

## INTRODUCTION

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## Sophistry and rhetorical pragmatism

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## I

The essays in this collection focus on two recent events in the human sciences – the revival of American pragmatism and the return of sophistic rhetoric – as these movements intersect with each other and especially as they are crosscut by contemporary issues in critical theory and cultural politics. Renewed interest in rhetoric has surfaced in a wide range of conferences and publications across several academic disciplines. It is evident in the establishment of university press series on rhetorical theory, the founding of organizations such as the Rhetoric Society of America and the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, and the development of new periodicals, including *Rhetorica*, *Pre/Text*, and *Rhetoric Review*. Besides the rapid growth of such rhetorically oriented fields as Composition Studies, several other disciplines have been significantly affected by the “rhetorical turn” in the humanities and social sciences, for example, philosophy, law, literary theory, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, speech communication, and even economics.

More recently in some of these disciplines, the general turn toward rhetoric has included a more specific re-evaluation of Greek sophistry. Since Plato, the Older Sophists have often been condemned as relativists and subjectivists, unscrupulous traders in opinion rather than knowledge, rhetorical mercenaries who taught their clients to disregard objective truth in making the weaker case appear to be the stronger. Especially during the last decade, revisionist interpreters have vigorously challenged this traditional negative view of the sophists. Indeed, Susan Jarratt and Victor Vitanza have gone so far as

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to suggest that we are presently within a third sophistic.<sup>1</sup> Whether this is the case or not, sophistic rhetoric is certainly undergoing a renaissance of interest, illustrated most notably in recent books by contributors to the present collection: Jarratt's *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, Jasper Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, Edward Schiappa's *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*, and Joseph Margolis' *The Truth about Relativism*.

As striking as the return of sophistic rhetoric, there has also been a significant renewal of American pragmatism. Again, this revival is interdisciplinary, centered in the neopragmatist writings within contemporary philosophy and literary studies.<sup>2</sup> Though most conspicuous in these two disciplines, Pragmatism is also being intensely discussed in such fields as American studies, political science, historiography, speech communication, composition, and religious studies. In 1990 the *Southern California Law Review* devoted an entire issue to papers from the "Symposium on the Renaissance of Pragmatism in American Legal Thought."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the enormous growth of publications on rhetoric, on pragmatism, and most recently on Greek sophistry, there has been very little discussion of the relationship between American pragmatism and sophistic rhetoric. The present collection attempts to remedy this situation by focussing on the various ways pragmatism, rhetoric, and sophistry overlap in their theoretical and political implications. These essays break new ground not only by suggesting how neopragmatism can be viewed as a postmodernist form of sophistic rhetoric, but also by addressing some of the most pressing questions in contemporary critical theory: How do the pragmatist and rhetorical turns in academic disciplines relate to recent issues in a wider cultural politics outside the university? Is neopragmatism an anti-theory

<sup>1</sup> Victor J. Vitanza, "Critical Sub/Versions of the History of Philosophical Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 6 (Fall 1987): 45.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, work in philosophy by Richard Bernstein, Nancy Fraser, Joseph Margolis, Richard Rorty, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, and Cornel West; and for literary studies, see Stanley Fish, Giles Gunn, Frank Lentricchia, Richard Poirier, Louise Rosenblatt, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *Southern California Law Review* 63 (September 1990). Also see *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Michael Brint and William Weaver (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), which reprints some of the essays from this special issue along with additional articles and a selected bibliography.

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irrelevant to any specific political program; is it a reactionary defense of traditional institutions; or is it a justification for radical democratic reforms? Is pragmatism, like sophistry, open to the Platonic charge of relativism? Does rhetorical pragmatism thus lead to political quietism, because it provides no objective basis for ethical choice; or to social anarchy, because it provides justification for *any* political choice? Later sections of this introduction and the two concluding essays address these questions directly, but all of the essays provide detailed analyses relevant to the theoretical issues underlying the political misgivings about pragmatism, rhetoric, and sophistry.

II

Linkages between sophistry and pragmatism actually began early in the present century. Jean Bourdeau entitled his 1907 journalistic critique of a new philosophical movement “Une Sophistique du Pragmatisme,” from which William James translated the following as a typical misunderstanding of his position:

Pragmatism is an Anglo-Saxon reaction against the intellectualism and rationalism of the Latin mind . . . Man, each individual man is the measure of things. He is able to conceive none but relative truths, that is to say, illusions. What these illusions are worth is revealed to him, not by general theory, but by individual practice.<sup>4</sup>

James uses this passage to illustrate the misrepresentation of Pragmatism as ignoring “the theoretic interest,”<sup>5</sup> but he might also have commented on how it typifies, in its reference to Protagoras’ *anthrôpos metron* doctrine, a related misreading of Pragmatism (and of Greek Sophistry) as skeptical relativism.<sup>6</sup> In another essay collected in *The*

<sup>4</sup> William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909; rpt. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 113, n. 4, translating from Jean Bourdeau, “Une Sophistique du Pragmatisme,” *Journal des Débats*, October 19, 1907.

<sup>5</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> According to Protagoras, “of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a, trans. Michael J. O’Brien, in *The Older Sophists*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972], p. 19). Though I retain the traditional translation of *anthrôpos* as “man” when directly quoting from specific English texts throughout this introduction, I use the term “human-measure” to refer to Protagoras’ famous maxim; see the argument for more inclusive language in Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 131, n. 4.

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*Meaning of Truth*, James does cite the accusation that Pragmatism is akin to relativistic sophistry. Here he notes that among the “most formidable-sounding onslaughts” against Pragmatism is the charge that “to make truth grow in any way out of human opinion is but to reproduce that protagorean doctrine that the individual man is ‘the measure of all things,’ which Plato in his immortal dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, is unanimously said to have laid away so comfortably in its grave two thousand years ago.”<sup>7</sup> I will have occasion below to take up this attack on pragmatic and sophistic “relativism,” but for now let me describe in more detail some general interpretations of “pragmatism” and “sophistry” circulating in the cultural conversation at the turn of the century.

We can begin with the 1902 *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by James Mark Baldwin, which includes entries by three of the founders of Pragmatism: James, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey. Under “Pragmatism,” Peirce emphasizes its anti-metaphysical “maxim for attaining clearness of apprehension: ‘Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’” Under the same entry, James extends this methodological maxim toward a pragmatic notion of truth, defining Pragmatism as the “doctrine that the whole ‘meaning’ of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, if the conception be true; which consequences would be different if it were untrue, and must be different from the consequences by which the meaning of other conceptions is in turn expressed.”<sup>8</sup>

Later, pragmatists would support such controversial notions as: truth is what works; truth is the expedient in the way of thinking; truth is warranted assertability.<sup>9</sup> These slogans invited the charge of

<sup>7</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>8</sup> *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. James Mark Baldwin (New York: Macmillan Co., 1902), v. 2, p. 321; further references to this volume will be cited in the main text as “*Dictionary*.”

<sup>9</sup> See William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; rpt. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 95–113; John Dewey, “A Short Catechism Concerning Truth” (1910) and “The Problem of Truth” (1911), rpt. *The Middle Works*, v. 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois

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skeptical relativism against pragmatist epistemology; but in 1902 the *Dictionary* entry on the "Relativity of Knowledge" makes no mention of pragmatism. It does remark on Protagorean sophistry, however, as G. E. Moore explains that the term *relativity of knowledge*

is now commonly applied to the theory of Protagoras, expressed in the famous saying . . . 'man is the measure of all things.' This theory seems to have been based on the obvious fact that some object may appear different to different men at the same time, or to the same man at different times. It is from this fact that Protagoras appears to have drawn the contradictory conclusion that all our beliefs may be not partially, but wholly untrue, as is implied in his stating his theory with regard to all things. (*Dictionary* 451)

Moore attributes a radical skepticism to *anthrōpos metron*, viewing it as a complete rejection of all knowledge claims. Another *Dictionary* entry extends this charge to Sophistry in general: "In ancient philosophy, the Sophists may be said to be the first definitely to raise the epistemological question, by their skeptical impeachment of the possibility of truth or universally valid statement."<sup>10</sup>

In "Presocratic Philosophy," James H. Tufts alludes to the ethical complaint traditionally made against this Sophistic epistemology. Commenting from within the individualistic, subjectivist interpretation of the human-measure doctrine, Tufts writes: "Individualism is . . . the prevailing note [of Sophistry], and this found expression in the saying attributed to Protagoras, 'Man is the measure of all things,' which is the classic formulation for the doctrine of relativism. It is not known that Protagoras himself applied his principle to ethics. He developed it rather with reference to sense perception." Tufts notes that Plato depicts only younger Sophists as "maintaining that 'might is right,' or that laws are merely the invention of the 'many weak' against the 'natural law'" (*Dictionary* 336).

Tufts, Dewey's co-author on the *Ethics* (1908), precedes his explanation of Protagorean relativism with a more general description of the Sophists, who

represent a shifting of the centre of interest and study from the cosmos to man, and an emergence of science from closed schools or societies into public discussion. The growing democracy made knowledge claims valuable to the citizen as well as to the scholar. Teachers of every subject, and especially

University Press, 1978), pp. 3–68; and Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), rpt. *The Later Works*, v. 12, ed. Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> A[ndrew] S[eth] P[ring]le-[P]attison], "Epistemology," in *Dictionary*, v. 1, p. 333.

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teachers of rhetoric, found eager hearers. The study of the art of persuasion, especially upon political themes, led naturally to the study of politics.

(*Dictionary* 336)

Rhetoric and its relation to politics plays no role in the few references Dewey himself makes to the sophists in his contributions to the *Dictionary*. Under "nihilism," for example, he claims that

The first pure nihilist in philosophic theory was also the last, viz. the Sophist Gorgias of Leontini, who is reported to have taught: (1) that nothing exists; (2) that if anything did exist it would be unknowable; (3) if it existed and were knowable it could not be communicated.

(*Dictionary* 177)

Dewey's reference to Protagoras is more qualified. Under "sensationalism," he mentions the traditional elaboration on the human-measure doctrine: "Some of the Sophists (Protagoras, in particular, to all appearance) applied the conception of Heraclitus, that all is becoming, in such a way as to give validity, on the side of the knowing process, only to that which is in itself changing and partakes of motion, viz. sense." Then Dewey adds parenthetically, "But this may be merely the platonic interpretation in *Theaetetus*" (*Dictionary* 516).

It is, of course, the 'platonic interpretation' of the Sophists and rhetoric more generally that remains the backdrop against which the associations between pragmatism and sophistic rhetoric are made at both the beginning and end of the twentieth century. Dewey considered Plato his "favorite philosophic reading" and once remarked that "Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a 'Back to Plato' movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, cooperatively inquiring Plato of the *Dialogues*, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor."<sup>11</sup> If Dewey rejects the interpretive history that finds in Plato an "all-comprehensive and overriding system,"<sup>12</sup> he does not necessarily accept the traditional Platonic condemnation of the sophists. Still, his attitude toward the sophists, especially Protagoras, appears more fluid than his unchanging admiration for Plato.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930), rpt. *The Later Works*, v. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 154–55.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> See John P. Anton, "John Dewey and Ancient Philosophies," *Philosophy and*

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Though he does distance himself somewhat from a sensationalist reading of *anthrôpos metron* by attributing it to Plato's interpretation in the *Theaetetus*, Dewey seems to accept the traditional association between subjectivism and sophistry in another 1902 *Dictionary* entry. In "Realism," he claims that the problem in one of its aspects "goes back to Socrates, who asserted that the object of knowledge (and hence the true, the certain, the real) was the universal, endeavoring in this way to overcome the subjectivism of the Sophists" (*Dictionary* 422). Later in the decade, however, Dewey provides a very different view of the sophists, both in the attitude and the argument of his interpretation.

In his 1907 syllabus for a course on the "History of Education," Dewey explains that the sophists "present for the first time in the history of Europe a class of professional teachers separate from other interests and callings . . . Many of the sophists were what would now be termed humanists; aiming, by teaching literature and other social studies, to make the Greek states more conscious of their common language, literature and religion, and thereby to bring them into more friendly relations with each other." Among their other accomplishments, Dewey notes that the sophists attempted "to train effective speakers and writers, involving the theory of persuasion and argument" and that they called "attention to the training in the arts relating to statesmanship . . . thus introducing the topics of political science and political economy." In his syllabus, Dewey also observes that "even the saying that 'Man is the measure of all things' was probably not meant in an individualistic sense, but rather was intended to emphasize the value of culture and civilization of humanity as against barbarism and animal nature."<sup>14</sup>

Dewey thus seems to modify his 1902 reading of the sophists as nihilistic and subjectivist and move to a more positive evaluation by 1907, a change that rejects the individualistic interpretation of *anthrôpos metron* and endorses a communal meaning for that Protagorean doctrine. During this five-year period, Dewey reviewed a

*Phenomenological Research* 25 (June 1965): 477–99; Frederick M. Anderson, "Dewey's Experiment with Greek Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1967): 86–100; and J.J. Chambliss, *The Influence of Plato and Aristotle on John Dewey's Philosophy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, "History of Education" (1907), rpt. *The Later Works*, v. 17, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 183–84.

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book by the British Pragmatist, F. C. S. Schiller.<sup>15</sup> It is in the work of Schiller during the first years of the twentieth century that we find the clearest connections made between Anglo-American pragmatism and sophistic rhetoric.

Like Dewey, William James reviewed Schiller's *Humanism*, published in 1903, calling its author Pragmatism's "most vivacious and pugnacious champion."<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to his book, Schiller argues that pragmatic humanism has "affinities with the great saying of Protagoras, that *Man is the Measure of all things*. Fairly interpreted, this is the truest and most important thing that any thinker ever has propounded." Schiller proceeds to take the first of his many swipes at Plato's anti-relativist critique of Protagoras: "It is only in travesties such as it suited Plato's dialectic purpose to circulate that [the human-measure dictum] can be said to tend to scepticism; in reality it urges Science to discover how Man may measure, and by what devices make concordant his measures with those of his fellow-men."<sup>17</sup>

Here we have Schiller's first suggestion of the pragmatist link he

<sup>15</sup> However, even hedged claims for the influence on Dewey of Schiller's defense of the Sophists must be tempered by Dewey's later acknowledgment of indebtedness to Alfred Benn's reading of the Sophists. See John Dewey, "The 'Socratic Dialogues' of Plato" (1925), rpt. *The Later Works*, v. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 124n; and cf. Alfred William Benn, "The Greek Humanists: Nature and Law," ch. 2 of his *The Greek Philosophers*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1882), esp. pp. 86–94 on Protagoras; and Benn, "The Diffusion of Culture: Humanists and Naturalists," ch. 5 of his *The Philosophy of Greece Considered in Relation to the Character and History of its People* (London: Grant Richards, 1898). In his opening 1910 course lecture at Columbia University, Dewey is also reported to have called Benn's and Theodor Gomperz' analyses the "best account" of the Sophists. See John Dewey, *Philosophy and Education in Their Historic Relation*, ed. J. J. Chambliss (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 23; and cf. Theodor Gomperz, "Protagoras of Abdera," ch. 6 in his *Greek Thinkers: A History of Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. Laurie Magnus (London: John Murray, 1901).

<sup>16</sup> William James, "Humanism," *Nation* 78 (March 3, 1904): 175–76; rpt. James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 551. Today, Schiller is Pragmatism's most forgotten major figure. See Reuben Abel, *The Pragmatic Humanism of F. C. S. Schiller* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 3; Kenneth Winetrou, *F. C. S. Schiller and the Dimensions of Pragmatism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967), p. 6; and Herbert L. Searles and Allan Shields, "Preface," to their *A Bibliography of the Works of F. C. S. Schiller* (San Diego: San Diego State College Press, 1968), p. iv.

<sup>17</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, *Humanism: Philosophical Essays* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1903), p. xvii.



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will repeatedly make between Protagorean sophistry and sophistic rhetoric. He strongly rejects the traditional Platonic reading of Protagoras, denying its claim that the *anthrôpos metron* doctrine inevitably leads to radical skepticism about the human ability to know the truth. In direct opposition to this negative, skeptical interpretation, Schiller reads Protagoras as arguing positively for the human origin of truth and thus affirming, not rejecting, mankind's ability to know it. There is only a hint here of Schiller's individualistic take on the human-measure dictum, his belief that Protagoras meant individual men as well as mankind as a group. But Schiller does make quite explicit even in this passing remark that the truth claims advanced by men, the measures asserted by individuals, must be negotiated among other men. It is the task of sophistic rhetoric to investigate and theorize how this rhetorical process takes place, to establish what rhetorical "devices make concordant [one man's] measures with those of his fellow-men."

In his 1907 essay, "From Plato to Protagoras," Schiller develops his earlier comments and clearly demonstrates how his humanism is both sophistic and pragmatist.<sup>18</sup> His first extended discussion of the sophists begins and ends in what we might call rhetorical politics. Following Grote and Gomperz, Schiller finds the origins of sophistry in the political situation of Greece in fifth century BC.<sup>19</sup> "The rise of democracies rendered a higher education and a power of public speaking a *sine qua non* of political influence – and, what acted probably as a still stronger incentive – of the safety of the life and property, particularly of the wealthier classes" (31). And it was the Sophists – "university extension lecturers hampered by no university" – who "professed to supply this great requisite of practical success" (31). Young men of the upper classes paid for sophistic lessons in rhetoric, which they hoped would gain them honor in the democratic assemblies and protection in the public courts.

The political context of sophistic education resulted in "a great development of rhetoric and dialectic" (31–32), and the Sophists grew wealthy from their professional success with already rich and

<sup>18</sup> Schiller, "From Plato to Protagoras," in his *Studies in Humanism* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 22–70; page citations in this and the next three paragraphs refer to this essay, which is a revised version of Schiller's review-essay, "Plato and His Predecessors," *Quarterly Review* 204 (1906): 62–88.

<sup>19</sup> See George Grote, *History of Greece* (London: John Murray, 1856), v. 8, ch. 67; and Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, v. 1, ch. 5.

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prospectively famous (or economically nervous) clients. Schiller points out that “this sophistic education was not popular with those who were too poor or too niggardly to avail themselves of it, *i.e.* with the extreme democrats and the old conservatives; it was new, and it seemed to bestow an unfair and undemocratic advantage on those who had enjoyed it” (32). Schiller’s brief remarks on the contradictory (democratic *and* undemocratic) origins of sophistic rhetoric foreshadow recent debates over the ideological affiliations of neo-sophistry and the political consequences of rhetoric more generally.<sup>20</sup> He clearly identifies rhetoric with democracy – only in such a political structure could sophistic rhetoric develop – but recognizes, at least in passing, that rhetoric could serve undemocratic interests – when rhetorical education was restricted by socio-economic privilege.

Schiller explains other reasons for attacks on the sophists in ancient Greece, particularly “the jealous polemic directed by the philosophers (especially by Plato) against rival teachers” (32). He turns then to “the great idea of Protagoras, the greatest of the Sophists . . . His famous dictum that ‘man is the measure of all things’ must be ranked even above the Delphic ‘Know thyself,’ as compressing the largest quantum of vital meaning into the most compact form” (33). To prove his case, Schiller takes up the conflicted history of interpreting the human-measure maxim. Postponing specific discussion of Plato’s reading, Schiller notes that past interpreters of “man is the measure of all things” have disagreed over whether “man” refers to individual men or to mankind as a whole. Schiller suggests the either/or choice has simply been a mistake repeated throughout the maxim’s interpretive history. “Protagoras may well have chosen an ambiguous form in order to indicate both the subjective and the objective factor in human knowledge and the problem of their connexion” (33). That is, according to Schiller, Protagoras intended both the subjective interpretation of the dictum – individual men are the measure of all things – and the objective interpretation – mankind in general is the

<sup>20</sup> On the contested relationship between sophistic rhetoric and democratic ideology, see, for example, John Poulakos, “Sophistical Rhetoric as a Critique of Culture,” in *Argument and Critical Practice*, ed. Joseph W. Wenzel (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1987), pp. 97–101; Edward Schiappa, “Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?” *Rhetoric Review* 10 (Fall 1991): 9–10; Susan Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), pp. 98–107; and section III, below.