sophist from Protagoras' teaching, which means that he believes that a sophist's skills and knowledge are transferable. At this point of the discussion we already get an idea about the notion of σοφιστής that Plato is looking for. This is not the general meaning of σοφιστής as 'knower'

37 Roochnik (1996: 96).

or ‘expert’. If that were the case, Socrates would have been happy with this definition and Hippocrates, on the other hand, would have been able to include painters and builders among the σοφισταί. But as becomes clear later in the dialogue, ‘sophist’ has the more concrete sense of ‘professional teacher’, which refers to Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus (314e4 ff). This does not mean that any professional teacher is a sophist. It is essential to understand that this is a title of reputation; to a large extent, the σοφοί and the σοφισταί are those renowned as such.

To illustrate the different uses of σοφιστής in Plato, let us think of the example ‘conservative’, which as an adjective describes a person’s preference for tradition and old values. As a noun (used in the specific political sense) ‘Conservative’ designates a member of a political party aligned with a particular ideology and agenda. Although this ideology is linked to the original meaning of ‘conserving’ or ‘preserving’ old values, when we refer to Conservatives as a party the adjectival meaning seems to fade, and the term becomes more like a title or tag to label a class of people. As a result, its sense and meaning are linked to the salient traits and activities associated with the people who belong to this group. Maybe we can think of the word σοφιστής in a similar way. There is the adjectival sense associated with σοφός that designates the quality of knowing, and there is a referential sense by which σοφιστής designates a group of people distinguished by certain characteristics.

It is clear that in order to identify ‘sophists’ as a group or a class we would need to establish a set of identifiable traits. Although no one today would admit that there is such thing as a ‘school’ of sophists (or even a ‘movement’), some accounts still offer a list with some common salient features of sophists invoking Plato as a witness.³⁸ Most notably, Guthrie (1969: 35 ff) says a sophist is distinguished by his (i) professionalism; (ii) inter-city status; (iii) epideictic and eristic methods; (iv) empiricist outlook. While it is true that most of these features are attributed to one or another individual sophist across the dialogues, there is little evidence in Plato to support the claim that this set of traits is either comprehensive or defining of sophists as a group. Other than the aspect of teaching, there seems to be no systematic set of defining features for the class of σοφισταί. It is actually quite difficult to distinguish sophists as a genus at all. The problem is identified at the outset of the *Sophist*, when Socrates wonders whether there is a difference between the categories σοφιστής, φιλοσοφός and πολιτικός (217a3). Part of the problem seems to be that, with the exception of Protagoras (*Prot.* 317b4), none of the so-called sophists call themselves sophists. This is quite significant. Unlike the case of ‘conservative’,

38 Dillon and Gergel (2003).

'sophist' is a title of reputation, which means that individuals can be identified as such as long as others regard them as such. In this sense, sophist is much closer to the label 'intellectual', a label rarely used for the purpose of self-presentation. Hence labelling becomes a controversial issue because most of those who are called sophists might choose for themselves some other title endowed with more prestige such as 'philosopher' (*Rep.* 495d4). We know that this was the case with Isocrates' *Antidosis*, and Plato seems to address him in the *Euthydemus* when Socrates says: 'they are the persons, Crito, whom Prodicus described as the border-ground between philosopher and politician, yet they fancy that they are the wisest of all mankind' (305c6-8). In the same dialogue, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, previously labelled as sophists by Crito (271c1), proudly accept that they are the 'best able to exhort a man to philosophy and the practice of virtue' (275a1-2). Precisely because these titles are conventionally established, they are flexible and permeable. Thus, it is entirely possible that he who presents himself as a philosopher may seem to be a sophist, as could be the case for Socrates, or a sophist as a philosopher, as could be the case of Isocrates. This problem is at the basis of the dialogues *Sophist* and *Statesman*.

VI. The Sophists' Reputation

'Plato's hostility to the sophists is obvious and has always been recognized. But exactly what he says about them has not always been described with precision'.³⁹ What makes Kerferd's statement interesting is the contrast between the categorical force of the first assertion, 'Plato's hostility is obvious', and the qualification that follows, 'but is not clear what exactly he says about them'. To assess the phenomenon, I would like to proceed in the opposite direction: to understand what Plato has to say about sophists and then establish whether his hostility is clear. Once we examine more closely Plato's own words, the argument for hostility becomes less obvious. The truth is that as much as we find clear attempts to disparage the sophists, we can also trace some effort on the part of Socrates to clear their name against common prejudice. The phenomenon is partly addressed in the *Apology* (22e6), in the *Euthyphro* (3c6) and the *Protagoras* (316d2) and has to do with a generalized odium against the intellectual, whether teachers, philosophers or scientists, as shown in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Indeed, when Hippocrates blushes at saying he will become a sophist, Socrates reacts: "'What? You? Wouldn't you be ashamed to present yourself to the Greek world as a sophist?'" (312a4-6). The negative evaluation attached to the title of sophist comes from public

39 Kerferd (1981: 4).

perception.

An interesting example to show how Plato deals with prejudice against the intellectual is found in the *Meno*. Socrates, in conversation with Meno about whether there are teachers of virtue, calls Anytus for assistance on the assumption that he has the status and authority to respond to such a question. Anytus, one of Socrates' prosecutors in the *Apology*, is a most representative example of the anti-intellectual stripe. If Meno desires to have σοφία and ἀρετή, Socrates asks who he should go to. It would appear natural, says Socrates, to go to those who advertise themselves as teachers of virtue, those whom men call 'sophists'. Anytus reacts "May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers" (91c1-5). Socrates challenges Anytus' opinions by invoking the example of Protagoras, who holds a great reputation among Athenians. 'Are we to deem those whom some people consider the wisest of men [σοφωτάτους ἀνθρώπων] to be so mad as that? (92a4-6). But Anytus does not give in and Socrates insists:

SOCRATES: Has some sophist wronged you, Anytus, or why are you so hard on them?

ANYTUS: No, by Zeus, I have never met one of them, nor would I allow any one of my people to do so.

SOCRATES: Are you then altogether without any experience [ἄπειρος] of these men?

ANYTUS: And may I remain so.

SOCRATES: How then, my good sir, can you know whether there is any good in their instruction or not, if you are altogether without experience of it?

ANYTUS: Easily, for I know who they are, whether I have experience of them or not.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you are a wizard, Anytus, for I wonder, from what you yourself say, how else you know about these things (92b5-c7).

Anytus' assumptions here, as in Socrates' *Apology*, reflect the anti-intellectual attitude based on prejudice. In Plato's version, it is precisely as a result of this distorted judgement that Socrates is regarded as a sophist. This can give us hints to explain why Plato does not endorse people's opinion in his assessment of the sophist. To destroy the sophist's reputation when is so

tightly associated with the philosopher's, particularly with Socrates, can do more damage than good.

In the *Protagoras*, Plato creates a good opportunity to tarnish the sophists' reputation. Hippocrates cannot identify the sophist's expertise and is at a loss to assert what a sophist is. Socrates, unlike Hippocrates, seems to have a clear idea of what sophists are: 'a sophist is a kind of merchant who peddles provisions upon which the soul is nourished' (313c4-6). Even though this depiction damages the sophist—he is presented as a seller rather than a knower or a teacher—when looking closely at the analogy we can see that the target of criticism is more the consumer than the seller. Socrates warns Hippocrates of the dangers of being a misinformed consumer. Like the merchants of food, the sophists' main goal is to sell their products, i.e. teaching, without discriminating the beneficial from the harmful. 'So if you are a knowledgeable [ἐπιστήμων] consumer, you can buy teachings safely from Protagoras or anyone else. But if you're not, please don't risk what is most dear to you on a roll of the dice, for there is a far greater risk in buying teachings than in buying food' (313e2-5).⁴⁰

It is striking to see later on that Protagoras' characterization does not satisfy this generalized depiction of sophists as merchants or sellers indifferent to the effect of their teaching. When asked about the nature of his teaching, Protagoras claims to make people better (318b4), to make them good citizens

40 The aspect of money has resonated in the tradition, if not as one of the strongest, then as one of the most persistent motives for Plato's condemnation of sophists (cf. Tell (2011: 39-59). Indeed, this is a recurrent theme across the dialogues (see *Apol.* 20b; *Lach.* 186c; *Theaet.* 167c-d; *Soph.* 225e; 226a; *Prot.* 313c; *Hipp. Maj.* 282b, 282e), although it is not exclusively treated by Plato. The negative aspect of money is also explored by Xenophon. See *Mem.* 1. 2. 5-6, 1. 6. 5. It is beyond the purpose of this analysis to carry a detailed examination of the aspect of money; it will suffice to say that this is not a specific aspect of Plato's criticism against sophists. The problem cannot be reduced to some distaste for money-making; it has a broader scope and is at the heart of Plato's value-system. According to some basic Platonic moral principles, the search for wealth and money (to which we might also add honour and pleasure) is misguided: it is the result of a misevaluation of goods. The particular problem with sophists, like Protagoras or Euthydemus, who offer to teach virtue for a fee, is that they challenge the Platonic moral balance between means and ends: virtue and knowledge become the means to acquire wealth, that is, the means become the ends and vice versa. Thus, even though the love for money is driven by a low appetite, charging a fee is not reproachable in itself (see *Gorg.* 520d), but it is for giving advice on virtue (*Gorg.* 520e). Ultimately, charging a fee (or request any other favour) for teaching virtue implies that some sort of exchange is possible, i.e. that it is possible to simply buy virtue as opposed to have to work at the internal understanding necessary to have it.

(319a5), and to teach virtue (328b1). The question of whether this is possible or not does not change the fact that he is not presented as a seller whose only goal is to make money. And unlike other sophists who ‘abuse young men, steering them back again, against their will, into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music, and poetry’ (318d9-e3), Protagoras claims to teach domestic and civic virtue: ‘sound deliberation, both in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action’ (318e5-319a2). Protagoras stands out as a sophist whose activity concerns the citizens’ well-being and he claims to undertake this activity in the name of sophistry. Across Plato’s dialogues, no one else embraces the title of sophist with such pride: ‘I admit that I am a sophist and that I educate men’ (317b4); ‘I have been in the profession many years now, and I’m old enough to be the father of any of you here’ (317c1-3). Protagoras’ pride at being a sophist is described as something remarkable and unprecedented. He himself explains that sophists are part of a tradition that goes as back as Homer: poets, prophets and even athletes are counted in the tradition of sophists, but because of people’s odium and suspicion towards them, they have concealed their profession (316d3-e5). The account offered by Protagoras seems to neutralize the earlier negative evaluation of sophists. As Kerferd says, as suspicious as it might seem, this account ‘functions as an attempt to provide Protagoras with respectable antecedents for his own sophistic art’.⁴¹ He goes on to say: ‘Plato here, through the person of Protagoras, gives expression to a more adequate “image” of the wise man in earlier periods, than that contrived, in part by himself and in part by Aristotle and others still later, which still dominates our handbooks and dictionaries’.⁴² But why would Plato do this? This account, of course, is offered by Plato as Protagoras’ own interpretation of the tradition of sophists. But it is striking to see not only that it makes sense historically, but also that it presents the sophists’ lineage in a rather positive light. I think there is a way to explain this within Plato’s own agenda. Clearing the sophists’ bad reputation would allow him to introduce his own assessment, a more serious one, free from the opinion of the majority and the anti-intellectual bias. By displacing popular conceptions, Plato validates his own. And this is ultimately because he considers that the reasons why sophists have a bad reputation are not the right reasons. As Protagoras’ account says, sophists have historically claimed

41 Kerferd (1976: 27).

42 Kerferd (1976: 28).

to educate men.⁴³ Traditionally, the odium against them is rooted in the belief that their education defies the traditional value-system and corrupts people. But Plato's suspicion of sophists is rooted in disbelief: he does not believe that sophists can teach virtue, and, to the same extent, he does not believe they can corrupt people. See for example in the *Meno*, where the problem of whether virtue is teachable becomes the problem of whether there are actual teachers of virtue. In this context, Meno asks Socrates: 'do you think that there are no teachers of virtue [ἀρετῆς διδάσκαλοι]?' to which he answers: 'I have often tried to find out whether there were any teachers of it, but in spite of all my efforts I cannot find any' (89e4-7). Unlike Anytus, Socrates does not think that sophists are a corrupting force; but he does not think they are teachers of virtue either. Both the downgrading and the overrating of sophists distort their image; they are neither educators in virtue nor corrupting rogues. This view is also laid down in the *Republic*. When Socrates diagnoses the causes of bad education, he asserts that sophists have no effect on the public. He asks Adeimantus: 'Or do you agree with the general opinion that certain people are actually corrupted by sophists [διαφθείροντας δέ τινας σοφιστὰς ἰδιωτικούς]—that there are certain sophists with significant influence on the young who corrupt them through private teaching?' (492a5-8). It is not the case that sophists corrupt young men when trying to educate them; rather, their teaching has no moral effect, either negative or positive. They are relatively harmless. As Irwin points out, Plato's view on sophists is less complimentary than the common view in that he holds them to be unoriginal, and more complimentary in that he does not accuse them of promoting new immoral doctrines.⁴⁴

Because Gorgias has traditionally been counted among the sophists, it is assumed that the *Gorgias*, by articulating an attack against rhetoric, also includes an attack against sophistry and sophists. But the truth is that Gorgias is not regarded as a sophist' in this dialogue.⁴⁵ Rather, 'he describes himself as a rhetor (449a), and the professions of rhetor and sophist are carefully distinguished by Socrates, though he admits that people are apt to confound them (465c)'.⁴⁶ Indeed, sophistry can hardly be counted as a main topic of discussion; σοφιστική appears only three times: twice in conversation with Polus (463b6; 465c2) and once in conversation with Callicles (520b2), where σοφιστής also appears only once (520a7). In the course of the dialogue Socrates

43 See Isocrates 15. 285, 313.

44 Irwin (1995: 578).

45 Cf. Dodds (1959: 7) and Irwin (1995: 575).

46 Dodds (1959: 7).

engages in conversation with three different interlocutors: Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. The exchange with Polus reveals that sophistry is different from rhetoric and the exchange with Callicles that sophistry is better than rhetoric.

When Socrates gives his own account of rhetoric to Polus, he explains that there are four crafts, two aimed at the well-being of the soul, justice (δικαιοσύνη) and legislation (νομοθετική), and two others aimed at the well-being of the body, medicine (ιατρική) and gymnastics (γυμναστική). For all four of them there is a knack that ‘makes the body and the soul *seem* [δοκεῖν] fit when in fact they aren’t any the more so’ (464a8). In the soul, oratory (ῥητορική) is to justice what sophistry (σοφιστική) is to legislation, and in the body pastry-baking (ὄψοποιική) is to medicine what cosmetics (κομμωτική) are to gymnastics (465bff). Thus, sophistry falls into the category of ‘flattery’ (κολακεία), which is defined as a ‘practice [ἐπιτήδευμα] that is not craftlike [τεχνικόν]’ (463a6), but rather a ‘knack [ἐμπειρία] for gratification and pleasure’ (462d10). As the dialogue aims to define the nature of rhetoric, the description of sophistry is rather incidental. In the context of the *Gorgias*, the purpose is to associate rhetoric and sophistry by bringing forth the (negative) aspects they share. At 465c, Socrates establishes that sophists and orators tend to be confused as people that are working on the same matter. But rather than indicating what the matter is, he gives a general account of their predicament: ‘they don’t know what to do with themselves, and other people don’t know what to do with them’ (465c5-7). In this analysis, both sophists and orators have the same status; neither is better than the other because they are both concerned with gratification and flattery, and disregard what is most important.

However, we may assume a distinction between sophist and orator by looking closely at the analogy that Socrates proposes: sophistry is to rhetoric what legislation is to justice. Socrates does not expand on the nature of legislation and its relation to justice, but we may fairly assume that legislation, roughly understood as ‘enacted law’, is an instrument for the observance of justice.⁴⁷ As such, legislation stands as a regulative instrument, as opposed to the administration of justice, which is corrective: in the same way that gymnastics is regulative and medicine is corrective. Thus, although both rhetoric and sophistry are equally bad—they are merely imitations, sophistry can surpass rhetoric in this one aspect, i.e. ‘on the principle that prevention is better than cure’.⁴⁸ Although both stand as imitations, they are different

47 If we wanted to go deeper into the analysis, we could evoke the visitor’s words in the *Statesman*, when he establishes that the law is defective but necessary (Cf. *Stat.* 294a10; 295a4).

48 Cf. Dodds (1959: 226).

with respect to the thing each of them imitates. As Nancy notes, 'if it is a finer thing to imitate the making of law than to imitate the administration of justice, it is because imitation has a share in the worth of his model. Sophistry consequently preserves a good deal of politics and even of politics' finest part, the fashioning of the law'.⁴⁹ One further point of difference, relevant for the present investigation, is brought forward by Rosen: 'Perhaps the slight difference between them comes to this: the rhetor (as represented by Gorgias) emphasizes the persuasive power (δύναμις) of his art (see *Gorgias* 455d6ff), whereas the sophist emphasizes his knowledge'.⁵⁰ What is most striking about this passage is that Callicles seems to despise sophists more than Socrates does (520a3-8). Unlike Protagoras, Gorgias does not seem to embrace the title of σοφιστής, and Callicles, following him, supports orators while condemning sophists.⁵¹ Callicles' assessment of sophists is in line with Anytus' in the *Meno*. 'To Callicles the sophists are no doubt obnoxious both on social grounds and as "unpractical intellectuals"; ὑπερή for him is something that needs no teaching, whereas Gorgias teaches something useful'.⁵² On this, Corey states: 'Gorgias, in other words, appears to have eschewed the name sophist, because he recognized the basic fact that to be a sophist was to be teacher of *aretē* and he did not want to present himself as a teacher of *aretē*' (Corey 2015, p. 30). However, rather than showing that Gorgias is not a sophist, as Corey claims, one can also infer from this that 'sophist' is a flexible title, a label that can be used to designate philosophers, rhetoricians or politicians. This is also shown by Socrates being called a sophist or a *sophos* while claiming to philosophize in the *Apology*, and Euthydemus and Dionysodorus being described as sophists while claiming to philosophize in the *Euthydemus*.

CONCLUSION

Across the dialogues, Plato offers a critical account of the aspects commonly associated with sophists. Rather than defining what or who the sophist is, he offers snippets of the common characterization of sophists. The result is that there is no clarity as to what or who the sophists are, what they do and why their activity would be condemnable. However, he is able to link

49 Nancy (2013: 58).

50 Rosen (1999: 26-7).

51 Gorgias is different from other traditionally classified sophists in that he does not claim to teach virtue. Cf. *Meno* 95c1-4.

52 Dodds (1959: 367). Further, Dodds (1959: 366) and Corey (2015: 16) claim this is the regular way Plato describes the sophist.

the problem of definition to the problem of sophists having no distinctive (or credible) realm of expertise, which is also important for his account in the *Sophist*. Importantly, Plato is critical of popular representations of sophists mainly because they are the result of people's misjudgement or ignorance, from which the prejudice against philosophers also stems. To adequately understand what the meaning of σοφιστής is, including his expertise and liability, it is necessary to transcend those aspects attached to individual sophists, all of which is treated in much greater extent in his dialogue the *Sophist*.

FUNDING

PAI Conicyt Chile

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