

## Fallacies and Sophisms

Aristotle's *SR* give us a list of 13 fallacies or *Sophistical* refutations. What makes them sophistical? Is this a fair attribution?

In the *Analytics*, A takes off two of the fallacies (BtheQ and Many Questions) because they are strictly dialectical and gives a formal analysis of the rest. Then in the *R* he gives another list of 9, which are given very short discussion.

So, in the *ST* we have fallacies that arise in dialectical discussions or examinations. A gives us four kinds of argument that might be involved. One of these is the examination.

If we look just at that, and how it is described at the end of *SR*, along with what is said about the practitioner, we get a picture very much like that of Socrates. It will occur to us that the early Socratic dialogues are examinations that aim at refutation, where the opponent puts forward a thesis and that thesis (the statements) is examined, with each move agreed on. In fact, S takes pains to secure the agreement of his opponent as he moves on. Then it arrives at a contradiction of the thesis, i.e., a refutation.

So this looks like the kind of refutation that A would see as fine (it is not sophistical, although it again shows how close to the Sophists S was in practice). This also suggests that the *SR* was indeed written while A was in the Academy, and that a key component of the process there was to engage in these kinds of (Socratic?) refutations. It also shows how close A was then to the threat of the sophist (influenced by P.)

So, is the attribution of fallacy to the sophists fair? On one hand, 'yes'. Give the time this is written, the *Euthydemus* would have been a current concern, hence the use of examples. But A is treating *SR* as equivalent to eristic, when there is much more to the Sophists' argumentative practice.

Look more closely at how A describes a *SR*. It is a fallacy because it disrupts the moves in an argument toward a contradiction. At stake is the difference between true and false statements.

Take, for example, the *ignoratio elenchi*. This translates as 'ignorance of what a refutation is', and is understood as the failure to prove the contradictory. While it is first introduced as one of the thirteen sources of fallacious reasoning, at *SR6* it is revised as *the* alternative way of accommodating all the other twelve, since each of them is a violation of some part of the definition of a refutation.

Part of our problem in understanding Aristotle's position on sophisms and false arguments is that he uses a number of different terms almost interchangeably (or at least without consistency, Schreiber, 2003-173).

We have:

Paralogism;

Apparent argument;

False argument;

Eristic argument;  
Sophistic argument.

Poste (1866:120) contends that Aristotle distinguishes paralogsms (fallacies) from sophistical refutations. But it is difficult to see the case here, and I incline with Schreiber to reject it.

“As further evidence against the claim that Aristotle distinguishes sophistic or eristic argument from paralogism either according to the context of the error or intent of the perpetrator, consider the following examples cited by Aristotle, all of which involve efforts to deceive another and all of which are labeled “paralogisms” (Schreiber, 175). Then follows a list that includes *Poetics* 24, 1460a20, where Homer is accused of speaking falsehoods, which is a paralogism.; and the concluding chapter to *SR*, where Aristotle describes all of the preceding false arguments, whether deceptions or errors, as paralogisms.

While

Elsewhere, we learn other things about the Sophists.

There are three theses that we might at least attribute to some of them:

1. A variety of relativism (cf. Protagoras’ measure maxim). Here we see the threat that P. and A. feel from the Sophists. An analysis of the maxim will show that they are drawing the judgment of being and non-being into the human realm. They trade in appearance in a ‘legitimate’ way. Whereas, A’s definition exploits the difference between appearance and reality. This is a fundamental disagreement, perhaps. What is reality, how can we know it, and how is reasoning to be used in relation to it?
2. To make the weak argument [appear] stronger. As we know, much hangs on the ‘appear’. Why do some people introduce it to the text? It speaks again to a key difference. For A and P, the weakness or strength of an argument is something inherent in it, something to be uncovered, and related to how it stands in relation to a truth which is independent of it. For the Sophists, I suggest, the weakness or strength of an argument cannot be determined in advance, prior to our experiential consideration of the details. And the ‘truth’ of the matter will arise after the fact. Will be decided (or judged) by the human involved—they are the measure of what is and what is not. So, there is a key difference here, and the nature of fallacy hangs on it.
3. Virtue can be taught. On the face of it there is less to be said here. But think about it.