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0521476410 - Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics
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Methods of sophistry

The Sophists of the fifth century B.C. have had a spectacular comeback over the last few decades. One scholar after another, in philosophy as well as in history or in classical literature, has argued that we ought to get away from Plato's devastating campaign to ruin their reputation, and restore them to their rightful place in the history of Greek thought. Perhaps the most complete and balanced picture of their role in the intellectual history of Athens has come from Jacqueline de Romilly.¹ More recently still, Thomas Cole² (1991) has argued, on the basis of what we can find out about their literary activities, that the tradition that makes the Sophists mere rhetoricians as opposed to philosophers is anachronistic in the sense that it imposes an Aristotelian distinction between (rhetorical) form and (argumentative) content upon a period in which such a distinction was not and arguably could not be made. The upshot of these reappraisals tends to be the judgment that the Sophists were both philosophers and rhetoricians, so that their contribution to both fields must be taken seriously. They have a place in both histories, and it is no use confusing the picture by pretending, as Plato does, that they were orators posing as philosophers.

Strictly speaking, though, we ought to say that the Sophists were neither philosophers nor rhetoricians, given that the establishment of philosophy and rhetoric as distinct disciplines came about only in the fourth century. It seems to me that the implications of this negative statement should be taken more seriously, and should prompt a fresh look at the professional activities of these public teachers. Some of what the Sophists said or wrote looks to us like philosophy, other parts look more like rhetoric (or, for that matter, science or grammatical theory); but if such labels are anachronistic, then it may also be misleading to try to understand their reported views and arguments within the framework of later disciplines. I will argue that the philosophical part of what the Sophists did, and

Earlier versions of this paper were read at a conference at Ohio State University and at departmental colloquia at McGill University, M.I.T., the University of Rochester, and Wellesley College. I am grateful to the audiences on all these occasions for helpful discussions and criticism. My most important debt is to Mitzi Lee and Dana Miller, who helped me with discussions of Protagoras and Gorgias, comments on the first draft and – last not least – word searches.

¹ *Les grands sophistes dans l'Athènes de Périclès*, Editions de Fallois, Paris, 1988.

² *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1991. See especially ch. 1.

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taught their pupils to do, would be most accurately described by the term “dialectic” in Aristotle’s – not Plato’s – sense, and that recognizing this may help us better to understand the aims and perhaps even the content of the Sophists’ (mostly lost) writings.

It is in fact Plato and Aristotle themselves, in spite of their often contemptuous attitude, who offer the best evidence for the claim that the Sophists were dialecticians. Aristotle even makes this claim explicitly several times (*Rhet.* A1, 1355b 17–21; *Met.* Γ 2, 1004b22–26), but it does not seem to have attracted much attention. If it can be corroborated, as I think it can, then this should also show us in which sense the Sophists were *not* philosophers, and seeing the difference will, I hope, put their activities in a more adequate perspective.

QUESTIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

I will try first to show that it is misleading to describe the Sophists as both philosophers and rhetoricians by looking at the development of the terminology used to describe both the people and their activities from the fifth to the fourth century. It seems helpful to me to distinguish between terms used to designate a person who exercises a profession or a craft, and terms used to describe activities, whether exercised as part of a profession or not. Of course, in many cases the professional label is taken simply from the word for the corresponding activity. For example, a pianist is a person who plays the piano, a shoemaker is someone who makes shoes, and a teacher is a person who teaches others. But a philosopher, I submit, would not be helpfully described as a person who philosophizes; and in the case of the Sophists, it may be worth noting that the Greek verb σοφίζεσθαι (to be skilled or clever), from which the noun σοφιστήρῃς is derived, was apparently not used to describe the professional activities of those who were called, by others or by themselves, Sophists. I begin, then, with a look at the three labels “sophist,” “philosopher,” and “rhetorician.”

The history of the word *sophist* has often been told.³ Roughly, in its earliest occurrences it seems to designate an expert in some craft or discipline which need not have anything to do with speaking or argumentative skills. Toward the end of the fifth century the word seems to have been used mainly for the people we still call Sophists in their professional role as teachers. By the time of Plato (or even earlier), “sophist” seems to become a term of abuse, describing a person as engaging in rhetorical tricks and fallacious argument. It seems obvious to me that by this time it could hardly function any longer as a professional label: who would wish to advertise himself as a con artist and teacher of fraudulence and deception? No wonder that Isocrates, the most distinguished pupil of the great Sophist

³ See e.g. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 27–34.

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Gorgias, preferred to speak of himself as a philosopher and described his professional rivals – presumably mainly in the Academy – as “eristics” (roughly, contentious debaters).⁴ Plato and his school, after all, probably did the same – or else they described their rivals as “mere” rhetoricians, as we still do.

If the label “sophist” could no longer be used, then those who set themselves up as teachers of higher education must have tried to find a different, less offensive title for their profession; and obviously they did. By the fourth century such teachers would describe themselves either as philosophers or as rhetoricians. It seems fairly clear that the person responsible for the vogue and lasting success of the label “philosopher” was Plato, though the other pupils of Socrates no doubt also contributed to the development. Socrates often describes himself as a “lover of wisdom” in the *Apology* and in the early dialogues, and the *Phaedo* treats Socrates’ friends as “philosophers” as well. However, the word does not seem to be used as a professional label in these texts. Lovers of wisdom are often contrasted with lovers of other things, rather than representatives of other professions – for example, with lovers of wealth and honor (*Phd.* 68C1–2), or lovers of sights and sounds (*Republic* 475D). “Philosophy” is treated as an attitude or a way of life throughout the early and middle dialogues. If we assume the standard chronology of Plato’s dialogues, it would seem that “philosopher” became a professional label, if at all, fairly late. It appears to be one in the *Theaetetus* (172C–175E, describing the contrast between philosophers and courtroom orators) and the *Sophist* (216C–D), where it is set in parallel and contrasted with “sophist” and “politician,” though not “rhetorician.” Socrates, who always insisted on his lack of expertise, would have had every reason to prefer the more modest “lover of wisdom” to the somewhat presumptuous “expert” or “wise man.” And the famous anecdote about Pythagoras as the first to apply this term to what he did (cf. Cicero, *Tusc.* 5. 8–9) has been convincingly traced to the Academy by W. Burkert.⁵ We might also note, apart from the evidence in Plato’s dialogues, that it would have seemed all right for an Athenian gentleman of the late fifth century to describe himself as φιλόσοφος, that is, interested in intellectual pursuits, as shown by the famous line from Pericles’ funeral oration in Thucydides (II 40.1), “we [Athenians] engage in the pursuit of wisdom without being effeminate” (φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἄνευ μαλακίας). By contrast, Plato (*Prt.* 311E–312A) vividly depicts the horror of a young prospective student of Protagoras at the suggestion that he might wish to become a sophist. “Philosophy,” then, was acceptable and even praiseworthy; sophistry was not.

⁴ For Isocrates and his terminology with regard to philosophy, sophistry, rhetoric, etc., see C. Eucken, *Isokrates*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 1983, pp. 6–18. Eucken stresses the point that Isocrates tried to rehabilitate the old word “sophist,” restoring it to its earlier use and applying it also to Presocratics like Parmenides and Empedocles; and that he refused to accept the label “rhetorician.” Plato’s terminology, it seems, prevailed in the later tradition.

⁵ “Platon oder Pythagoras?“, *Hermes* 88 (1960), 159–177.

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It is less clear when and how the word *rhetorician* (ῥητορικός) was introduced and eventually also became a professional label. While the word ῥήτωρ (speaker) occurs in the second half of the fifth century, ῥητορικός in the sense of public or professional orator first appears only in Plato, and E. Schiappa⁶ has recently argued that it was coined by Plato himself in the *Gorgias*. I do not think that the evidence allows us to be as precise as that, but we can see why Plato or indeed Gorgias himself might have introduced this new label as distinct from both “sophist” and “philosopher.” Gorgias, as Plato tells us in the *Meno* (95C), ridiculed the claims of other Sophists to teach virtue, and promised only to make his pupils “skilled in speaking” (λέγειν δεινός). No doubt this will have had something to do with the odium that the profession of sophist had acquired by the end of the fifth century. Gorgias lived much longer than Protagoras, whom Plato represents as proudly defending his profession, and so we find Gorgias himself in Plato’s dialogue of that title claiming to be a rhetorician (449A). Making persuasive speeches is fairly obviously not the same as striving for truth and wisdom, and so Gorgias, at least as he is portrayed by Plato, could hardly have been described as a philosopher. Hence another term was needed to indicate the exclusive concentration on skills in speaking (which does not, of course, exclude skill in argument), and that is what the word “rhetorician” serves to bring out. Note, however, that Plato himself considers this merely a subterfuge, an attempt to find a more polite label for a sophist. At the end of the *Gorgias*, he has Socrates tell Callicles that there is in fact no difference between rhetoric and sophistry (520A–B). To Isocrates, though a pupil of Gorgias, the label “philosopher” evidently seemed more attractive, and so he tried – unsuccessfully, as we know – to wrest it from Plato’s school, arguing that it should by right belong to the kind of instruction he provided. But others seem to have been content with the label “rhetorician,” and by the time of Aristotle’s treatise on the subject, rhetoric seems to be an accepted discipline or profession. To sum up: the history of the terms “sophist,” “philosopher,” “rhetorician” seems to show that *sophist* was replaced as a professional label, probably around the turn of the fifth to fourth century, by the twin labels of *philosopher* and *rhetorician*. There was a dispute in the fourth century between the schools of Isocrates and Plato as to who should rightfully call himself a philosopher, and hence what philosophy should consist in. This dispute was obviously and decisively won by Plato, and hence his rival Isocrates came to be classified by the later tradition as a rhetorician.

Plato’s conception of philosophy as a search for truth by reason and argument has established itself and continues down to this day. But the important point to note in our context is that this conception may not have been around at all before the time of Plato or Socrates. If the Sophists’ craft was split up into philosophy and rhetoric, it does not follow that the earlier Sophists themselves were anything like

⁶ *Protagoras and Logos*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S.C., 1991, ch. 3.

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philosophers in Plato's sense. Indeed, the contrast Plato draws between the Sophists and Socrates makes this clear, even though Plato often chooses to present the Sophists as pseudo-philosophers. The principal difference seems to lie in the different ways Plato and Socrates on the one hand, the Sophists on the other, saw the use of speech and argument. Plato insists that the point should be the discovery of indisputable truth; the Sophists seem to be content with producing arguments for each side in a controversy. Whether this amounts to fraudulence and deceit remains to be seen.

LET US now take a look at the words used to describe the activities of the Sophists. It appears that they advertised themselves as teachers of virtue (ἀρετή), wisdom (as the label "sophists" itself implies), or political skills; but it seems clear that the training they provided for their students consisted mainly in making them good at speaking, as Plato has Gorgias say. There may not have been a more technical label around to designate the Sophists' skills, but Plato, who is once again our main source here, offers several. The relevant terms are, I think, ἀντιλογική (antilogic), ῥητορική (rhetoric), and διαλεκτική (dialectic). I set aside polemical words like ἐριστική, ἀμφισβητητική, ἀγωνιστική which clearly mark the Sophists' activity as a bad thing and could therefore hardly have been adopted by the Sophists themselves, however much they may have been used by their detractors.

The most informative passage is, in spite of its bias, Plato's long series of definitions in the *Sophist*. Setting aside, once again, the first few definitions that refer to the sophist's alleged acquisitiveness (numbered 1–4 at 231D), the Eleatic stranger has offered, as definitions 5 and 6, "eristic," and what is in effect the Socratic *elenchus*, namely the art of "clearing the soul of beliefs that stand in the way of learning" (231E).⁷ After this bewildering panorama, the stranger proposes to pull the threads together, starting from what he seems to see as the heart of the matter, namely ἀντιλογική. The sophist, he says, is a teacher of "antilogic," and he teaches his pupils to produce contrasting arguments about all kinds of subjects – theology, cosmology, politics, and the field of every craft. At this point Protagoras is mentioned as having set out in his writings the arguments to employ in debate with practitioners of every craft (232D). The upshot is that antilogic is the capacity to engage in debate about *all* subjects (232E). So far the description is, I think, in agreement with the bulk of our evidence about the Sophists from Plato as well as from other sources. Protagoras was notorious for having said that "there is a counterargument to every argument" (or a counterthesis to every thesis; παντὶ λόγῳ λόγος ἀντίκειται);⁸ he is on record as having written two books of ἀντιλογία (conflicting arguments, D.L. 9.55; 80A1 DK), and various Sophists

⁷ For this point see A. Nehamas, "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990), 3–16.

⁸ So Clem. Alex. *Str.* VI 65 (80A20 DK); cp. D.L. 9.51 (80B6a DK).

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are portrayed by Plato as offering to answer questions about any subject the audience might wish to discuss.⁹

The next move in the *Sophist*, however, is typically Platonic and should be considered as highly suspect. The Eleatic stranger proceeds to argue that a person who pretends to be able to argue with experts from every field must claim omniscience for himself. But since it is impossible – as Theaetetus agrees – to know everything, the sophist’s craft must be based on deceit. This leads to the well-known definition of the sophist as a producer of deceptive images based on mere belief, not knowledge (268D). But Plato’s argument here is a non sequitur which goes beyond the actual claims made by the Sophists. It does not follow from the claim that one can produce conflicting arguments on any given subject that one pretends to be an expert on all subjects, nor did the Sophists have to claim such omniscience. They would indeed have to know *something* about every subject, which should not have been impossible at the time, but they did not need to pretend to exhaustive knowledge. In other words, Plato is unfairly exploiting the boasts of people like Hippias (cp. *Hipp. Ma.* 281C–282A; *Hipp. Mi.* 364A).

The Sophists’ claim could be based, for example, on the supposition that there are no real experts in any field – not an implausible view at that point in history, I should think. Or it could be due to the equally plausible view that even experts are not usually good debaters.¹⁰ And finally, as Plato’s *Gorgias* shows (456B–C), the Sophists might grant expertise, say, to doctors, and still find things to say that the doctors themselves might not have thought of, for example in an attempt to persuade a patient to follow the doctor’s advice. The practice of antilogic does not imply any definite epistemological view, and it certainly need not be based on a claim to omniscience. There is, then, good reason to agree with Plato that antilogic was the core of the Sophists’ craft, but no good reason to go along with his further argument that it must therefore be a craft of conscious deception.

That the skill of constructing arguments for conflicting theses was the core of the Sophists’ craft is confirmed by many other passages in Plato’s dialogues as well as by other testimonia, at least about Protagoras. The word *antilogic* itself, however, did not survive as a neutral description (if indeed it was ever really neutral), any more than the term *sophist* itself. Besides the many derogatory alternatives men-

⁹ A good example of a sophist’s repertoire may be provided by the anonymous little treatise handed down as an appendix to the works of Sextus Empiricus, now usually referred to as *Dissoi Logoi* (“Two-fold Arguments”) and believed to have been written around 400 B.C. Here is what I take to be the author’s description of what a sophist must know: “I think it belongs to the same art to be able to discourse in the brief style and to understand <the> truth of things and to know how to give a right judgment in the law courts and to be able to make public speeches and to understand the art of rhetoric and to teach concerning the nature of all things, their state and how they came to be” (DK 90. 8.1; tr. R. K. Sprague, *Mind* 77 (1968), 165).

¹⁰ That debates with would-be experts were neither as outrageous as Plato seems to imply nor actually infrequent is nicely illustrated by G.E.R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987, ch. 2, esp. pp. 61–70.

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tioned before, Plato uses it presumably because he wishes to keep the alternative label, *διαλεκτική*, as the exclusive property of Socrates and the people he calls philosophers. So he explicitly tells us at *Sph.* 253E4–5: “But the skill of dialectic (*τὸ διαλεκτικόν*) you will grant to no one else but the person who engages in philosophy in a pure and just manner.” But “dialectic,” or rather the verb *διαλέγεσθαι*, may well have been Socrates’ term, and we have already noted that among the many definitions of “sophist” offered in this dialogue there is one that looks for all the world like a description of the Socratic *elenchus* – the sophist, as the Eleatic stranger reluctantly admits (see 230A–231B; 231D–E), could be defined as a person who clears the soul of beliefs that stand in the way of learning. By contrast, the capacity ascribed to the true philosopher at 253D, namely that of “seeing one Form spread out over many, each of these lying apart . . . etc.,” for which Plato ostensibly wishes to reserve the label *διαλεκτική*, has very little to do with the art of conducting a conversation or debate, philosophical or otherwise. Hence it should come as no surprise that Aristotle, who seems to have no such pious reservations with respect to the term *διαλεκτική*, describes that discipline as doing exactly what Plato said antilogic did, namely “constructing an argument about any given thesis” (*Top.* A1, 100a18–20). And at *Rhet.* A1, 1355a33–36, he explicitly tells us that “no other discipline constructs arguments for opposite conclusions, but only rhetoric and dialectic do so.” If the Sophists’ craft consisted in doing that, it follows that sophists and dialecticians differ, if at all, not in their craft but only in the way they use it. “Sophistry,” says Aristotle (*Rhet.* A1, 1355b17–18) “lies not in the capacity (*δύναμις*), but in the purpose (*προαίρεσις*).” And “a man will be a sophist with respect to his purpose, a dialectician with respect to his capacity” (*ibid.*, 20–21). The alleged purpose, as we learn from other passages (e.g. *Soph. El.* 165a28–31; *Met.* Γ 2, 1004b17–24), is to appear (rather than to be) wise or omniscient. So the capacity of the sophist is the same as that of the dialectician; only the sophist uses it, presumably, for the wrong purpose. But in these Aristotelian passages we have of course the derogatory sense of the term “sophist.” Take away the gratuitous assumption that the sophist must be out to deceive or pretend to be omniscient, and we find Aristotle saying that the sophist’s craft is indeed *διαλεκτική*.

As for the term *ῥητορική*, not much needs to be added. Plato, as I have noted, does not seem to see much difference between rhetoric and sophistry. Apart from the passage in the *Gorgias* cited above, he treats rhetoric as a branch of antilogic in the *Phaedrus* (261A8–E5), and the only difference between rhetoricians and sophists he finds at the end of the *Sophist* lies in the fact that orators (*δημολογικοί*) make long speeches in public, while sophists conduct debates by question and answer, and in private (*Sph.* 268B1–C4). Aristotle, for his part, takes rhetoric to arise as a kind of offshoot from a combination of dialectic and “the discipline that deals with character,” that is, political science (*Rhet.* A2, 1356 a25–27). A number of Sophists, notably Gorgias and Protagoras, appear as teachers of rhetoric in

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Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. This confirms my earlier claim that the Sophists' craft was split in two, as it were, in the fourth century. In the terminology of Aristotle, the two branches would be called dialectic and rhetoric. For Isocrates, who probably tried to keep them together, the appropriate label would be just "philosophy."

As with the professional labels, so with the terms for activities: the earlier words, "sophistry" and "antilogic," disappear and are replaced, either by Aristotle's pair "dialectic" and "rhetoric," or by Isocrates' "philosophy."

So much, then, for the claim that in Aristotelian terms, the Sophists were dialecticians. This does not mean that they might not also have been, in Aristotle's sense, philosophers. After all, dialectic was presumably an important and respected part of philosophical education in the Academy. But I think Aristotle was also right in holding that the Sophists were *only* dialecticians, that is to say, not philosophers in his or in Plato's sense. This point is more difficult to establish, since Aristotle does not offer us a full account of the differences between philosophy and dialectic. Some distinctions, however, seem to me to be fairly uncontroversial. First, according to Aristotle's official definition at the beginning of the *Topics* (A1, 100a18–21), the dialectician will argue from *ἔνδοξα*, reputable or commonly accepted premises that may or may not be true. The philosopher, by contrast, will try eventually to argue from true, or even necessarily true, premises. He may use the *ἔνδοξα* to find the first principles of a scientific ("philosophical") discipline (*κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιστήμη*, *Top.* A2, 101a34), but this will only be a preparatory stage before the development of the eventual theory. Furthermore, while the dialectician will be able to provide arguments for each of two contradictory theses, the philosopher will try to decide which one of a pair of contradictories is true and which is false. He will try to find a theory that accounts for the untutored views of the many as well as the sometimes paradoxical views of the wise, either by justifying and incorporating such views in a systematic framework or by showing why, though plausible, they have to be rejected. Dialectic is useful for philosophy because going through the puzzles (*διαπορῆσαι*), that is, considering the conflicting claims and arguments that surround a philosophical problem, makes it easier to see what is true and what is false (cf. *Top.* A2, 101a34–b4).

Two points should be noted about this contrast between philosophy and dialectic: first, it seems clear that nothing prevents the dialectician's arguments from being philosophical in the sense of dealing with philosophical subjects and using premises that could occur in a philosophical theory. Second, the dialectician is not a propounder of doctrines, but only of arguments. He does not set out to establish the truth in each case, but merely shows what reasons there might be for holding a given view – or indeed its contradictory.

It seems to me that both these characterizations are true of the Sophists of the fifth century, and that the error of those who wish to defend their reputation by claiming that they were both philosophers and rhetoricians lies in assuming that because they engaged in philosophical argument, they must also have held philo-

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sophical doctrines. The view that philosophical argument must be used to discover and eventually to demonstrate the truth is Plato's – and perhaps to some extent our own – but it does not follow that it was the view of all of Plato's predecessors. The Sophists were famous for their ability to produce ἀντιλογία, conflicting arguments. We will fall into the Platonic trap once again if we assume that the practice of antilogic was itself based on an epistemological doctrine, e.g. relativism or skepticism. Offering plausible arguments on both sides of a controversy may have been all the Sophists did; and if such arguments sometimes involved what looks to us like philosophical doctrines or at least sketches of philosophical theories, we should not rashly assume that they endorsed those theories. It is not irresponsible, whatever Plato may have thought, but perfectly reasonable to use different premises and different “theories” in different cases without trying to fit them all into a comprehensive framework. Once we give up the attempt to fit all the bits and pieces of, say, Protagoras' writings into a consistent system, we can, I think, better appreciate both the limits and the importance of the Sophists' contribution to philosophy.

TWO EXAMPLES: GORGIAS AND PROTAGORAS

I propose now to take a brief and superficial look at two treatises that are relatively well documented by the tradition and unquestionably philosophical in content: Gorgias' “On What is Not” and Protagoras' “Truth.”¹¹

We have two summary accounts of Gorgias' work, in Sextus Empiricus (*M* VII 65–87 = fr. 82B3 in DK) and in the pseudo-Aristotelian “*De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia*” (*MXG*, not printed in DK).¹² Most scholars agree that the treatise was written as an attack on Parmenides, and probably on other Eleatics like Melissus and Zeno as well. Gorgias is said to have argued for three theses: (1) Nothing is; (2) if anything is, it cannot be known; (3) if anything is and can be known, it cannot be revealed or communicated to others (Οὐκ εἶναι, φησίν, οὐδέν· εἰ δ' ἔστιν, ἄγνωστον εἶναι· εἰ δε καὶ ἔστιν καὶ γνωστόν, ἀλλ' οὐ δηλωτὸν ἄλλοις, *MXG* 979a11–13). The arguments for these astonishing claims are, unfortunately, hard to recover from our two sources, which disagree in the terminology they use as well as in many details of argument. Also, both sources seem to be garbled to

¹¹ By discussing Gorgias before Protagoras, I do not mean to imply anything about the chronological order in which their works were written. I begin with Gorgias because he seems to me to offer the clearer example of what I am trying to show.

¹² For the text of the *MXG* see the edition by B. Cassin, *Si Parménide*, Presses Universitaires de Lille, Lille, 1980; for its likely author, see J. Mansfeld, “De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia – Pyrrhonizing Aristotelianism,” 1988, repr. in Mansfeld, *Studies in the Historiography of Greek Philosophy*, Van Gorcum, Assen/Maastricht, 1990, pp. 200–237. Most scholars seem to think now that the report in *MXG* is likely to be closer to Gorgias' original, so for simplicity's sake I am not considering Sextus' version here.