

4-1-2018

Platonic Agonism: A Dialogical Addendum to Plato's Sophist

Bennett Foster
Bennfos@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph>



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Foster, Bennett (2018) "Platonic Agonism: A Dialogical Addendum to Plato's Sophist," *Sophia and Philosophia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph/vol1/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sophia and Philosophia* by an authorized editor of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

Platonic Agonism: A Dialogical Addendum to Plato's *Sophist*

Bennett Foster

I. Introduction

The following addendum to Plato's *Sophist* was fabricated as a kind of experimental answer to a specific contextual question: What is the relation of Plato's conception of philosophy to the practice of the *agōn* in Ancient Greece? For the "contest-system,"¹ to adopt Gouldner's phrase, has long been recognized as one of the salient features of Greek culture in the centuries leading up to Plato's time.² Yet in the dialogues Plato never gives an explicit critique of the *agōn* the way he does other cultural phenomena, such as politics, poetry, rhetoric, education, etc. Many scholars have therefore concluded that Plato is more or less ambivalent toward the *agōn* as such, or, if anything, he "objects to the conventional Greek contest-system and usual economic virtues" in favor of a more rarefied account of the human good.³ This conclusion seems to be derived in part from the fact that where Plato does mention agonistic activity and values, he seems to distance them from those of philosophy. One notable example is found in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates warns his interlocutor that they would do well not to be like those sophistic "contestants" (ἀγωνισταί), who seem to care only about winning the argument, and says that they should rather pursue the truth in their inquiry as more prudent "lovers of wisdom" (φιλόσοφοι).⁴ The distinction between true philosophers and mere sophistic contestants is here somewhat offhanded, but it anticipates a more in-depth and formal discussion in the *Sophist*—the dramatic action of which takes place the day after that of the *Theaetetus*. Interestingly, while Plato further confirms and elaborates upon the sophist as a contestant, he also provides an opportunity for the stark opposition between philosophy and *agōn* to be challenged. As it turns out, the sophist is only a particular *kind* of contestant, that is, one who engages in "fighting" (μαχητικόν), as opposed to "competition" (ἀμιλλητικόν).⁵ But what distinguishes these two types of *agōn*? What are the characteristics of competition such that sophistry is not one of its kinds? Can it be that, just as sophistry is identified as a kind of fighting, philosophy can be characterized in terms of competition? Had Plato allowed his characters to survey these avenues of inquiry, the question of the relation between philosophy and the *agōn* would have a more definite answer. These questions,

however, are left unexplored in the *Sophist*, and so they are taken up in the present addendum.

There is, admittedly, a certain amount of presumption involved in attempting a “dialogical addendum” to Plato. Suffice it to say, I do not claim to “add” anything to Plato’s corpus in the sense of completing or improving upon it. Nor do I pretend to have discovered anything definite about what Plato himself thought concerning the relation of agonistic and philosophical activities. Rather, the purpose of this experiment is to see what happens when the possibility of what I will call “Platonic agonism” is tested organically, so to speak, with the contextual and philosophical constraints, as well as the creative freedom, that the form of dialogue affords. I undertake this enterprise to offer a new perspective on Plato’s dialogues, yes, but also to evaluate the methods and practice of dialogue itself. In a time when dialogue—philosophical, social, political, intercultural—is commonly recognized as being so crucial and yet so deeply convoluted and contentious, there is potential value in embracing and perhaps refining the interpersonal friction, the contest of words and ideas, that seems to be inherent in ideological exchange. I mean to suggest that Socratic dialectic can be the model by which to engage this form of dialogical agonism. In addition, this introduction is meant to elucidate and offer extraneous support for the findings of the experimental addendum. It should be noted that, while I do consider their historical backgrounds and conditions, a thorough analysis of the complex relationship between the Platonic dialogues and the *agōn* as a cultural phenomenon in their socio-historical contexts is beyond the scope of this piece. My purpose here is to entertain and enliven the possibility of Platonic agonism as a dialogical paradigm by demonstrating that Plato’s conception of philosophy can be conceived as agonistic (in a specialized sense), in such a way that is consistent with both the discussions of the nature of philosophy and portrayals of philosophical practice throughout several dialogues.

Before advancing the view that Platonic philosophy can be considered a kind of agonistic endeavor, it will be useful to consider a recent argument to the contrary. In her book, *Socratic Charis: Philosophy without the Agon*, Lisa Wilkinson offers a specifically non-agonistic interpretation of Plato’s philosophical method. As the title of her book suggests, Wilkinson argues that the practice of philosophy in the dialogues is driven by *charis*, “grace” or “gift-giving,” which she characterizes as a dialogical value that is in direct opposition to the *agōn*. By explicating the gift practices in ancient Greek culture in relation to the emergence of *demokratia* and the role of

friendship (ξένια), Wilkinson presents *charis* as the egalitarian model of reciprocal exchange upon which Socratic *philosophia* is based. In the *Apology*, for instance, Socrates presents himself as one who wants nothing other than to benefit his interlocutors, not to defeat or harm them in any way. He is quite literally the god's gift to Athens; indeed, he explicitly asserts as much in his defense at trial. Accusations to the contrary, which tend to emphasize Socratic irony and disputatious examples of dialectic, are based on a misunderstanding of his task and purpose, and, Wilkinson argues, at the heart of this misunderstanding is the presupposition that the Socratic *elenchos* is driven by agonistic motivations.

Like myself, Wilkinson is ultimately concerned with more than just an accurate reading of Plato; she aims to “highlight the democratic possibilities of Socratic dialogue” by arguing that Plato’s conception of philosophy (as she interprets it) “may have something to offer our present day concerns and practices,” related to “democratic competence” and the open, honest exchange of ideas.⁶ Plato gives us a model of genuine dialogue, motivated by Socratic *charis*, as interpersonal, egalitarian, non-elitist; it is “completely free of strife,” “proceeds to a relationship of ‘equality and reciprocity’ by mutual willingness and action,” and is “predicated on the possibility of a genuine combination of interests.”⁷ The *agōn*, by contrast, is by its very nature elitist, operating as the winnowing fan that separates the better person from the worse, the noble from the base. This “competitive *ethos*” is specifically and essentially aristocratic, and stands in opposition to Socrates’ gift of opening a “space between citizens that indicate the value of their relationships.”⁸ Moreover, reading the Platonic dialogues as “perennial contests between words and deeds”⁹ undermines the very purpose of dialogue to perpetuate an open and pluralistic economy of ideas. According to Wilkinson, then, the *agōn* is an unfortunate remnant of an antiquated, non-egalitarian societal model, to which Plato has little to no connection and which he does not want to perpetuate.

Much of Wilkinson’s argument hinges on her interpreting Plato’s Socrates as “non-elite in appearance, speech, and property,”¹⁰ and generally subversive of aristocratic norms and values. It is necessary, however, to consider the possibility that Plato does not mean to subvert or entirely disavow hierarchical valuations (social or otherwise) as much as he means to challenge and transform their traditional contents. It should be noted, first, that the *agōn* had played an integral role in the institution of such valuations at least since the Homeric period. According to Oswyn Murray’s account, “Homeric man . . . sustained his role as military champion” by means of contests on the

battlefield (as in the numerous individual fights between warriors in so many books of the *Iliad*) and off (as in the funeral games of Book XXIII of the *Iliad*, as well as Odysseus' archery contest with the suitors in the *Odyssey*).¹¹ Through the archaic period, as the *agōn* became a cultural activity in its own right, victory in such contests was the standard by which nobility was judged: "the word 'aristocracy' itself meant 'the rule of the best man,' and their *aretē* (excellence) was proved by success in contest."¹² Now, Wilkinson may be correct to observe that, by Plato's time, aristocratic attitudes no longer had singular, or even dominant influence on Athenian culture, since democratic values were becoming relatively well established. And yet, given the longstanding and pervasive agonistic tradition, with the rise of an intellectual elite, including poets, political orators, dramatists, sophists and the newly forming schools of so-called *philosophia*, it was perhaps inevitable that the *agōn* continue to be a driving cultural force as these groups vied to become recognized as the veritable educators of Greece.

Aristophanes demonstrates this by means of comic satirization in the *Clouds*: the personified Right and Wrong arguments engage in a verbal "fight" (μάχης) to decide which is better for the Greeks, the traditional aristocratic education, or the new sophistic education (represented here by the parodied Socratic school). As the debate is about to begin, the chorus describes it as a "great contest" (ἀγών μέγιστος) in which the "entire crisis of wisdom" (ἅπας ... κίνδυνος ... σοφίας) is at stake.¹³ Here we see that, among the various intellectual groups, the *agōn* continues to function through the latter half of the 5th century as the trial by which virtue, specifically wisdom, is assigned and instilled. Thus, Aristophanes establishes a significant—if farcical and, given its influence on the fate of Socrates, dangerous—precedent for the conception of philosophy as a kind of contest.

Now, one might think Plato should want to deny Aristophanes' unflattering depiction of Socrates and distance his methods as much as possible from the agonistic characterization of philosophy. As I will show, however, Plato does not unequivocally oppose this precedent of dialogical agonism so much as he revalues and realigns it to fit the true philosophical paradigm, as actually established by Socrates.¹⁴ In this, I am in agreement with Nietzsche: with his dialectical method, "[Socrates] discovered a new kind of *agōn*," and this is precisely why he inspired such fascination—and frustration—among Athens' elite.¹⁵ Only, the combative element of dialectic is not born from a spirit of *ressentiment*, as Nietzsche would have it, nor is its purpose even primarily to determine a victor, but rather it is to cultivate real human excellence. Throughout the

dialogues, philosophy is presented as just that practice by which the meaning of *aretē* is transformed: true excellence is no longer identified with the heroic virtues of the Homeric period, the aristocratic virtues of the archaic period, or the sophistic virtues of his own day, but rather with the virtues of the *psyche*, secured by knowledge of the good, as established by his own philosophical paradigm. By means of the dialogical *agōn*, a new kind of “best man” is decided, one who is led by wisdom, who is good and just of soul. This is, in any case, the underlying thesis that the addendum is meant to demonstrate.

The specific context in which I take up this thesis is the rivalry between philosophy and sophistry, and more specifically, between the dialectic of *elenchos* and eristic argumentation. Scholars have often admitted that Plato and the sophists were engaged “in a competitive struggle for the allegiance of Greek youth.”¹⁶ Yet few seem willing to grant that this agonism meaningfully informs Plato’s conception of the methods and goals of philosophy itself. In fact, many scholars have tended to represent the sophist’s eristic method as an “agonistic” mode of argumentation, a shameless contest in which the interlocutors are quarrelsome and litigious “opponents,” seeking “victory in argument.”¹⁷ Platonic dialectic, on the other hand, is often distinguished as an essentially cooperative, dialogical endeavor, in which the one being questioned is not necessarily the defender of a thesis, but rather an active participant in the investigation.¹⁸ A closer look at the operations of both eristic and dialectic, however, reveals a subtler distinction.

Especially relevant here is the *Euthydemus*, which is referenced throughout the addendum. In that dialogue, Socrates introduces the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus as experts in fighting (μάχη) and pankratiasts (παγκρατιασταί), or “all-around fighters.”¹⁹ The *pankration* was an especially brutal athletic contest that combined wrestling and boxing with kicking—almost any move was allowed except for biting and gouging the eyes—which was won by making your opponent *admit* defeat.²⁰ Using this image, Socrates characterizes the brothers from Chios as masterful pankratiasts of argumentation, who are “so marvelously skillful at fighting with words (τοῖς λόγοις μάχεσθαι) and refuting (ἐξελέγειν) any argument, whether it is true or false.”²¹ This is the supposed “wisdom” that Socrates labels as “eristic” (ἐριστικῆς), and which he claims to be so eager to learn.

Of course, Socrates’ praise of the Chian brothers as wise and skilled (σοφώ) pankratiasts is an especially candid performance of irony. It is, however, necessary to ask, what precisely does Plato have in mind that makes the irony work, that gives it its

bite? Given a non-agonistic conception of dialectic, the typical interpretation would be that Socrates' praise is ironic because the *pankration* contest is itself an inappropriate model for philosophical *elenchos*. On this view, Plato's association of eristic with the *pankration* and *agōn* in general is already an indication of it being opposed to the cooperation and reciprocity inherent in dialectical exchange. There is, however, an alternative interpretation, according to which Socrates' irony is not directed at the model of the *agōn* in general, but rather at the brothers' specific eristic method as a *deficient example* of proper argumentative contest. That is to say, Plato means to represent Euthydemus and Dionysodorus as tricksters and cheats, rather than as serious competitors.

Indeed, throughout the dialogue Plato consistently uses language to show that the eristic method is not a contest at all, but rather an inane and brutal joke. After the brothers demonstrate the eristic on the young and inexperienced Clinias, Socrates repeatedly accuses them of engaging in "child's games" (παιδιά) and only "making fun" (προσπαιζειν) of Clinias, "tripping" and "overturning" his mind with their equivocations and word games, like pranksters who pull a stool out from underneath someone who is about to sit.²² These childish tricks are opposed to what Socrates was (ironically, perhaps) expecting to see from them, namely a "serious demonstration" of their expertise, which from the beginning he had characterized as a new and impressive kind of contest.²³ It is only with great difficulty that Socrates is finally convinced that the brothers are speaking in earnest.²⁴

Even when Plato uses agonistic language to characterize the brothers' eristics (and he often does), he makes it clear that they are not allowing for a fair fight. For example, when Dionysodorus whispers to tell Socrates how the eristic will make a fool of Clinias, Plato notes that Socrates "was not able to warn the boy to be cautious." In other words, Clinias is not made fairly aware of the conditions and motivations of his questioner; he enters the arena blind, already at a great disadvantage before the conversation even begins.²⁵ Socrates describes Clinias as being pummeled by the brothers' arguments—as if they were pelting him with a ball,²⁶ or throwing him, as in wrestling—and finds it necessary to intervene on his behalf, "wishing to give him a chance to breathe."²⁷ When Socrates himself faces the eristic, he resists Dionysodorus' devious tactics, asking him if he really believes the question to be "fair" (δίκαιον).²⁸ These examples point to a characterization of the brothers not as competitors in any proper sense, but rather as bullies, tricksters, and cheats, whose argumentative method falls short of Socrates' initial expectations. Socrates cannot even *ironically* praise the eristic; rather than make

anyone even appear to be wise, Socrates concludes that their argument “has made no progress and still has the old trouble of falling down itself in the process of knocking others down.”²⁹ On this interpretation, Plato’s problem with the eristic method employed by these sophists is not that it is agonistic, but rather that it is *antagonistic*. That is to say, it subverts any kind of genuine contest by which the veritable “best man” could be decided or produced.

Plato provides a contrast to the brothers’ eristics in Socrates’ dialectical conversations with Clinias, which Socrates introduces as demonstrations of the sort of contest of words he wanted to hear from the beginning. If Plato does mean to depict eristic as deficient and *antagonistic*, then we should expect Socrates’ dialectic to appear as an example of a true philosophical competition, conducive of virtue and wisdom—and this is what we do find. Between Socrates’ first and second conversations with Clinias, Plato displays a significant development in the latter’s dialectical role, which can be understood in terms of a philosophical *agōn*. While Socrates is questioning Clinias during the first demonstration, for the first time in the dialogue Clinias asks questions *of his own*.³⁰ That is to say, Clinias becomes an active participant in the contest, rather than a punching bag. He is, at least, not allowing Socrates to dominate the conversation unchallenged. Admittedly, these are at first only simple questions of clarification rather than real challenges—but even these mark a critical distinction between dialectic and eristic, since, as we see later in the dialogue, the brothers, wanting to maintain their unfair advantage, become quite agitated when Socrates asks similarly harmless questions.³¹ In the second demonstration, Clinias actually disagrees with one of Socrates’ conclusions, and challenges him with an account of his own—an account with which they both come to agree!³² So, Socrates not only allows Clinias the breathing room to stand up for himself in the cross-examination, but actually is himself refuted by Clinias. By means of these two demonstrations, Socrates is training Clinias to contend for the true account using the methods of the *elenchos*. It is important to note as well that, unlike the brothers, Socrates is congratulatory and delighted at the progress they have made, even though his own thesis was defeated. So, what we see in the *Euthydemus* is a stark contrast between two kinds of discussion: the antagonistic, eristic fighting of the sophists, in which the aim is simply to thwart the opponent, and the dialectical *agōn* of the philosophers, in which both interlocutors strive productively for the common goal of truth.

That Plato himself conceived of this opposition between mere fighting and virtuous competition may be confirmed by reference to Book Five of the *Laws*, in which the Athenian Visitor is discussing “what sort of person one should be oneself if one is to lead the most noble sort of life.”³³ The entire paragraph is worth quoting:

Let us all be lovers of victory when it comes to virtue, but without envy. The man of this sort—always competing (ἀμιλλώμενος) himself but never thwarting others with slander—makes cities great. But the envious man, who fancies he must gain superiority by slandering the others both lessens his own efforts to attain true virtue and makes his competitors (τούς ἀνθαμιλλωμένους) dispirited by getting them unjustly blamed. Thus he makes the whole city a flaccid competitor in the contest for virtue (ἄμιλλαν ἀρετῆς) and does what he can to diminish its fame.³⁴

This passage clarifies the sense in which agonistic activity can also be productive, cooperative and beneficial, not only for the victor, but for the entire city, including the defeated. What’s at stake in this contrast between the honorable and envious competitor is the attainment of true *aretē*, as opposed to an ill-defined and ultimately insignificant sense of superiority. And this amounts to nothing less than a *transvaluation* of the *agōn* as an aristocratic institution. In the dialectical “contest of virtue,” the philosopher does not strive simply to win the argument, for winning is not the goal. The goal is to become the “best man” (ὁ ἄριστος), one who “lives through truth” (ἀληθῆς ὢν διαβιοῖ), with “temperance” (σωφροσύνης) and “wisdom” (φρονήσεως).³⁵ If he is oriented correctly toward the truth and willing to receive it, progress will be made toward wisdom whether he is shown to be right or wrong. Wilkinson is not wrong to insist that a certain egalitarian spirit hangs over the practice of dialectic: both interlocutors (i.e., competitors) potentially benefit from dialectic, and are equal insofar as they share a common rational nature; socio-economic class is irrelevant, a mere adornment that is probably better cast off before one enters the ring. On the other hand, it is neither possible nor desirable that the competitors be equal in every sense, not least in the relevant respect: if virtue is to mean anything, the more virtuous person must really be *better*, a more excellent human being, better acquainted with the truth, *wiser*, and not simply and unequivocally equal. To follow the classic Platonic line, the point is that one who is better with respect to knowledge and the virtues of soul *really is* a better human being, while the old aristocrats and victors in contest only *appeared* to be. Since these new “lovers of victory” have no care for

appearances, they compete *without envy* (ἄφθονος): even while they contend and “strive with all their power” for truth, they work productively for a common goal, virtue, the benefits of which inevitably overflow from the victor’s cup. For if one who is “victorious in virtue” (νικηφόρος ἀρετῆ) is truly the “best man,” then he “is able to possess [the virtues] not only for himself but can also share with others . . . in the spirit of love” (διὰ φιλίας).³⁶ So, even while the philosophical competitor sincerely *strives* against the other, presenting the best argument he can in accordance with the judgment of reason, his *love* of wisdom, along with his Socratic skepticism and propensity for self-examination make him ready for and open to defeat whenever reason judges him to be wrong.

Thus, to return to the *Euthydemus*, of course Socrates is delighted at being refuted by Clinias, since he too has made progress toward the true account. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, on the other hand, employ every dishonorable and absurd tactic in order to appear to win the argument by making the others admit defeat, without any regard for the truth whatsoever. We may conclude then that Wilkinson is right to recognize a degree of *charis* present in Socrates’ practice of philosophy: by refuting his interlocutors, Socrates undoubtedly aims to benefit and not simply oppose them. In fact, this beneficence is essential in distinguishing dialectic from eristic. On the other hand, it is simply wrong to infer from this that “in the dialogues no one ever wins, and no one ever loses.”³⁷ Wilkinson’s assumption that beneficence is entirely absent from all agonism appears to be rooted in a rather constrained conception of the *agōn*, which disallows the possibility of true virtue as its prize. In the dialectical *agōn* each interlocutor strives *against* the other’s account insofar as it is the *other’s*—but in the same act they are striving *together* for the true account insofar as it is conducive of *wisdom*. *Eris* and *philia* come together in the philosopher’s contest for virtue. As Pierre Hadot has put it, Socratic dialogue is “a combat, amicable but real.”³⁸ When there is only strife in dialogue, one is left tangled up in the tricks and games of the eristic, the sophists’ “fighting with words.” But without any strife, without the friction of critical challenges and counter-arguments, without actually trying to refute the other for the sake of something greater than both participants—greater even than *agreement between them*—dialogue is in danger of becoming stagnant, disingenuous, all concession and compromise, a game of superficial agreement or ideological flattery. In this way, a non-agonistic dialogue of mere “exchange” can be as intellectually stifling and unproductive as the antagonistic eristic debates. It might be worse.

This contrast between the honorable and the envious competitor in the *Laws*, along with the displays of dialectic and eristic in the *Euthydemus*, provide the background and model for the essential distinction between fighting and competition made in the following addendum to the *Sophist*. While much of the interest in Plato's *Sophist* has been aroused by its metaphysical themes, the more dramatically explicit concern of the dialogue is to discover the nature of the sophist, as distinct from the philosopher and statesman. Before the point at which the addendum begins, Theaetetus and the Eleatic Visitor have defined the sophist's expertise in five different ways, all falling under the broad category of acquisition (κτησις). In the last of these five accounts, the sophist's expertise (i.e., eristic argumentation) appears as a kind of *contesting* (ἀγωνιστική). This has, again, contributed to the common view that sophistry, as opposed to philosophy, is agonistic. But the Visitor goes on to divide contesting into two kinds, namely, fighting (μαχητικόν) and competition (ἀμιλλητικόν)—the latter being the same term Plato uses in the *Laws* to describe the honorable competitor in the contest for virtue. Then, the Visitor relegates the sophist's eristic to fighting (specifically, the money-making kind of “fighting with words” for which sophists had become infamous), leaving kinds of competition unexplored. From here they move on from the broad category of acquisition to types of expertise that involve separating (διαίρετική), which has nothing to do with the *agōn*. When they follow this track, they come to an account of refutation (ἔλεγχος), which they describe as a “noble kind of sophistry” (γενναία σοφιστική). Like a doctor who removes illness from the body, this type of thinker “purifies the soul” of that most shameful kind of ignorance that does not know that it does not know, which can easily fester into inflated opinions and false claims to wisdom. While they admit the expertise of this “noble sophist” bears some resemblance to the eristic, they are reluctant to conflate them, since the methods and goals of the *elenchos* are more honorable. This marks a point in the dialogue at which it would have been natural to digress from the main investigation in order to better classify this new type of thinker they have distinguished. Instead, following his Muse, Plato has his characters move on to try for a more definitive and general account of the sophist.

While the philosopher is not explicitly discussed until later in the dialogue,³⁹ this discussion of the noble sophist is a thinly-veiled reference to Socrates, who famously engages his interlocutors in just the way the Visitor describes: he “cross-examines someone who thinks he is saying something while saying nothing at all. . . . and, bringing together the things they say, he compares them and, by comparing them,

demonstrates that they contradict one another. . . . and by refuting the opinions that impede learning, he shows that the soul is purified, believing it knows only the things it does know, and nothing more.”⁴⁰ There are of course other models for the philosopher than the Socratic skeptic—Plato insists on this point in the dialogue—but since it is the textually relevant type, I make it the focus of the addendum as well. Not to mention, as I demonstrate in what follows, it is this type in particular for whom Platonic agonism is the operative philosophical paradigm. Indeed, this is one reason Theaetetus and the Visitor are baffled by the noble sophist. Their account in terms of “separating” has not clearly shown just *how* this thinker is both contentious and beneficent, both similar to the disputatious sophists and yet really able to make people better and happier. This is where the addendum picks up, with the Visitor and Theaetetus wondering about this strange, noble sophist and resolving to investigate further, this time in terms of their original category of acquisition, which leads them to consider again the *agōn*.

II. The Addendum

The addendum begins at *Sophist* 231a, after the first two sentences of the Visitor’s response to Theaetetus. Plato’s original text is bolded (my translation).

Theaetetus: But clearly there is at least a similarity between the sophist and the one we were just talking about.

Visitor: Indeed, and between a wolf and a dog, the most savage beast and the gentlest. To be safe, we must be on our guard most of all when it comes to similarities, for the kind of person we are investigating is a most slippery sort. Let us therefore not let stand our description of this strange person, who seems both like a sophist and in some way more honorable. But perhaps if we seek him out in the way we sought the others before him, we will be able to see him more clearly.

Theaetetus: How do you mean?

Visitor: By investigating in what way, if any, he engages in the same activity as the others, namely, acquisition (κτησις). You see, Theaetetus, although it was not without purpose, I am afraid I may have obscured this noble sophist from the beginning when I made discrimination our starting point, rather than acquisition.⁴¹ For it seems to me now that, if the noble sophist engages in acquisition, then it must be of a different, more honorable kind than those

others; and if we can find this and agree, then our difficulty should disappear, and we will be able to answer the question of whether this man we've discovered is indeed a sophist, or really something else, which is only in some ways "similar," as you said. So, then, based on what we have said about him so far, does he in any way engage in acquisition?

Theaetetus: It's difficult to tell, Stranger.

Visitor: Didn't we say that those whom this noble sophist refutes (ἐλέγχειν) lose their contradictory opinions, as well as their obstinate and inflated beliefs about themselves and their apparent wisdom?⁴²

Theaetetus: Yes, we did say that.

Visitor: Then he takes from them these things, which, before they are shown to be false, they hold onto as if they were prized possessions?

Theaetetus: It seems so.

Visitor: Then the noble sophist does engage in acquisition, since possession-taking (χειρωτικός) was one of the types we distinguished earlier.⁴³ Or do you disagree?

Theaetetus: Well, there does seem to be a difference between this kind of taking and the kind we distinguished before.

Visitor: Yes, I see what you mean. Before we meant not only taking away, as the doctor takes away sickness, but actually bringing the thing into one's own possession.⁴⁴ Surely the doctor does not take away sickness so that he may possess it for himself. Likewise, the noble sophist does not take away false beliefs in order to acquire them.

Theaetetus: No, I should think not!

Visitor: But then again, perhaps the analogy is not exact. Perhaps the noble sophist, in taking away false beliefs, also acquires something else in the same act, whereas the doctor does not.

Theaetetus: How do you mean? What do you say he acquires?

Visitor: I have an idea, but before I say it, let us continue, assuming he does indeed acquire something when he takes away false beliefs. Later, we shall see if it bears out.

Theaetetus: All right, but let's not forget to come back to this, since it is an unsupported hypothesis.

Visitor: Indeed, we won't neglect it, since everything that follows depends upon it.

Theaetetus: Let's continue then.

Visitor: So, we'll assume that, of the two types of acquisition, our noble sophist engages in possession-taking. Of possession-taking we distinguished contesting (ἀγωνιστική), which is done openly, and hunting, which is done in hiding.⁴⁵ It seems clear enough that our noble sophist performs the cross-examination openly, in the marketplace, for instance, where anyone can watch and examine him. Isn't that right?

Theaetetus: Indeed; he does not so much go hunting for ignorant men so that he may refute them, as he openly challenges them when they make some claim to knowledge.

Visitor: Precisely. Then his expertise is a kind of contesting. Now, of contesting we distinguished fighting (μαχητικόν) and competition (ἀμιλλητικόν).⁴⁶ But we didn't before say what distinguishes one from the other, so let us say now. How do you distinguish them?

Theaetetus: A worthy question. What do you think?

Visitor: If you ask me, fighting is the type of contest that is not governed by formal rules, which limit the actions of the contestants, nor by a proper judge, who is able to justly declare a victor. The victor, rather, is just whichever one happens to prevail over his opponent, even if he is not really the best man.

Theaetetus: If he prevails, is he not the best?

Visitor: No, not necessarily, at least not "best" in the sense I mean. Often the worse opponent can find a way to win. In a fight, the combatants are racked not only with passion for victory, but also with great envy, so that in the end each wants only for his opponent to lose and for himself to win, with little or no regard for the means to his victory.⁴⁷ For this reason, and because there are no rules to stop him, a fighter, especially if he knows he is at a disadvantage, will often act dishonorably and unjustly in order to thwart his opponent and outdo (πλεονεκτεῖν)⁴⁸ him. It is in this sense that I would not want to call such a contestant "the best"—such a title should never apply to the unjust.

Theaetetus: I agree.

Visitor: For example, in a fight of body against body, he might throw a cheap blow, and pummel his enemy before he has a chance to catch his breath.⁴⁹ One who acts in such a way is likely trying to compensate for some weakness, don't you think? In a fight of words, such as the eristic debate we mentioned, the

worse man might slander his opponent, so that he becomes dispirited, or play tricks with his words, so that his opponent becomes confused and disoriented.⁵⁰

Theaetetus: Yes, I'm familiar with the type, or at least Theodorus has warned me about them.

Theodorus: That's right. And I believe Socrates almost mistook you for one of those pugnacious sophists when I was introducing you earlier.

Visitor: Yes, I overheard that, Theodorus. But I don't think that's what Socrates meant when he said I might be some kind of "god of refutation" (θεός ἐλεγκτικός) in disguise.⁵¹ On the contrary, there could be nothing further from a god than those who engage in eristics. For, when men act in this way, enviously debating and trying to refute their opponents no matter what they say, it is surely dishonorable. But I refuse to believe the gods act dishonorably; certainly they would never condescend to envy. In fact, a god who will stop at nothing to refute a mortal is not only honorable, but exceedingly gracious (χαριστικός), since the gods are wise and possess all knowledge, while "men are void of understanding," as Heraclitus said.⁵² And a man can only benefit from seeing his ignorance so clearly displayed before him—or don't you think Thamyris benefitted from his divine refutation?

Theodorus: You refer to the tale of the poets?

Visitor: Indeed, the very one in which that man, a mere mortal, claimed to be especially skilled in singing, wiser even than the Muses, and challenged them to a musical contest. Of course, he was shamefully defeated, as no mere mortal could be wiser than the gods in anything, least of all in that art that is dear to them. Do you remember Thamyris' fate in the story?

Theodorus: As I recall, he was punished rather harshly for his hubris. I believe it's said that the Muses blinded Thamyris and "took from him his marvelous song,"⁵³ making him forget all his musical knowledge. Do you really suppose he benefitted from being left in such a pitiable condition?

Visitor: Certainly. After all, was not Thamyris in a rather bad state, before he was refuted?

Theodorus: I think I see where you are going. Since Thamyris was all puffed up and guilty of hubris, which is a heinous crime against the gods, the Muses were just in exacting a harsh punishment. And a person who has committed an injustice always benefits when he receives justice in return, in soul if not in body. Therefore, Thamyris benefitted insofar as the wickedness in his soul was

not left to fester like a disease, but was removed through the harsh means of punishment. Is this what you mean?

Visitor: An excellent point! I see that you were paying close attention to my discussion with Theaetetus earlier.⁵⁴ But that's not exactly what I have in mind now.

Theodorus: Speak, then.

Visitor: I am not thinking of Thamyris' hubris so much as the *cause* of his hubris.

Theodorus: Which was what?

Visitor: Didn't Thamyris hold false beliefs about himself, concerning his knowledge of singing? He thought he was exceptionally wise in the craft, and it was *because* of this inflated idea about himself that he claimed to be more skilled (σοφός) than the Muses and dared to challenge them to a contest. So, while Thamyris is rightly said to have been guilty of hubris, it seems to me that the primary cause of his wickedness was ignorance about himself. And like good physicians, the Muses removed the cause of his wickedness, and not only the symptom. This is the reason I've called the Muses' response a "refutation" (ἔλεγχος) and not primarily a "punishment." In fact, if I were more brazen I would say that the poets should modify the myth, so that the Muses are not said to have punished Thamyris by blinding him and taking away his wisdom, but rather, by means of the contest, they simply revealed to him his true state of blindness and ignorance, which he had before failed to perceive for lack of knowing himself. And it is in this way he truly benefitted. For of course, one who knows he is ignorant is much better off than one who is ignorant and does not know it.

Theodorus: Yes, I agree with that.

Visitor: Then even Thamyris benefitted in this way, and the Muses were gracious even in their harshness. We would be wrong, therefore, to pity him, since the state in which his soul was left was undeniably better than the state it was in before.

Theodorus: I think you are correct.

Visitor: Before we move on, we should note too that any part of this myth that suggests the goddesses were envious of a mere mortal when they accepted his challenge, rather than acting out of beneficence, we will simply dismiss as fabrication, since we do not believe such ignoble things about the gods.

Theodorus: Agreed.

Visitor: Now, Theaetetus, let's return to our discussion. But oh! It seems that, in our digression, we've made some progress in our inquiry. The nature of competition, as distinct from fighting, has already come clear into view.

Theaetetus: How so, Stranger?

Visitor: Well, it's clear at least that this story about the Muses has not to do with fighting. For we agreed, first of all, that the goddesses have no envy, and envious opponents was one of the main conditions of fighting. Not to mention this contest was clearly governed by a just judge. For the greatest judge is one who is most wise about the contestants' art⁵⁵—and there is none wiser about singing than the Muses. And let it not concern you that in this case the judge is also a contestant, for it is not beyond the power of the goddesses to act in both roles. Aren't we right, then, to say that this is a myth of competition?

Theaetetus: Indeed, we are.

Visitor: Then let's give a more direct and general account, which will include competitions between human beings. Let's say that competition is the type of contest that is governed by a proper judge, who justly enforces the rules and is able to declare the right winner, since he has knowledge of whatever art the competitors are displaying—whether it be singing, flute-playing, tragedy, wrestling, or what have you—and understands the virtues of that art; and it is by virtue of his knowledge of the art that the judge is most qualified to tell which competitor performs more excellently, and to proclaim a victor.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the participants are without envy (*ἄφθονος*), and do not wish to diminish their opponent.⁵⁷ Rather, in defeating the other, each hopes to benefit his opponent, and the victor is gracious (*χαριστικός*) in his victory. That is to say, the true competitor genuinely wants the best man to win, whether it be himself or his opponent. For in either case, both will benefit, since they will have stirred up (*ἐγείρειν*) one another to cultivate their virtues and become more excellent in their craft, and those in attendance will have witnessed a just display of excellence, so that not just one man, but the whole city is made greater (*αὔξει*) by the competition.⁵⁸ This, it seems to me, is the best account of competition.

Theaetetus: Bravo! A competition such as this would be a delight to witness.

Visitor: Indeed, it would, and you should consider yourself extremely fortunate if you ever witness one; I doubt I ever have.

Theaetetus: Why do you say that, Stranger? Have you never been to any games?

Visitor: Never any like what we've described. For while there is no lack of so-called competitions throughout Greece, competitors who are completely honorable and without envy are rare indeed. Most of the events that Greeks flock to see at Olympia and Delphi and the others I suspect are really, according to our definitions, a kind of chimera of contests: they are like competitions, since they are governed by rules and a judge, but they are also like fights, since the competitors typically strive with an envious spirit, and are especially begrudging when they are defeated; at least Pindar seemed to think so when he sang to the Nemean victor, "envy always clings to the noble."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, we should not retract our account, but insist that the account we gave is what a competition should be, even if in its pure form it is a rare thing. And perhaps some divine human beings, when they compete, are capable of virtue and of being gracious in defeat, as well as in victory; some may before the contest lift up the prayer to Zeus, "Give to both of them equal strength, make equal their honor."⁶⁰ Now, we better apply this lengthy account to our noble sophist before we neglect him any further. But surely by now it's obvious to which category he belongs.

Theaetetus: You tell me, Stranger.

Visitor: Did you not notice how closely he resembles the Muses in our story of competition? Remember, what we said about him: when people think they are very wise, like Thamyris, and presume to teach our noble sophist, he does not simply admonish them, since he thinks it won't do much good, but rather accepts their challenge, as it were, and proceeds to cross-examine them, since he wants to benefit them. By collecting their opinions together and artfully scrutinizing each one, he shows that they are in conflict with one another. So, like the Muses, he reveals that the people being examined do not have the knowledge they thought they had. And by undergoing this refutation and seeing their own ignorance displayed before them, the people being examined lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves and become calmer towards others. Thus, they benefit greatly from their defeat, since, being emptied of false knowledge, they are now well-disposed to learning, and believe that they know only those things that they do know. And as you said before, that's the best and most healthy-minded way to be.⁶¹

Theaetetus: And I still think so.

Visitor: Can we fail to agree, then, that this art of refutation is the most important kind of competition as well? For those who engage in this competition with our noble sophist are happy and blessed indeed, since, if they are defeated, they benefit in the ways we mentioned, and if they are victorious, then they have only better secured their knowledge by having to defend it. And in either case, their soul has been well tested through this competition, so that it can be assured that it has correct opinions concerning the things it knows and the things it does not know. And anyone who is to be really happy should be tested in this way.⁶²

Theaetetus: Absolutely.

Visitor: Now, let's try and be more specific about what kind of competition our noble sophist engages in. Can you divide competition into two kinds?

Theaetetus: Well, there are competitions in musical arts, of which we've already spoken, and they are different from those in which one body competes against another.

Visitor: The latter we call athletics (*ἄθλος*), which clearly do not apply to our noble sophist. But just as athletics have to do primarily with the body, do not the other kind have to do primarily with the soul?

Theaetetus: Yes, that is the true distinction.

Visitor: And it would seem that this art of refutation would fit into the category of musical craft, falling under the supervision of the Muses,⁶³ since, like the others,⁶⁴ it has to do with knowledge and the soul. Not to mention those who engage in it often seem to be divinely inspired.⁶⁵ Tell me, Theaetetus, is there a single name for competitions in musical arts?

Theaetetus: Oh, I doubt there is one word in particular.

Visitor: Then since we've already demonstrated their likeness, let's use the same word the poets use for that musical contest between Thamyris and the Muses. Do you know what it is?

Theaetetus: To be honest, Stranger, I've only heard such competitions called *erides*,⁶⁶ a word closely related to the *eristikos*, the debates of the sophists. I must admit, I realized this before, but I was hesitant to bring it up, since it seemed to contradict everything.

Visitor: Oh, don't be so boyish, Theaetetus! And do not be afraid to admit anything you think is true, even if it defeats our whole argument. Rather,

imitate those honorable competitors and invite defeat if it makes us better and brings us closer to our goal, which is the truth. But still, we are right to strive for victory and resist defeat if we can, for only in this way can we be sure the best theory is victorious in the end. So, what will be our countermove?

Theaetetus: Shall we say the poets are wrong in calling the episode an *eris*?

Visitor: Only if we have a good reason. To be fair, the poets have their own reasons for using one word over another, such as it fits the meter or sounds more pleasant. Therefore, we allow them more liberties with language, and do not expect them to undergo rigorous analyses of words, such as we've done. So, if they have used the wrong word, we shouldn't be too hard on them. But it seems to me that we do not have to contradict the poets at all, if we only take a cue from one of them, namely Hesiod. He says, does he not, that there is not one, but two kinds of Eris: one he calls "harsh Eris," who "promotes pernicious war and battle (δῆριον)," and seems to preside over all of those activities that we have labeled as kinds of fighting (μαχητικόν). But the other is more benevolent to men; she "stirs up (ἐγείρειν) the shiftless to toil," in just the way that we said two competitors stir up one another to enhance their virtues.⁶⁷ We need not accept everything Hesiod said, especially about the gods; but that there are these two kinds of *eris* in which men might partake seems reasonable enough. So, while the sophistic debaters engage in the one that causes discord and chaos, our noble sophist and all honorable competitors engage in the other, which is productive, and arouses men to cultivate excellence by placing in them a desire to strive for the best. Will that distinction satisfy you?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Visitor: Well then, the strange man we have been searching for has appeared now in another form, as a competitor in the musical *eris* that tests the art of refutation. And our account is nearly complete, for we see that his expertise stands in direct opposition to that of the sophists we discovered before, since he engages in the opposite kind of *eris*. It seems we were right to resist calling him a sophist, and not let our account stand as it was. What's left, I suppose, is to say what he *is*, since we shouldn't be satisfied with knowing only what he is *not*. But first we should return to that concession we made earlier, which made this whole account possible. You didn't forget, did you Theaetetus?

Theaetetus: Of course not; it's paramount to our discussion. We assumed that he engages in possession-taking without ever really saying what precisely he

takes when he performs his refutation. Since you intimated that you have an idea of what he takes, we trusted you and let that remain as our foundation. So now, tell us what you were thinking then, so that our account can be completed.

Visitor: Well, rather than simply tell you—for then you might too quickly agree, without proper examination—let me ask you some questions and we will see if you come to same conclusion.

Theaetetus: All right, proceed.

Visitor: Tell me, is the person we've been searching for a god or a human being?

Theaetetus: Now what kind of question is that?

Visitor: A serious one. We did agree that he resembles closely the Muses in our story, who graciously refuted that happy mortal. But let's say clearly, is he himself a god, or only godlike?

Theaetetus: He is certainly a human being, although it seems to me right to call him in a sense divine ($\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$).⁶⁸

Visitor: And what distinguishes gods and human beings? Clearly there are many qualities, such as the gods are immortal, while human beings are mortal, and so forth. But didn't we also say before that gods are wise and have perfect knowledge, while men are "void of understanding" and lack wisdom?

Theaetetus: Yes, although I think it's safe to say that some men are wiser than others.

Visitor: Do you mean that some men have a part of wisdom, and yet are also ignorant in other respects; in other words, they are in between being wise and being ignorant?⁶⁹

Theaetetus: That's what I mean.

Visitor: In that case, how does one acquire a part of wisdom?

Theaetetus: Through learning, I suppose.

Visitor: But isn't there something prior to learning? Remember, we agreed before that the soul cannot acquire any knowledge of a thing until it has been emptied of false opinions concerning that thing, by means of refutation.⁷⁰ Won't you agree, then, that it is impossible to gain any part of wisdom without first perceiving one's own lack of knowledge?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Visitor: Then, in order to have any part of wisdom, one has to know oneself with respect to the things that one knows and does not know, and to

comprehend the extent of human ignorance. And since all further knowledge depends on this, this seems to me the first, and in a sense the most important part of the wisdom anyone can acquire.

Theaetetus: Absolutely.

Visitor: Do you think this is something our man is likely to understand?

Theaetetus: I should think so, since he is constantly seeing the ignorance of men displayed before him through his refutation.

Visitor: Precisely. Now, tell me, what kind of effect do you think this has on him?

Theaetetus: I am not sure what you're getting at.

Visitor: Well, always perceiving the ignorance of men, and knowing himself to be one of them, won't he be extremely cautious in making any claims to knowledge whatsoever, lest he fall into that most shameful kind of ignorance, in which the soul does not know that it does not know?

Theaetetus: Of course.

Visitor: So, when he accepts the challenge of someone who claims to have knowledge of something—the nature of justice, or virtue, or whatever it is—our man will either not already have true knowledge of it, since he is only a mortal, or even if he does, he will be cautious and suspicious of himself, in case he is wrong. So, he will remain undecided as to whether his own opinions or the other's are truer, wishing only for the best and truest theory to come out on top, allowing reason to be the judge. And during the cross-examination he will be constantly examining himself as well, so that he is sure the appropriate questions are being asked and the best answers are being given. In other words, our man will place himself on equal footing with the person being cross-examined, so that their virtues (or lack thereof) can speak for themselves. Is all of that consistent with what we've said about him?

Theaetetus: Yes, it is.

Visitor: Now, keeping this in mind, tell me, when they have reached the end of the refutation, and the opinions of the other have been shown to be contradictory, and all his false knowledge has been removed, do you see what our man will have gained?

Theaetetus: I see it clearly now. For by conducting the cross-examination and scrutinizing the other's opinions as well as his own, at the very least he will have acquired knowledge of himself, whether he knows the thing being investigated,

or not. And if not, he will be in that healthy state of mind that is necessary for learning.

Visitor: Then you have reached the same conclusion as me: our man does engage in acquisition, that is, the acquisition of knowledge.⁷¹ I suppose this answer was staring us in the face all along. For, as we said, the person being cross-examined, even if he is refuted, gains the very same thing in his defeat. Isn't it right that the victor gain something as well?

Theaetetus: Most certainly, for the victor always deserves a prize.

Visitor: Indeed, but I doubt the most honorable competitors care much for crowns of olive, or any other vegetable for that matter. Our man strives for something much more precious than the extravagant gifts offered to Olympian victors. Indeed, he will settle for nothing less than the greatest and most valuable thing of all, the highest of all the virtues, which he will not be reluctant to share. By now it is obvious what prize he seeks.

Theaetetus: It's nothing if not wisdom.

Visitor: Right. Of course, he cannot gain the whole of wisdom in the course of one conversation; *that* might take a lifetime, or longer. But he will at least have taken a small step towards wisdom, by gaining either the knowledge they were seeking in their discussion, or if not, then knowledge about himself, which, in truth, is no small thing, but perhaps the greatest knowledge a man can gain on earth.⁷²

Theaetetus: Indeed.

Visitor: Well then, if not a sophist, what are we going to call this honorable competitor, who is always striving for wisdom and trying to motivate others to do the same?

Theaetetus: We would be wrong to call such a person anything other than a lover of wisdom, a philosopher.

Visitor: I could not agree more. You've confirmed the suspicion I had since the beginning of this long digression, that, while looking for the sophist, we seemed to have stumbled upon the philosopher. So, let's say again: the philosopher's expertise belongs to acquisition, possession-taking, contesting, competing, and the musical *eris* that has to do with the art of refutation and wisdom-seeking more generally. This, Theaetetus, is the supreme *agōn*, since it tests reason, the highest part of the soul, and its prize is wisdom, the highest virtue. Everyone who wishes to be happy should be a philosophical competitor.

We should not think, of course, that we've exhausted the account of the philosopher; I suspect he will appear in other guises as well. But for now, let's return to our original question: What is the sophist?

Bennett Foster
Bennfos@gmail.com

Notes

¹ By “contest-system,” Gouldner means to convey the sense that the *agōn* is a systematic cultural entity, almost on the level of a formal institution. By *agōn* there is certainly meant more here than the sum of the various types of contests in Ancient Greece, let alone a particular type or instance of contest. Alvin Gouldner, “The Greek Contest System,” in *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), 41-77.

² Jacob Burkhardt is credited with popularizing the notion of the “Agonal Age” of Greek history, during which the *agōn* was a “motive power ... capable of working on the will and potentialities of each individual and indeed became the paramount feature of life.” While the *agōn* was on the wane in Plato's time, its influence was formative and lasting, and it was still a live issue whether traditional values such as the *agōn* represented should be retained. [Jacob Burkhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. by Sheila Stern, ed. by Oswyn Murray (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 162, 166.]

³ Gouldner, 194.

⁴ *Theaetetus* 164c. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ *Sophist* 225a.

⁶ Lisa Wilkinson, *Socratic Charis: Philosophy without the Agon* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 202.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Aristophanes, *Clouds*, lns. 890-1104. Quotations are from lines 934 and 955 respectively.

¹⁴ Of course, we know very little about the historical Socrates, so it is necessary to note that in the dialogues Plato might not be reflecting an inherited so much as an invented paradigm of philosophy.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Problem of Socrates” §8 in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 2003), 42.

¹⁶ Thomas H. Chance. *Plato's Euthydemus: Analysis of What Is and What Is Not Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 63.

¹⁷ George Kerferd has been most influential in this reading. See his *The Sophistic Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 62-63. Also, Chance, 27, 30, 48, 51, 56; Walter Watson, “Dogma, Skepticism, and Dialogue,” in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, ed. by Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 197-200; Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 105.

¹⁸ Notable exceptions are Alexander Nehamas’ excellent article “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1990), pp. 3-16 and Gregory Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1 (1983), pp. 27-58.

¹⁹ *Euthydemus* 271c.

²⁰ See Murray, 203.

²¹ *Euthydemus* 272a-b. It is worth briefly noting that there is a stark similarity between the brothers’ method in the *Euthydemus* and the method of the Wrong argument in the portion of the *Clouds* mentioned above, almost to the point that one is tempted to read the dialogue as a direct response to Aristophanes.

²² *Euthydemus* 278b. C.f. 288b, 299b.

²³ *Euthydemus* 288b.

²⁴ *Euthydemus* 294b.

²⁵ *Euthydemus* 275e-276a.

²⁶ *Euthydemus* 277b. Interestingly, a ball game called *phaininda* existed in Greece, which, like the *pankration*, was especially brutal, as almost any violence against opposing players was allowed. The description of fourth century comic poet Antiphanes provides an interesting parallel to the brothers’ eristic game depicted in the *Euthydemus*: “He caught the ball and laughed as he passed it to one player at the same time as he dodged another . . .” (c.f. *Euthydemus* 276a-277b). Moreover, the name of the game might be derived from the verb *phainizein* (“to deceive”), which connects it further to eristic. See Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 120-125.

²⁷ *Euthydemus* 277d.

²⁸ *Euthydemus* 287c.

²⁹ *Euthydemus* 288a, trans. by Rosamond Kent Sprague in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 725.

³⁰ See *Euthydemus* 279c.

³¹ E.g., 295b: Socrates asks, simply to clarify, “. . . isn’t this what you have in mind?” and Euthydemus responds, “Aren’t you ashamed, Socrates . . . to be asking a question of your own when you should be answering?”

³² *Euthydemus* 290b-c.

³³ *Laws* V, 730b, trans. by Thomas L. Pangle in *The Laws of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980), 117.

³⁴ *Laws* V, 731a, trans. Pangle.

³⁵ *Laws* V, 730c-e. My translation.

³⁶ *Laws* V, 730d – 731a.

³⁷ Wilkinson, 159.

- ³⁸ Pierre Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. by Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 91.
- ³⁹ See *Sophist* 249c, 253b - 254b.
- ⁴⁰ *Sophist* 230b-d
- ⁴¹ See *Sophist* 226b.
- ⁴² See *Sophist* 230b-c.
- ⁴³ See *Sophist* 219d. χειρωτικός more commonly has the sense of “mastering” or “subduing,” but it might literally be rendered as “getting one’s hands on.” I’ve adopted White’s rendering, “possession-taking,” which better captures what is meant here, even if it is somewhat awkward. See *Sophist*, trans. by Nicholas P. White, in *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.
- ⁴⁴ See *Sophist* 219c.
- ⁴⁵ See *Sophist* 219e. According to Rosen, the idea seems to be that “the hunter must conceal himself from his prey” [Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 97]. But how this is supposed to apply to all the types of hunting the visitor mentions is somewhat problematic, not least in the case of the sophist “hunting” young men. Rosen points to *Protagoras* 316d as a hint.
- ⁴⁶ See *Sophist* 225a.
- ⁴⁷ C.f. *Laws* V, 731a.
- ⁴⁸ C.f. *Republic* I, 344a: Thrasymachus argues that the unjust and powerful man is happiest, since he is “able to greatly outdo (πλεονεκτεῖν) everyone.”
- ⁴⁹ C.f. *Euthydemus* 277d.
- ⁵⁰ At 235a, the Visitor and Theaetetus will agree that the sophist is a “cheat” and “someone who plays childish games.” C.f. *Euthydemus* 271c-272b, 276c, 277c, 278b, 283d. By Socrates’ time, the ability to “make the worse argument stronger” (*Apology* 18b) was already considered characteristic of the sophists, as is made plain by its satirization in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*.
- ⁵¹ See *Sophist* 216a-b.
- ⁵² Heraclitus, DK 1 (ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι).
- ⁵³ Homer, *Iliad* II.599-600.
- ⁵⁴ See 228b, where wickedness in the soul is considered to be analogous to a disease in the body.
- ⁵⁵ C.f. *Theaetetus* 178d - 179a.
- ⁵⁶ C.f. *Laws* II, 658e - 659b.
- ⁵⁷ C.f. *Laws* V, 731a-b.
- ⁵⁸ C.f. *Laws* V, 731a.
- ⁵⁹ Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 8.21.
- ⁶⁰ *Iliad*, VII, ln. 205 (trans. Richard Lattimore).
- ⁶¹ See *Sophist* 230 a-d.
- ⁶² C.f. *Republic* VII, 534c.
- ⁶³ At 259e, the Visitor distinguishes true refutation from eristics, calling the practitioner of the latter “altogether unmusical and unphilosophical” (παντάπασιν ἀμούσου...καί ἀφιλοσόφου). Plato’s characterization of philosophy as the supreme form of music is well-known. See, for example, *Phaedo* 60e-61a and *Cratylus* 406a.
- ⁶⁴ Poetry, history, astronomy, mathematics, etc.

⁶⁵ Socrates' *daimōn* is the obvious reference, but also see *Euthydemus* 291a.

⁶⁶ See Euripides, *Rhesus*, ln. 917, 923. Also see Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.3 (μουσικῆς ἥρισε). Xenophon uses the related verb ἐρίζειν to describe Marsyas' musical contest with Apollo (*Anabasis* 1.2.8).

⁶⁷ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lns. 11-27. In anticipation of this distinction, I have had the Visitor include the quality of "stirring up" (ἐγείρειν) in his original account of competition above.

⁶⁸ C.f. *Sophist* 216b and 254a-b.

⁶⁹ C.f. *Symposium* 204b.

⁷⁰ *Sophist* 230c-d.

⁷¹ At 219c, the Visitor mentioned "learning" (μαθηματικόν) and "acquiring knowledge" (γνωρίσεως) among his examples of types of acquisitive expertise. Also, c.f. *Euthydemus* 288d, where philosophy is defined as the "acquisition of knowledge" (κτῆσις ἐπιστήμης) and *Theaetetus* 197b-199c, where Socrates discusses the difference between "the possession of knowledge" (ἐπιστήμης κτῆσιν) and "the having of knowledge" (ἐπιστήμης ἔξιν).

⁷² C.f. *Theaetetus* 187c, where Socrates says, "Either we shall find what we are going after; or we shall be less inclined to think we know things we don't know at all—and even that would be a reward we could not fairly be dissatisfied with."

Bibliography

Aristophanes. *Aristophanes Comoediae*, ed. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart, vol. 2. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart. Oxford. Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1907. Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> (accessed: January 10, 2015).

Burkhardt, Jacob. *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*. Translated by Sheila Stern. Edited by Oswyn Murray. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Chance, Thomas H. *Plato's Euthydemus: Analysis of What Is and What Is Not Philosophy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.

Gonzalez, Francisco J. *Dialectic and Dialogue*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gouldner, Alvin. "The Greek Contest System," in *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965.

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995.

Heraclitus. *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*. Edited and Translated by Charles H. Kahn. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Hesiod. *Works and Days*, in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1914. Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> (accessed: January 10, 2015).

Homer. *Homeri Opera*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1920. Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> (accessed: January 10, 2015).

—*The Iliad*. Translated by Richard Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Kerferd, George. *The Sophistic Movement*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Miller, Stephen G. *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Murray, Oswyn. *Early Greece*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Nehamas, Alexander. “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry,” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1990), pp. 3-16.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Books Inc., 2003.

Plato. *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet. Oxford University Press. 1903. Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> (accessed: January 10, 2015).

—*Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.

—*The Laws of Plato*. Translated by Thomas L. Pangle. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980.

Rosen, Stanley. *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Vlastos, Gregory. "The Socratic Elenchus," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1 (1983), pp. 27-58.

Watson, Walter. "Dogma, Skepticism, and Dialogue," in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*. Edited by Francisco J. Gonzalez. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995.

Wilkinson, Lisa. *Socratic Charis: Philosophy without the Agon*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013.