

DRAFT

Contentious Arguments: The Origin of Aristotle's Theory of 'Fallacy' in the Dialogues of Plato.
Or
Did Plato have a Theory of Fallacy?

In raising this question it is not my intention to explore, as others have done (Robinson, 1942; Sprague, 1962) the presence of fallacies in the dialogues, although we cannot avoid taking note of them. Nor do I wish to argue that there is anything as full and vital as Aristotle begins to provide in the *Sophistical Refutations* (henceforth, *SR*). Rather, I want to consider the degree to which Plato expresses a firm understanding of bad reasoning that could amount to something theoretical and serve as a precursor for what Aristotle later develops and, generally, for later fallacy theory and informal logic.¹ After all, Aristotle is explicit in his claim that he is the first to provide the kind of treatment that he does, for with respect to the inquiry into fallacies (παράλογισμῶν) it is not a question of it having been previously elaborated only in part because it had not existed at all (*SR* 183b35: οὐδὲν παντελῶς ὑπήρχεν). On the other hand, should we expect the theory of fallacy that commentators attribute to Aristotle to have fallen full born from his stylus? Beyond this, Plato seems motivated by a particular concern that leads him to take seriously the question of fallacy and how it should be understood. It is also my intention, then, to explain and explore that concern.

Of course, to ask the question posed in my subtitle invites a number of preliminary questions and qualifications that themselves can be insightful. What, after all, would count as a theory of fallacy for Plato? We should not expect him (as some do) to hold the kinds of contemporary notions that prevail to day. The suggestions of historians of philosophy, like Ian Hacking (1973) and David Owen (2002) are useful here: just as Descartes did not seem to share our sense of inference (Hacking) or Hume use reasoning as we do (Owen) nor might Plato's concept of fallacy have any deep connections with our own. Furthermore, if we are to understand a theory of fallacy to be the counter-side to a positive theory of reason (as our appreciations of an oppositional thinker like Plato would invite), then what would that positive side look like? If we take fallacies to be in some central sense flawed *arguments* of some repeatable kinds, then does Plato have a view of good arguments? I want to begin by addressing each of these questions.

What counts as a theory of fallacy?

In contemporary parlance, we are likely to think of "fallacies" as arguments that fail to meet or exhibit some key criteria of correctness or violations of rules that govern good argumentation. These ideas reflect the way appreciations of the theory and practice of argumentation have

¹In his paper, "Plato and Informal Logic," Benjamin calls Plato's role in the origins of Informal Logic "complicated" (1997, 33). But beyond noting that Plato provides "the foundation for an examination of fallacy in informal logic" (29), no details of such a foundation are forthcoming. Nor do is there any mention of the *Euthydemus* or *Sophist* (beyond noting that Plato's method of composition and division will influence Aristotle—30).

developed in the Aristotelian tradition. But in certain strange ways (which we will not explore here) that ‘tradition’ is often removed from its own roots in Aristotle’s milieu (Huby, 1997:44-45). Aristotle is concerned first and foremost with *sophistical* refutations, which appear to be real refutations, but are not.² Thus the standard against which they are judged is the refutation or *elenchos*, and that is something we are equally familiar with in Plato’s dialogues, unless there is some significant difference between the earlier *elenchos* and that of the *SR*. This is something we will consider.

To be clear on the terms here, “*elenchos*” refers to the method of question and answer by which Socrates examines himself and others, and which Aristotle calls “peirastic” (πειραστικοί): “those [arguments] which are based on opinions held by the answerer” (*SR* 165b3-6). The thesis is refuted only when its negation is derived from the answerer’s own beliefs. This reflects Socrates’ repeated request of his interlocutors that they say only what they believe.

Focussing on the *elenchos* contrasts somewhat with the treatments of previous writers on this theme, like Robinson and Sprague. Sprague manages to produce an entire study of fallacy in Plato’s work (primarily looking at the *Euthydemus* and with the goal of saving Plato from the charge of having committed fallacies) without really defining her central term. The final chapter does suggest that fallacies are “bad arguments” (1962:80), but in the context of the eristic arguments she has been exploring, the nature of this badness remains unclear. Robinson has a more contemporary view implicit in his treatment. As evidence that Plato must have had some awareness of fallacies, he writes: “When the greatness of a great man expresses itself frequently in highly formalised and explicit chains of deduction, it stands to reason that the possibility of fallacy must occur to him in some shape” (1942:102). But he surmises that Plato has no word or phrase that means “fallacy” [it is implied by this that Robinson has in mind a modern view], offering only vague notions like antilogical, eristical and sophistical. Even Aristotle, he notes, could understand the latter only by means of “unsatisfactory phrases such as “Sophistical refutation”” (103). But it is exactly in the direction of such “unsatisfactory” phrases that we must look if we are to appreciate Plato’s engagement with fallacy as a topic of inquiry.

Aristotle’s treatment of fallacies in the *SR* focusses on dialogues. This partly accounts for some of the awkwardness of modern treatments which have tried to retain Aristotle’s labels while avoiding the specific dialectical context of their origin. Refutations arise as the goal of examinations, where one participant puts forward a thesis and another introduces questions of that thesis. The statements involved are examined in a dialectical exchange with each move agreed upon. The goal is to arrive at a refutation of a thesis, i.e. a contradiction. This procedure is reminiscent of the elenctic method that we see in the early Socratic dialogues, which involve examinations of statements that usually result in refutations of the theses put forward (and,

²I am interested here with ‘fallacy’ as it is understood in the *Sophistical Refutations* and not in the later logical works or the *Rhetoric*. The treatment in the *SR* is his earliest and involves the identification of a list of thirteen. In the *Prior Analytics* two of these are omitted (Begging the Question and Many Questions) because they are strictly dialectical, and he provides a formal analysis of the rest. Then in the *Rhetoric* we find a final list of nine, which are given very short discussion. The root theory, then, is that of the *SR*, which is also the most detailed.

hence, the dialogues are seen as aporetic). Socrates' interlocutor, a Euthyphro or a Crito, puts forward a thesis and that thesis is examined, with the moves agreed upon (implicitly or otherwise).³ In fact, Socrates takes pains to secure the agreement of his interlocutor before he moves on, and works only with the propositions or agreements of the other, never introducing ideas that are not agreeable to all parties.⁴ Then the discussion arrives at a contradiction of the thesis, a refutation. So we see in the Socratic practice the kind of refutation that would likely have been viewed as fine by Aristotle. Insofar as it is correctly exercised, it is not sophistical.

The failure to effect this end in a reasonable fashion, to circumvent the process in some way, means the refutation is only apparent and not real. In Aristotle's terms, it is sophistical. The fallaciousness in this stems from disruptions in the moves of the dialogue toward a contradiction. Take, for example, the very basic *ignoratio elenchi*. This translates as "ignorance of what a refutation is," and is understood as the failure to prove what it should. While it is first introduced as one of the thirteen sources of fallacious reasoning, in Chapter 6 of the *SR* it is revised as *the* alternative way of accommodating all the other twelve, since each of them is a violation of some part of a refutation. So in broad terms, a fallacy can be defined as a failed refutation. Of course, there is more to a fallacy *as* a sophistical refutation. Deception seems at stake and, depending on the degree to which eristics is brought into the mix, almost a willfulness to avoid a serious end.

To talk about sophistical refutations as "fallacies," as the tradition invites, is to take a stand on how best to translate Aristotle's terms. Part of our difficulty involves the various words that he employs and that translators designate as "fallacy." At the outset of the *SR*, they (sophistical refutations) are described as arguments that appear to be refutations but are really paralogisms instead. This term (Παραλογισμων) is rendered in the Loeb translation, for example, as "fallacies", as opposed to Παραλογιζονται which is rendered as "false reasoning." But later (the start of Chapter 3), when Aristotle identifies five aims of those who compete and contend in argument—refutation, fallacy, paradox, solecism, and the reduction of one's opponent to babbling—the word rendered as "fallacy" is ψευδος (pseudos). As Schreiber (2003:173) points out in his recent study of the *Sophistical Refutations*, we have difficulty understanding Aristotle's position on fallacies and false arguments because he uses a number of terms interchangeably, or without consistency, but I think a case can be made for reading paralogism as fallacy or false argument. Poste (1866:120) contends that Aristotle distinguishes paralogisms (as fallacies) from sophistical refutations. But it is difficult to see the case for this in light of what is stated at the outset of the *SR*. I am inclined to agree with Schreiber that Aristotle does not distinguish sophistic (or eristic) argument from paralogism (false argument). This is particularly clear in the concluding chapter of the *SR*, where Aristotle describes all the preceding false arguments,

³Socrates rejects Euthyphro first definition of 'piety', for example, because they had agreed to look for a standard by which they could judge all pious acts and Euthyphro's definition does not meet that goal.

⁴In this respect, the early dialectic differs from Plato's later dialectic, where the aporia is resolved and the expectation of arriving at truth through investigating hypothetical statements is more pronounced.

whether deceptions or errors, as paralogisms. For us, perhaps the most important feature of the Aristotelian account at this point is that a fallacy is the *appearance* of a correct argument (or, strictly, refutation). In light of this discussion, and given the early dating of the *SR*, we have a fairly clear idea of what could count as a theory of fallacy for Plato.

One last preliminary point concerns the status of the *Sophistical Refutations* in Aristotle's work. Generally, this book is taken as the last book of the *Topics* and so needs to be understood in relation to that larger project. Aristotle's *topoi* differ from those of Plato in the central way in which they are opinions rather than positions of certainty (apodeictic) drawn from the everyday. Insofar as the *Topics* reflects the dialectical practices of the Academy, *topoi* are "places we go for arguments,"⁵ or, in Ryle's analysis "lines of argumentation" commonly used to defend and attack well-known theses (Ryle, 1968:75). Hence, it seems, there were standard ways to defend and attack the Forms, for example, and members of the Academy would become practised at using these lines of argumentation in debates. Innovations would involve adding new lines to this common fund of argumentation, or further nuances to old ones. In contemporary terms, we might think of the standard lines of argumentation used in pro and con arguments around the abortion debate, and the ways students are taught these standard lines and encouraged to add to them. We see similar things emerging with new debates, like that over Intelligent Design.

What is controversial about this is the clear break with what Plato would accept as *topoi*. His concern is not with argumentation drawn from opinion but with argumentation aimed at the demonstration of truth. Thus, the places one might "go" for lines of argument are far less accessible than those available to the Aristotelian student. Yet while Plato's dialectic is aimed at the truth of the Forms, it's not so clear that the same would have held for the investigations of the historical Socrates.

Does Plato have a positive account of argument?

The second question that I posed above involves what understanding of 'argument' would exist in Plato's mind and that could work as a counter to any theory of fallacy. Remarks like those of Robinson that attribute chains of deductive reasoning to Plato may be guilty of reading back onto Plato practices that are more modern in their formulation and could not have been consciously employed by an author writing prior to Aristotle. On the other hand, Plato's dialectician once he (or she) has grasped the unity of things which comes with an appreciation of the Forms, sees the connectedness of ideas and is able to exact divisions through a process of logical categorizing that appears to abstract particulars from universals. Still, is this type of 'inferencing' really what we are looking for in determining a Platonic attitude toward argument? In spite of the cooperative venture that characterizes philosophizing in the dialogues, his remarks on the persuasive processes of argument are really quite individualized. Consider this from the *Theaetetus*: Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he defines thought (*διανοεῖσθαι*) in a particular way, namely as speech (*λογον*) which the soul has with itself (190a). Here, "the soul is conversing with itself, asking itself questions and answering, affirming and denying." This "interior *elenchos*," as it appears, allows one to arrive at a conclusion about which they do not

⁵I am grateful to my colleague, Maged el Komos, for this formulation.

doubt and so form a judgment.⁶ The same attitude is borne out in the famous defense of argument and attack on misology in the *Phaedo* (89d-91a), where no greater evil could befall us than to hate argument (λογους). Socrates develops the analogy between men and arguments who may become subjects of hatred because they betray our trust and turn out to be other than as they seem. That is, implicitly, the appearance of correctness misleads because the person has not learned how to distinguish good from bad arguments and ends up hating both. A fuller statement of what is said will help us here:

...if there is any system of argument which is true and sure and can be learned, it would be a sad thing if a man, because he has met with some of those arguments which seem to be sometimes true and sometimes false, should then not blame himself or his own lack of skill, but should end in his vexation, by throwing the blame gladly upon the arguments and should hate and revile them all the rest of his life, and be deprived of the truth and knowledge of reality. [90d, Fowler's Loeb translation, which reads "argument" for λόγοις and λογους]

He blames this attitude on those who study disputation and care not for the truth but only persuading their audience. For this reason, Socrates avows the value of the same interior reasoning of the *Theaetetus*: "I shall not be eager to make what I say seem true to my hearers, except as a secondary matter, but shall be very eager to make myself believe it" (*Phaedo* 91b). Implicitly, it is the sophists, as Plato understands them, who stand accused in this passage from the *Phaedo*, and we see no less when Socrates engages specific sophists. Hippias, for example, is repeatedly exhorted to make his arguments about the fine clearer because they need to persuade a shadowy dissenter to whom Socrates must report. This man, who Socrates must convince, is finally identified as Sophroniscus' son, that is, Socrates himself, "who wouldn't easily let me say those things without testing them" (*Greater Hippias* 298c). Plato's reasons for employing this strange distancing device (since Socrates could just as easily directly contest Hippias' claims) seems to lie in the direction of stressing his preference for private argumentation, where conviction must take place internally, over the sophist's public displays.

This gives us some appreciation of what Plato values in argumentation⁷: a discourse that reveals knowledge of reality, that aims at truth and provides inner persuasion. Against this preliminary understanding, we can begin to explore "fallacy" in Plato.

Fallacy in the *Euthydemus*:

The place to begin this part of the investigation must be the *Euthydemus* dialogue, wherein the sophists' alleged penchant for eristics is best illustrated. This term, "eristics," is another that requires some definition. This will largely develop as we look at its expression in this dialogue, but some preliminary points might be offered here: Sometimes translated as "contentious

⁶The same point is made later in the *Philebus* (38c) in the analysis, this time, of *false* judgment.

⁷Distinct, perhaps, from the argumentative nature of *Socrates' elenchos* that we will see practiced in the *Euthydemus*.

arguments” (Loeb, *SR* 183b35), “eristic” is called by Kerford (1981) seeking victory in argument, and marked as not involving any concern for truth,⁸ and Chance (1992) calls it the pseudo-science of argument. Interestingly, against a tide of negative appraisals of this practice, Grimaldi (1996) offers a relatively neutral definition (“disputatious argument wherein one person seeks to make the other give absolute answers to statements which demand qualification”, p.28) and argues that it is not something to be dismissed out of hand because “it is a kind of intellectual dueling that develops a sharpness of mind, clarifies problems, and helps to specify and define issues. Even in its bad sense it encourages the person subjected to the trickery to develop these qualities in self-defense” (p.29). All agree that the place to best witness it in practice is the *Euthydemus*.

Synopsis of the dialogue:

The “action” of the dialogue involves a series of exchanges between Socrates and members of his party (Cleinias and Ctesippus) and the sophist brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, centered and bookended by conversations between Socrates and Crito. Socrates professes admiration at the brothers’ proficiency at fighting with arguments and refuting whatever may be said, whether it is false or true, to the extent where he is prepared to hand himself over to them for instruction in this skill and also invites them to persuade the young Cleinias that he ought to love wisdom and have a care for virtue. The structure of the dialogue involves the sophists’ demonstrations of eristic argument interspersed with Socrates’ demonstrations of protreptic (or hortatory) argument (that is, an argument designed to exhort the non-philosopher to take up the philosophical life).

1st sophistic episode, 275d-278e: knowledge, ignorance and learning.

1st Socratic episode, 278e-282d: wisdom and prudence.

2nd sophistic episode, 283a-288d: everything is true; contradiction is impossible.

2nd Socratic episode, 288d-292e: philosophy and the kingly art.

3rd sophistic episode, 293a-304b: relations and qualifications.

We seem left without a 3rd Socratic episode, which the previous one left necessary, but perhaps we have this in the final conversation between Socrates and Crito (306c to the end).

In the first sophistic episode, Euthydemus asks Cleinias whether it is the wise or the ignorant who learn. Cleinias hesitates before opting for the wise as the learners. But as Dionysodorus whispers to Socrates, it does not matter, he would be refuted whichever alternative he chose. It seems a feature of eristics that the respondent is confronted by opposites with no middle ground, either of which can be refuted. Indeed, first Euthydemus refutes Cleinias’ thesis by showing that it is the ignorant who are the learners because learners do not know what they learn and those who do not know are not wise, and those who are not wise are ignorant. And before the boy can recover, Dionysodorus steps in to show Cleinias that he should not have agreed that it is the ignorant who are learners because when boys are learning writing dictation, it is the wise and not the ignorant who learn.

When Socrates begins his first episode, he calms the boy by drawing his attention to the different meanings of “learn” that were involved in the previous argument (thus, apparently,

⁸See Kerford p.63.ff for a discussion of the distinction between eristic and antilogic.

illustrating Plato's awareness of "fallacy," at least of equivocation) and then examines Cleinias' ideas on what is worthwhile, concluding that he has thus illustrated a hortatory argument (282d) and inviting the sophists to continue in a more serious vein by developing matters along a similar line.

The contrast between what Socrates seeks and what eristics offers is maintained in the second sophistic episode, however, as Dionysodorus argues, this time with Socrates, that in wanting Cleinias to be wise Socrates wants him to be other than he is, and in wanting him to no longer be what he is now, he wants his death. Ctesippus takes umbrage at this, insisting the suggestion is a lie. To which a puzzled Euthydemus asks whether Ctesippus thinks it is possible to tell lies, and the brothers proceed to show not only that it is impossible to say what is false, but that contradiction itself is impossible (since all they would be doing is speaking different descriptions of the same thing, since they can only say what is).

When Socrates' begins his second episode, this time to calm Ctesippus, he is able to turn the table on the sophists, arguing that if there is no falsehood, then no one makes mistakes and there are no ignorant people (contrary to the earlier conclusion) and no refutations (again contrary to the earlier conclusions). The sophists, however, seem unfazed by this turn in the discussion and simply stop answering, at which Socrates proceeds with a further protreptic argument for philosophy (one that ends aporetically with the failure to find the statesman's art).

In the third and last sophistic episode, the brothers argue that Socrates knows everything, and has always known this. The exchanges here often turn on the proper way to answer questions and the refusal (by the sophists) to allow qualifications—another feature of eristics. The claims become more and more outrageous, with arguments like the famous dog/father argument that Aristotle will employ in the *SR*, building to an absurd climax at 303a. Along the way, Socrates draws the sophists into further apparent contradictions and Ctesippus shows how well he has learned from the brothers by using some of their strategies against them. Yet, at the end, Socrates is still praising the brothers' skills to Crito, suggesting, as many commentators observe, that the similarities between dialectic and eristics are really quite strong.

The dialogue itself is generally dated between 390 and 380, between the first Sicilian period of 388/387 and the writing of the core books of the *Republic* around 380. For comparison, Aristotle's dates are 384-322. So we can place the production of the *Euthydemus* well before the *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*.

Lessons from the *Euthydemus*:

I want now to go into some of these exchanges in a little more depth to explore what might be seen as fallacies and why they might be seen so. Let's look at the first demonstration of the brothers, where they show that neither the wise nor the ignorant are learners.

Euth: Which are those who learn, the wise or the ignorant?

Clein: The wise.

Euth: Are there those called teachers or not?

Clein. Agrees there are.

Euth: The teachers are teachers of those who learn?

Clein. Agrees they are.
 Euth: When you were learning, you did not yet know the things you were learning?
 Clein: No.
 Euth: And were you wise when you did not know?
 Clein: No.
 Euth: And if not wise, then ignorant?
 Clein: Yes.
 Euth: Then while you were learning, you were ignorant?
 Clein: Yes.
 Euth: Then it is the ignorant who learn and not the wise. [Refutation of Cleinias' claim.] (275d-276b).
 Dionysodorus then follows at 276c:
 When the writing master gave you dictation, which boys learned, the wise or the ignorant?
 Clein: The wise.
 Dion: Then it is the wise who learn and not the ignorant. [Refutation of Cleinias' agreement at 276b]

What is wrong here? Two answers are suggested in the text, both of which are borne out by readings of what Aristotle is concerned by in the *SR*. On the one hand, the brothers commit fallacies of equivocation. The explanation of this is given by Plato himself, beginning at 277d, when he has Socrates explain to Cleinias that *manthanein* (learn) can mean not only to get information about something, but also to use information to understand what was previously known. Thus, the same word can be appropriately applied to both the one who knows and the one who does not. Sprague sets it out clearly:

Those who understand are those who know. (The learners are the wise).
 When Cleinias got information about music, he was not knowing about it.
 Those who get information are the not knowing. (The learners are the ignorant.) (1965: 10, fn16.)

The sophists' moves, then, depend on the equivocation of this central term.⁹ This indicates an explicit appreciation of equivocation and its effects on Plato's part similar to what Aristotle explains in the *SR*. And it is ambiguity which appears as the dominant "modern" fallacy appreciated by Plato (Robinson, 1942, 106ff). If we want to develop a modern treatment of fallacy in Plato (as, indeed, Sprague has done), it would be along these lines.

On the other hand, what the brothers also do which would surely bother Plato (and Aristotle) is simply fail to provide real refutations and, hence, they illustrate well what might be seen as "sophistical refutations." The applause and laughter that greets the refuting of the boy (276c) seems to confirm that the audience judges him to be refuted, and cleverly so. Important here are the parallels between eristics and the *elenchos*. Both involve an investigation through

⁹As various commentators point out, the sophists' arguments also involve the ambiguity of "wise" and "ignorant," although Plato does not draw attention to this.

questions and answers to a refutation of the thesis; and both solicit the agreement of the respondent at each step. To *appear* real, the sophistical refutation must imitate its legitimate counterpart, be parasitic upon it. (Gonzalez, 119).

To better appreciate what makes the bad refutations sophistical (or the sophistical refutations bad) we can contrast them with what we might take to be a *real* refutation. Consider how Socrates treats Dionysodorus' thesis that no one speaks falsely (286c).

[Socrates:] The argument amounts to claiming that there is no such thing as false speaking, doesn't it? And the person speaking must either speak the truth or else not speak?

He [Dionysodorus] agreed.

Now would you say that it was impossible to speak what is false, but possible to think it?

No, thinking it is not possible either, he said.

Then there is absolutely no such thing as false opinion, I said.

There is not, he said.

Then is there no ignorance, nor are there any ignorant men? Or isn't this just what ignorance would be, if there should be any—to speak falsely about things?¹⁰

It certainly would, he said.

And yet there is no such thing, I said.

He said there was not.

Are you making this statement just for the sake of argument, Dionysodorus—to say something startling—or do you honestly believe that there is no such thing as an ignorant man?

Your business is to refute me, he said.

Well, but is there such a thing as refutation if one accepts your thesis that nobody speaks falsely?

No, there is not, said Euthydemus.

Then it can't be that Dionysodorus ordered me to refute him just now, can it? I said. (286c-e)

On the terms we have been exploring, the sophists are refuted. Having claimed that there are ignorant people and that Cleinias was earlier refuted, they are now led to “accept” that there are no ignorant people and no refutation. At least, this is what they would be committed to accept if they would commit themselves. Socrates' question “are you just saying this for the sake of argument, or do you honestly believe it” is crucial. The integrity of the *elenchus* pivots on the principle to say only what you believe. If the brothers believe what they are saying, then they are inconsistent in their beliefs and we have had demonstrated for us a real refutation.¹¹ For our terms now, it should also be clear that Plato has in mind a distinction between a sophistical

¹⁰We might note here the consequences of the sophists' position for Socrates “art,” since it depends on his professed ignorance. This is similar to the concern raised in the *Theaetetus* that Protagoras' maxim (which makes all humans equally knowledgeable) renders the Socratic *elenchos* redundant.

¹¹In like manner, the Protagorean maxim that humans are the measure of all things will be charged with inconsistency in the *Theaetetus*.

refutation and a real refutation (the question remains whether the sophists have in mind any such distinction), that this is similar to what Aristotle will develop later, and that this hinges on the respondent being committed to the statements he puts forward. What prevents the earlier refutation of Cleinias from being real on these terms is the structure of the opening question that demands a choice between stark alternatives (wise or ignorant) with no room for middle ground. In accepting those terms, Cleinias is not saying what he believes but what he is told. The point is emphasized in the third sophistic episode when the sophists question Socrates and become repeatedly frustrated with his insistence on qualifying his answers. As Socrates observes at that point, “I realized he was angry at me for making distinctions in his phrases, because he wanted to surround me with words and so hunt me down” (295d).

But do the sophists accept what has been shown them? Are they working with the same principles and the same understanding of the nature of discourse? It seems not. At the heart of all of this is the central exchange (in the second sophistic episode) which bears on the very nature (and possibility) of fallacies themselves, if they are seen as in some way saying what is false.¹² If false speaking is impossible, then what are we to say of fallacies, as they are understood in Plato and Aristotle’s terms? Hence, we can begin to appreciate how the *Euthydemus* points ahead to the problematic of the *Sophist* and what has to be accomplished there (that is, to show that there is a sense in which we can say what is not).

Consider Euthydemus’ argument as it develops:

Ctesippus believes it is possible to tell lies (283e). Euthydemus counters by asking whether this is done when the person speaks thing spoken about, or when they do not speak it? [When they speak it, says Ctesippus.] So, if the person speaks this, he speaks no other of the things that are, except this one. And the thing he speaks is one of those that are. Hence, the person speaking the thing, speaks what *is*. But someone who speaks what is, and the things that are, speaks the truth, and tells no lies. [Ctesippus counters that a person who speaks these things does not speak things that are—284b.] But, Euthydemus points out that the things that are not, do not exist. They are nowhere. When someone speaks, they do something; make something. So, “nobody speaks things that are not, since he would then be making something, and you have admitted that no one is capable of making something that is not. So according to your own statement, nobody tells lies” (284c).

Here we have another refutation. Ctesippus’ original claim has been refuted. Is it a sophistic refutation? Commentators point to the awkwardness of the language in this section of the text, as if Plato’s characters are themselves having difficulty speaking about the subject under review. Bluck (1957) proposes that the fallacy “lies in the ambiguity of τὸ ὄν (or τὰ ὄντα) which can refer either (i) to an existing person or thing or (ii) to truth” (184). The ambiguity is lost when translators commit themselves to one side or the other, as Rouse (1961) does in translating *ta onta* as “the facts.” But a similar ambiguity (and fallacy) might also be seen in the meaning of λέγειν *x* (speaking *x*), which may mean to mention or refer to *x* or to say (utter) something

¹²Fallacies as sophistic refutations do say something that is false. This is clear about the early account of the fallacies. Later, the concept is extended to include notions like that of irrelevance (which does not, strictly, involve falsehood). But Plato does not seem to understand them here in that developed sense.

(about *x*). The object of λέγειν may be either the thing you refer to or what you say *about* it.

On either front we have suggested for us an underlying epistemological difference between Socrates and the sophists, which may in turn upset our previous thinking about fallacies in the *Euthydemus*, and which may suggest why the brothers do not accept the account by virtue of which their reasoning is deemed fallacious. They seem, after all, quite nonchalant in the face of the refutations aimed at them, which readers generally take as an indication that they are not serious.

The contrast noted above in the ambiguity surrounding λέγειν, may be seen as that between a use of language itself and a use of language to refer to things that are, and a commitment to those things. Earlier, in his first elenctic appearance, Socrates had pointed out that even if one learnt everything the brothers teach, such a person would be no more knowledgeable about the way things actually are (278b). The value of discussion, for Plato, is in its ability to uncover the truth about things. But the sophists seem fundamentally uninterested in such a project. They delight in enjoying the senses and textures of words. As Gonzalez (1998, 116) suggests, this is another key difference between dialectic and eristics: dialectic is full of content; eristics is empty. Hence, one can defeat eristics only by bringing the words back into a context where they mean something (Gonzalaez, 118), and this we see Socrates attempting throughout.

McCabe (1994) pushes things further and argues that the apparent underlying dispute between Socrates and the sophists is over whether things persist over time: “Suppose,” she asks, “that the argument about being and dying turns on whether you admit, or refuse to admit, that there are continuants underneath change. On such an interpretation it is not a fallacy at all, but a valid argument from the extraordinary premiss that nothing persists” (83). Indeed, it is a commonplace assumption about change and “what is not” that for any change to occur there must be something that persists over time. McCabe connects the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus to the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* who, on her reading, insisted that there are no continuants, based on the belief that any moment is discontinuous from any other, so that states of affairs existing in those moments are unconnected. This allows us to see the apparent connections made in the *Theaetetus* between Protagoras and Heraclitus (McCabe, 82-83). Along these lines, it is then suggestive that Dionysodorus responds to a Socratic charge of inconsistency between what was then being maintained and what had been asserted earlier by saying: “Really, Socrates... are you such an old Cronus [dinosaur] as to bring up what we said in the beginning? I suppose if I said something last year, you will bring that up now and still be helpless in dealing with the present argument” (287b). Here he implies that what was said then, was then; what is said now, is now, and the two are not to be connected. If the sophists do not believe that there are persistent things, so that a Cleinias who is not what he is now is dead, then the focus of their interest becomes words and what we can do with them.

We cannot here pursue McCabe’s suggestion by examining in detail what the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* is made to say and might mean. Suffice it to recognize that there were deep disagreements between the sophists and Socrates/Plato about how to see the world and to use language, such that such a rigorous divide as she suggests is plausible. This also accounts for the extreme nature of the threat that the sophists *en masse* represented for Plato’s epistemological project and which requires such repeated retort and defense on his part. McCabe’s further

conclusions are also relevant: “If this sort of theory is the basis for Euthydemus and Dionysodorus’ lack of interest in consistency in the *Euthydemus* then the dispute between the sophists and Socrates is no longer a matter of what kind of argumentative tricks they are prepared to use to achieve their ends” (76). In fact, what emerges is a claim that fallacies are theory-bound, arising in relation to a series of beliefs about the standards of what is true (91).

We recognize the existence of fallacies, and a notion of “fallacy,” in the *Euthydemus*, because we have bought into the epistemological tradition that defines them. But Plato must do more than this, he still confronts the very real challenge of the sophists and must show that fallacies (sophistical refutations) are ‘real’ by showing that when we speak falsely, we speak about something. That is a task taken up in the *Sophist*.¹³

Lessons from The *Sophist*:

In spite of the *Sophist* dealing with the question of what is and what is not, and following on the heels of the *Theaetetus* where Socrates has contested the statements of Protagoras, including the important second part of the measure maxim—humans are the measure of all things, things are that they are, things that are not, that they are not—Socrates is not the spokesperson. If the claims underlying eristics are to be put to rest here, then perhaps we should not be reminded of an elenctic method (and its practitioner) which is so similar.¹⁴ A new dialectic has emerged, which aims beyond an uncovering of ignorance to an achievable truth. On the morning following the meeting reported in the *Theaetetus*, Theaetetus, Theodorus and Socrates (plus his younger namesake) gather again, along with an Eleatic Stranger introduced by Theodorus, “a kind of god of refutation” (θεὸς ὧς τις ἐλεγκτικὸς)—216b.

Structurally, the dialogue falls into three parts, beginning, middle and end. While the beginning (216a-236d) and the ending (264b-268d) concentrate for the most part on the various definitions of the “sophist,” the middle part (236d-264b) focusses on the problem of what is not and falsehood. It is this part which will be of greatest interest to us. Thus, it is not my intention here to discuss the various definitions of the “sophist” that are put forward by the Stranger and his respondent, Theaetetus; nor to consider some of the problems with the theory of Forms that this dialogue brings to light, or the question of whether Plato involves both existential and copula senses of being. My focus is solely on the import of this dialogue for the problematic brought to light by the *Euthydemus*.

The import of the problem is clearly carried over from that earlier dialogue. The Stranger observes: “We are really...engaged in a very difficult investigation; for the matter of appearing

¹³At this point I continue my study of Plato on “fallacy” by following the argument into the *Sophist*. But the paper could take a different direction altogether and turn back to recover a more positive appreciation of sophistic argument and, especially eristics. Such an appreciation would put in question the fairness of the attribution “fallacy” to “sophistical refutation.”

¹⁴If the method of the philosopher can be confused with the method of the sophist, then it is not only the methods but the practitioners (philosopher/sophist) who need to be distinguished. As set out in the prologue (216a-218c), this is the project of the *Sophist*.

and seeming, but not being, and of saying things, but not true ones—all this is now and always has been very perplexing. You see, Theaetetus, it is extremely difficult to understand how a man is to say or think that falsehood really exists and in saying this not be involved in contradiction” (236e-237a). No explicit reference is made back to the *Euthydemus* here, but it should be clear to us what is at stake. It is only in the absence of such a backward glance that we can understand the puzzlement of commentators at the Stranger’s (and Plato’s) puzzlement here.¹⁵ As far as problems go, this is as real as they can get for Plato as he struggles to establish his ideas against the popularity of the sophists. To hold a false opinion, it seems, is to think something that is the opposite of what is real. But this is to think things that are not, which the interlocutors agree is impossible. The sophist has them in contradiction on their own terms (241a-b).

To solve this puzzle, in the first instance, that they overturn the edifice of Parmenidean thought (which the Eleatic Stranger does with reluctance) by identifying a set of basic or primordial Forms by virtue of which the others (and particulars) are possible. And to accomplish this they work with Plato’s dialectic, seen here in the method of division, as it has now developed. Dialectic now involves determining the nature of Forms not through the method of hypothesis that characterized earlier dialogues, but by determining their relations to each other through collection and division. The *Sophist* gives us a succinct definition of this: dialectic is the “knowledge and ability to distinguish by classes how individual things can or cannot be associated with one another” (253d). This firmer way to uncover truth than the Socratic *elenchos*, since it trades in the reality of the Forms, about which the other seems agnostic, also contrasts with the dialectic of Aristotle, which draws on popular opinions.

The eleatics, following Parmenides, would hold that there is only one Being. But the discussants of the *Sophist* determine that since change (or motion)¹⁶ and rest are opposed to each other, and since both exist, then neither can be Being but must be separate from it, as from each other (250c-d). Being, of course, blends with both these other Forms, but they cannot blend with each other. In being separate from each other, they each partake in Difference or Otherness (το ἕτερον). And, finally, both of these are the same as themselves and so both partake in Sameness (Identity). These basic Forms are those by which all others (and particulars) can be understood.

In establishing the role of το ἕτερον the discussants have made a major advance in resolving their puzzle. Change, for example, is not Sameness (or Identity) and yet it is the same (as itself). So a sense of not-being emerges. As the Stranger observes, when they say that it is the same and not the same, they “do not use the words in the same sense” (256a). Change is in a sense Other (or Different) and also in a sense not Other. Hence, Change really is not, and also is,

¹⁵Runciman (1962, 99) calls the problem “unreal,” because Plato knew that denials could be made.

¹⁶Change is the preferred translation of κίνησις because Plato’s meaning would encompass not only movement of position (locomotion) but also changes in the quality of a thing (like sunlight through a window as the afternoon progresses). Thus, “motion,” a popular alternative in many translations, seems not to convey enough. Unfortunately, what seems to encourage the choice of “motion” is that the contrasting term, στάσις, has no clear corresponding word in English, and hence the choice of “rest.”

since it partakes of Being. The conclusion they must draw is that in relation to Change, “not-being is,” and this must extend to all the classes or kinds. That is because “as applied to all of them, the nature of the Other [or Different] makes each of them not be by making it other than that which is” (256c). All of them “are not” in this same way. Not-being emerges not as the opposite of Being, but as what is Other than Being” “when we say not-being, we speak not of something that is the opposite of being, but only of something other” (257b). Hence they deny that the negative signifies the opposite and allow only that the particle “not” indicates something other than the words to which it is prefixed (or the things denoted by those words that follow the negative). The Other has existence as a kind of non-being, “for it signifies not the opposite of being, but only the other of being, and nothing more” (αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος οὐσία ἐστίν, οὐκ ἐναντίον ἐκείνῳ σημαίνουσα, ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτον μόνον, ἕτερον ἐκείνου—258b)

It is the case, as commentators have noted (Runciman 1962, 100), that Plato provides nothing like an account of negation that would satisfy contemporary logicians. In fact, he is more extending the sense of assertion than explaining negation. But the larger task was not Plato’s goal: he was seeking a way in which it was sensible to talk about falsity, and he seems to have found it. This is the second part of the resolution of the puzzle: having established a way in which not-being is, they must finish the question of how they can speak not-being.

The Stranger and Theaetetus have discovered a set of primary or foundational Forms that blend or mix (Being, Change, Rest, Other, Same). They have also found that not-being is a class of being that permeates all being (260b).¹⁷ This has allowed them to make the remarkable claim that the complete separation of each thing from every other would be “the utterly final obliteration of all discourse (λόγων)” (259e). Our power of discourse is derived from the mixing of classes or ideas. Runciman, as an example, finds this claim puzzling. We can agree with his observation what Plato means here “is extremely difficult to establish with any confidence” (1962, 107) yet still remark on the contribution this would make to the insistence of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus that things *are* separate or discontinuous and therefore they are not committed to any consistency with regard to what they say at different points in time. Insofar as Platonic discourse requires consistency of terms as well as beliefs, then this remark of the Stranger’s is not so puzzling.

If not-being permeates all being, then it is not a stretch to expect it will also mingle with all speech, will create a background of otherness against which speech emerges and is possible. When Theaetetus questions this idea, the Stranger points out the consequence that we have also seen from the *Euthydemus*, that if it does not mingle “then all things are true,” as they were for the sophist brothers; but if it mingles “then false opinion and false discourse come into being” (260c). And with falsehood arises deceit and with deceit the problems of appearance, that region in which Plato believes the sophist hides.

Of course, the sophist could raise an objection here and insist that some ideas do not partake of not-being, with speech and opinion being among them. The sentences “Theaetetus sits” and “Theaetetus, with whom I am now talking” are investigated in order to both complete the resolution of the general puzzle and counter this objection. The one sentence has the quality

¹⁷I leave aside here the question that troubles some commentators of whether Plato is asserting a Form of Not-being.

of being true, the other false. The true one states the facts or what is.¹⁸ The false one states things that are other than the facts (263b).¹⁹ The false statement speaks of what is not as if it were. In sum, false discourse and false opinion²⁰ have been found much sooner than they expected.

Of course, a false statement like “Theaetetus flies” is not a sophistical refutation. That is, there seems a far remove from Cleinias’ conclusions that the ignorant are the learners or the wise are the learners, and the false assertion about Theaetetus. But, in the first instance, Cleinias’ conclusions were refutations of his claims because they were contrary to them, and the *Sophist* account focuses not on the contrainess of the conclusion but on its otherness from what was first asserted. Thus, it counters the charge of the *Euthydemus* that refutations, whether real or sophistical, are impossible. Plato has countered the sophists’ claim that speech cannot share in not-being by showing that otherness is possible. The explanation we are given, that mistakes involve the misidentification of the Form being partaken of, is idiosyncratic to Plato’s project, but it allows for the first coherent understanding of what a “fallacy” might be. On Plato’s understanding, a “real” refutation would not make that mistake. Speech about a class is refuted by staying within what is appropriate to say about that class, by drawing on ideas consistent with it. A false refutation asserts a conclusion that is other than about that class, or outside of it. The *Sophist* is explicit in its (Plato’s) conclusion that the person who confuses or denies distinctions by “always bringing forward opposites in the argument” (like, we may believe, the oppositional choices characteristic of eristics, i.e., wise/ignorant) provides “no true refutation” (οὔτε τις ἔλεγχος οὕτως ἀληθινός) but only, we must imagine, a sophistical one (259d). Also, this has the perhaps surprising result of allowing us to expand the concept of “fallacy.” Up until this point we may have been thinking about it in a very rudimentary sense as the *opposite* of truth, because that was the direction in which the sophists led us. But now it is presented as the *other* of truth, or other than the true. This would seem to open up the concept to include irrelevance insofar as the conclusion of an irrelevant argument is other than what should be concluded. Even Plato’s earlier recognition of equivocation is consistent with this observation. We then have the philosophical groundwork laid for a broader appreciation of sophistical refutation in Aristotle’s work of that name, including his all-encompassing account of the *ignoratio elenchi* which accommodates a range of confusions about what a refutation is, all amounting to something *other than* a correct refutation.

¹⁸The same ambiguity arises here as in the *Euthydemus* of translating τὰ ὄντα as “the facts.”

¹⁹Not “opposite,” note; it does not say that it’s not the case that Theaetetus sits.

²⁰The argument to establish false opinion is a little lengthier: Thought is the silent inner speech that the soul has with itself; when speech arises this way it has the name of opinion; and when this condition is brought about in a person through sensation, it is called “seeming”; hence, some opinions, being akin to speech, will be false (263e-264b).

Consequences for our understanding of ‘fallacy’ and the projects of Informal Logic.

Beyond the ideas we can relate to Plato and his (emerging) role in the history of argumentation, what further provisional conclusions can we draw that are relevant to the interests of fallacy theory generally?

Fallacy is to be understood against not just a concept of ‘good’ argument, but a model of rationality that supports that concept. Thus, the study of fallacy in any particular tradition should reveal as much about the conditions for good argumentation as it does about bad. Assumptions that there is only one tradition (our own) grounded in the Aristotelian can obscure this insight and what we might benefit from it. Because it follows, as McCabe has hinted here, that we may have other traditions (or communities) of “rationality” that define good and bad reasoning on their own terms. We have traced the story of fallacy in Plato’s dialogues on *his* terms, but left aside was another story that might have been told on the part of the sophist brothers who appear clearly to reject the assumptions along which Socrates and Plato are proceeding in the *Euthydemus*. What “that” other tradition might have looked like (and what would count as good and bad reasoning within it) is yet to be uncovered. But we may speculate that it would appear in relation to the different goals (ones more public and human-centered) addressed by sophistic reason and practice. We see something similar, perhaps, in Andrea Nye’s observation that in her assessment of the history of logic she has likely committed a number of fallacies (Nye, 1990, 174). But she says this not as a confession or apology, but, like the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, unconcerned for what it suggests. In part, surely, because she does not see herself writing “inside” that tradition, and what counts as fallacious for her would be something else altogether. It follows further from this, that “fallacies,” being tradition-bound, are not measures of objective reason but relative to the account/community. Fallacies are violations of norms of rationality and will vary according to the model of rationality involved.²¹ Such a consequence will not be well received by some.

Secondly, a theory of fallacy must also explain why/how errors arise. This Plato’s theory does, albeit, as I have noted, idiosyncratically. But it is incumbent on those who provide accounts and treatments of various fallacies to explain both how they could be committed and (if we are to take them seriously) how people could be misled by them. Some of the examples Aristotle provides in the *Sophistical Refutations* seem to fail at least this last requirement.

Finally, and on a more positive note. We might return to the question of why we should be interested in, and even concerned by, the question of “fallacy.” Plato has a clear response to this: fallacies impede our movement towards the truth and for that reason should be identified and avoided. But there is a further, fuller, dimension to this. In spite of frequent appearances, Plato is not concerned with the acquisition of truth in the abstract. It fits into a comprehensive appreciation of how best to live life to the fullest. In relation to this we might say that reasoning

²¹This is the tack taken by myself and Andreas Welzel in a new project influenced partly by the so-called “rationality wars” and the conflicting responses to traditional fallacies by people evaluated according to different sets of assumptions: by cognitive psychologists as opposed to behavioural economists, for example.

well and being able to conduct good argumentation is an essential part of *eudaimonia*, of well-being. Hence, the stress placed on practicing argumentative debates in the Academy, done not just to prepare young people for interactions in the public fora, but for the development of their characters, for improving the self. Thus, at one of its roots, argumentation has ethical and social consequences. And this is as important today as then. Bad reasoning affects our quality of life. As Plato's theory of argument indicates, it is in the internal conversation with ourselves that the merits of good argumentative principles come to bear, and bad ones have effect. Thus, the study of fallacy is not one of abstract logical interest, but has deep associations with the most important projects of the human endeavour: to improve ourselves and the environments in which we develop.

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