



# “Who’s afraid of the sophists? Against Ethical Correctness”

Barbara Cassin

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Barbara Cassin  
**Who's Afraid of the Sophists?**  
Against Ethical Correctness

SOPHISTIQUE, subst. A. Ensemble des doctrines, ou plus exactement attitude intellectuelle commune des principaux sophistes grecs (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.). B. (Nom commun.) Se dit d'une philosophie de raisonnement verbal, sans solidité et sans sérieux.

SOPHISTICS, substantive noun. A. The set of doctrines, or more precisely, the shared intellectual attitude of the main Greek sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.). B. (Common noun.) Used to refer to a philosophy of verbal reasoning, lacking solidity or seriousness.

(A. Lalande, ed., *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*).

### I. The Occasion

The set of doctrines or teachings associated with the individuals known as the sophists is termed *sophistike*, in French, *sophistique*. The expression is lacking in English, which puts one in the position of either using the adjectives 'sophistic', 'sophistical', or of using the dismissive expression 'sophistry'. As I shall be arguing for a systematic role of these doctrines, I will ask your indulgence and introduce the neologism 'sophistics' for now. The question is, why should one be interested in sophistics today?

As occasional causes are by far the most significant and the most efficient, I would like to explain first of all where my own interest in sophistics stems from. It arose from the encounter of two trajectories which were rivals in all senses of the word. The first phase of study, both triumphant and confused, took place under the sign of Heidegger. Because everything possessed a renewed intelligibility, everything also fit neatly into the palm of one's hand. The history of philosophy was philosophy itself, which the question of Being enabled one to scan and rework into epochs and turnings, with a hitherto unequalled skill which knew when to be self-effacing. It is very difficult to rid oneself of the idea that philosophers today do anything else besides rework Heidegger's gesture, even the anti-Heideggerians who sought their training in Kant, with a different point of entry than the *Kantbuch*. In order to move out from this circumscribed territory, no less is required, doubtless, than (a) a redefinition of philosophy throughout its history, in such a way that this widening of the scope does not

produce a mere analytic restriction or moral rigidity which can immediately be traced back destinally to the technical and technological nature of our epoch, and (b) probably some new conceptual characters, to use Deleuze's expression. But the most frequent approach, which Deleuze himself initiated or at least made use of contemporaneously (using the Stoics, Spinoza and Bergson), is to draw attention to the readings Heidegger failed to perform, or did not perform, inasmuch as they are held to be strategically impossible.

My own growing rigid, in this context, has to do with the determination of the origin and the dawn. The Greek morning which Heidegger arranged for us is a monomaniac and a kleptomaniac. It robs an entire array of texts and possibilities so that they may fit under the aegis of Parmenides' poem, such that the *Parmenides* of 1942-1943 reads *polis* merely as *pelein*, the old Greek verb for *einai*: if the *polis* in itself is only the "pole of *pelein*," then "it is only because the Greeks are an absolutely non-political people" that they could found the *polis*, and did. The first reading that I found impossible to perform using Heidegger alone, in the truly grandiose perspective of Parmenides' unveiling, was Gorgias' *Treatise of Non-Being*, a treatise which, approximately a half-century after the dawn, provides a full-fledged demonstration of the mechanisms or strategies thanks to which the *Poem* conforms to Heidegger's dream; it is a text which critically exceeds ontology in its nascent state. Thus there was a different way of being Pre-Socratic.

The teachings of the sophists serve as a good tool, maybe even the best of the available tools, to produce something like a new narrative of the history of philosophy -- the tale of a new morning which makes one want to count the fingers of the dawn --. as well as a new delimitation of the entity called 'philosophy' in relation to the other entities it constructs (sophistics as rhetoric, and then as literature).

The following remarks, then, will take the form of a philosophical and literary stroll, which responds to an aspect of things that does not belong to our ordinary habits (but which, once one responds to it, is as good as they are at monopolizing our attention), a stroll which gives itself the right to stop, along the course of time, and collect texts of a different lineage than that which runs from Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, to Hegel, Heidegger, or Habermas. Once these texts have been gathered up, they begin to resonate with one another.

This should surely enable us to glimpse how artificial the border between the rational and the irrational is, and perhaps to reorganize the cosmos of philosophy, starting from a richer, more complete, more contemporary, or otherwise effective point of view.

## II. Sophistics as Historical Fact and Structural Effect

As the state of the corpus of translations and stubborn retranslations of the same ancient texts reveals, we have until quite recently, in France in any case, been prisoners of the image that antiquity sought to project of itself, namely, a succession of moments of excellence. Yet my choice of sophistical doctrine as an object of research does not, at least initially or not solely, stem from an antiquarian zeal for ill-known texts which require a great deal of philological and historical work. Nor, thereby, does it originate in an interest in the margin where these roughly crossed-out texts lie, an interest which would make the margin into an area of research, legitimizing a militant pathos in favour of accursed thinkers, against debarments and exclusion. Hence I will not be proposing a "rehabilitation," and especially not one of these rehabilitations which are grounded, by means of a circular argument, in the modifications and improvements they enable one to introduce into the persistent frame of the most traditional of all histories.

Indeed, the singularity of sophistical doctrine is to already be, inasmuch as it is a historical fact, a structural effect, that is, an effect of the structure: the "doctrine of the sophists" is a philosophical concept, whose model is truly provided by the real practice of those who called themselves, and were called, sophists (individuals such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Antiphon) -- this is definition A in Lalande's *Vocabulaire* -- but it is also used in philosophy to refer to one of the possible modalities of non-philosophy -- this is definition B, which is as magisterial as it is mysterious: "a philosophy of *verbal reasoning*, lacking any solidity or seriousness." I will frequently return to this definition.

This is Plato's starting-point, and the point where he welds together the two halves of the problem: sophistic doctrine, which is a historical reality, is at the same time artificially produced by philosophy. The essence of this artefact is simply to construct the sophist as the

negative *alter ego* of the philosopher: his bad Other. They have resembled each other ever since the Stranger's comment in the *Sophist* that the sophist resembles the philosopher "as the wolf does the dog, as the most savage resembles the most tame" (231b). They are so much alike that even when one reaches out with both hands to catch one, one catches the other. Socrates's cathartic midwifery (*maieutics*), his practice of refutation end up belonging to the *genei gennaia sophistikê* (which one translates as "the genuine and truly noble art of sophistics," ignoring the emphasis which cements the bond). Conversely, at the end of the dialogue, when all dichotomies must be recapitulated, the final arborescence provides us with the same pair, when the issue is how to describe the demagogue or speech-maker: "wise man or sophist?" The decision is only reached when Theatetus states a thesis: "We posited him as not knowing" (268c). In any case, the sophist, who is an "imitator of the wise man," is his paronym to exactly the same extent as the philosopher himself is.

If we consider the Platonic dialogues as a whole, we can indeed discern the figure of sophistics, which will henceforth belong to the tradition. It is devalued on all grounds; ontologically, because the sophist is not concerned with being, but seeks refuge in non-being and what is accidental; logically, because he is not in pursuit of truth or dialectical rigor, but merely opinion, seeming coherence, persuasion and victory in the oratorical joust; ethically, pedagogically, and politically: his goal is not wisdom and virtue, for the individual or for the city, but rather personal power and gain; the sophist is even devalued on literary grounds, since the figures of speech he makes use of, his style, are merely the bulges of an encyclopedic vacuity. If one makes use of the standard of being and truth in order to judge the teaching of the sophist, it must be condemned as pseudo-philosophy: a philosophy of appearances and a mere appearance of philosophy.

On this basis, however, another dimension of the *Sophist* comes to light which shakes up its strict organization: the artefact itself becomes a producer of philosophy. The sophist is the other of the philosopher, whom philosophy never ceases to expel from its domain, and even from humanity itself, as we will see with Aristotle, because the philosopher in turn defines himself as (merely) the other of the sophist, an other whom he pushes further and further into a corner. Philosophy is the child of wonder, and, according to the first sentence of

the *Metaphysics*, "all humans naturally wish to know." Yet "those who ask if one should honour the gods and love one's parents, or not, simply need a good lesson, and those who ask if snow is white or not only need to look" (Aristotle, *Topics*). The sophist exaggerates, as Protagoras does regarding the gods, Antiphon regarding the family, and Gorgias regarding that which is and that which one perceives. He always asks one question too many, he always derives one consequence too many. Due to this insolence, philosophy is literally beside itself, the love of wisdom is forced to transgress the limits that it assigned itself, and to make gestures which surely do not belong to the rest of its procedure, such as pulling out the stick. In what follows, I should like to analyze some of these gestures, as a goal of my research. The doctrine of the sophists is indeed an operator which serves to circumscribe and define the scope of philosophy.

Thus the point of view I have chosen makes use of a philosophico-sophistical perception (Novalis, in his *Logological Fragments*, suggested the term "philosophistize"), the nature of which may be conveyed by the term 'effect'. It is an effect, first of all, because sophistics is an artificial creation, a by-product of philosophy [*as the difficulty with terminology itself shows*]. But it is an effect, second, because sophistics, a fiction of philosophy, reverses the direction of things and shocks philosophy, never ceasing to have an effect on it. This sums up the structural version of an infinitely complex history of ideas which, in my view, historians of philosophy are wrong to ignore.

### III. The Sophistical Effect

My work over the last ten years has focused on showing how sophistical doctrine obliges philosophy to reflect on itself, and reflect itself, starting from three moments, three privileged bodies of text, which enable one to express the sophistical effect, and reconstitute a history of the limit.

*A Treatise Against a Poem*

The confrontation between Parmenides' *On Nature, or On the Entity* and Gorgias' *On What is Not (or, On Nature)* shall provide us with our primal scene. As Heidegger has shown, but not *only* as he has shown, everything hangs on the way in which being and saying are connected (recall Lalande's definition: "a philosophy of verbal reasoning").

"Nothing is; if it is, it is unknowable; if it is and it is knowable, it cannot be said // communicated." The three theses of the *Treatise* present themselves as a reversal of Parmenides' *Poem*, which, from Plato to the present day, has been taken to say, firstly, that there is being, since "Being is" and "non-Being is not," secondly, that this Being is essentially knowable, since "being and thinking are one and the same." Thereby philosophy was able to embark on the right path, to know being *qua* being, and diversify itself commercially itself into doctrines, disciples and schools. This series of reversals should not, however, be viewed as an idle little game, for it is a radical critique of ontology.

Gorgias's strategy, as displayed in his first thesis, is to have us realize that Being, which is the Parmenidean hero just as Ulysses is the Homeric hero, is never anything besides an effect of the Poem. By following the way in which, at the starting-point of the Poem, the "word of the path" (*Is*) suffices to secrete the full subject, which is identified thereafter as the article (*the entity*), by means of a series of infinitives and participles, the sophist dissects the way in which syntax creates semantics. If there is a "sophism," it resides in the "is" and its ontological treatment, since the mere statement of the identity of being, which leads one to confuse the copula with existence, derives its entire worth from an amphiboly and a homonymy.

The second postulate of the poem -- which Heidegger translates paratactically as "being, thinking, the same" (fragment 3) -- marks the mooring-point of truth as unconcealment, and then as adequation. Here the catastrophe is perfect. It is enough for me to think something, and moreover, to speak it, for that thing to be, by that token: if I say "tanks battle in the open sea," then tanks are battling in the open sea. There is no room for non-being, or for errors and lies. It is Parmenides's ontology alone, taken at face value and pushed to the limit, which guarantees the infallibility and efficaciousness of the discourse, which thereby is sophistical.

That being is a speech effect now takes on a twofold meaning: we are not simply faced with a critique of ontology -- your purported being is nothing but an effect of the way you speak --, but with a claim which is characteristic of "logology," to use a term of Novalis (and also of Dubuffet). What matters from now on is not a being which would supposedly be already there, but the being produced by the discourse; one must assess the magnitude of the shift in landscape, from the primal scene onwards. The safest identity principle is no longer formulated as 'Being is', or 'The entity is', but, to quote another sentence from the treatise, "he who speaks, speaks." The presence of Being, the immediacy of Nature and the evidence of a speech which aims to express them adequately all vanish at the same time; the physics discovered by speech makes way for the politics created by discourse. Indeed, it is here, thanks to the sophists, that we reach the dimension of the political as *agora* for an *agôn*: the city as the continuous creation of language. The discourse of the sophists is to the soul what the *pharmakon* (poison and remedy) is to the body: it induces a change of state, for better or for worse. But the sophist, like the doctor, knows how to use the *pharmakon*, and can transmit this knowledge; he knows and teaches how to move, not, according to the bivalency of the principle of non-contradiction, from error to truth or from ignorance to wisdom, but, according to the inherent plurality of comparison, from a lesser state to a better state. In the *Theatetus*, Protagoras, who professes virtue, states this through the mouthpiece of Socrates, who then defends him: "one has to effect a change from another condition to the better. But the physician effects a change by drugs, the sophist by speeches" (167a), and wise and good orators like him "make cities be of the opinion that the good things in place of the poor things are just" (167c). The entire rhetoric of the sophists is thus a vast performance which, time after time, by means of praise and counsel, produces the consensus required for the social bond. This consensus is minimal, even minimalist, because far from requiring a uniformity, the sophistical consensus does not even require that everyone think the same thing (*homonoia*), but only that everyone speaks (*homologia*) and lends their ear (*homophônía*). In this way, it is hinted that the final motor [*ressort*] of political discourse is homonymy ("that



the sentence have a meaning for each of the meanings of each of its terms"), which alone can have an effect on "the metaphysician" as much as on "the cook," to speak with Ponge.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, the distance that has been achieved from the Heideggerian dawn begins to sink in. In the philosophizing Greece of *alêtheia*, the invention of the city is non-political, because the political *qua* political is in no way political; rather, it is always subordinate to Being, the True, and the Good. But in a philosophisticizing Greek, where the ontological immediately reverts to, backtracks towards the logological, the *logos* enables us to grasp the very immanence of the political, in its condition of possibility, in a perception which is more Aristotelian and Arendtian than it is Platonic and Heideggerian. "Humans live together according to the mode of speech"<sup>2</sup>: the specificity of the political lies in the competition of the *logoi*, governed by the norm of taste (in the sense this term has had since Kant), which "seeks to obtain the consent of the other," in the midst of a plural condition. Arendt emphasizes that this is why doing "political philosophy," that is, "to look upon politics from the perspective of truth [...] means to take one's stand outside the political realm." Under the aegis of the first statement, namely, Antiphon's assertion in *On Truth* that "one citizens" (*politeuetai tis*) no longer refers to nature except as something that has escaped from a private crevice into the public realm, the autonomy of the *logos* which creates the legal sphere and the autonomy of the political are henceforth intertwined.

### *The Logos of a Plant*

All of Aristotle's regulation of language, in which modernity is invented, may justifiably be seen as a rejoinder to sophistics: how can language be tamed, how can it be rendered ethical, both prior to and during its rhetorical-political life?

The response or come-back to the primal scene can easily be located: it is the demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction which is performed at the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> I am paraphrasing Francis Ponge's formidably dry statement, in *Pratiques d'écriture ou l'inachèvement perpétuel* (Paris: Hermann, 1984), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> These quotations are drawn from "Philosophie et politique," *Les Cahiers du Grifh* 33 (Printemps 1986), and "Vérité et politique," in *La crise de la culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); the original of the second quotation is from "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 259.

*Gamma* 4, a demonstration which is scientifically impossible, since the issue is the first principle, yet can be carried out dialectically, in the shape of a refutation of the opponents who claim to deny it. Now, refutation is the paramount weapon of the sophists; Aristotle, following Socrates, borrows it here for the occasion. If Gorgias's treatise is read in the way we just did, it stands *in toto* as a refutation of Parmenides's poem. It starts with the speech of the other, as enunciative procedure and thematic statement, and brings to light its catastrophic consequence -- ontology taken literally means logology, or in other words, if Parmenides, then Gorgias. Quite symmetrically, the demonstration by refutation starts with the opponent's statement of the principle, if only so as to express his denial, and brings to light the unsettling consequence that the opponent obeys the principle at the very moment he denies it. Sophistics taken literally is Aristotelian; if Protagoras speaks (which sophists normally do), he can only speak the way Aristotle does.

The real dynamic of the refutation lies in a series of equivalent relations which, once they are stated, are as self-evident as ontology itself: to speak is to say something that has a meaning, and this meaning is the same for oneself and for another. Thereafter, indeed, I need only speak ("Hello") for the principle of non-contradiction to be proven and instantiated in the process: it is impossible for the same (word) to have and not have the same (meaning), at the same time. All I need to do is speak, or, alternately, "so long as the opponent says something": Aristotle finalizes the procedure by ensuring that this necessary and sufficient condition is present in the very definition of man, and excluding all those who do not fall under his demonstration from humanity, from the outset, "for such a man, as such, is like a plant, from the outset." The requirement of meaning, once it is equated with the aim of univocity in this fashion, is first of all a formidable war machine against homonymy. All those who refuse to submit to this requirement have been reduced to so much silence or noise, something prior to language, ever since Aristotle. They are free to inquire into "what is in the sounds of the voice and in words," to drivel or nonsense (*blabla*), or in other words, into the signifier inasmuch as it does not signify. This freedom will not even extend to the conventional sphere of human language.

From Parmenides to Gorgias, and from Gorgias to Aristotle, let us grant that the sophist has been check-mated. But much is to be learned from the game, up until the present day.

It is up to us, in particular, to decipher the ambiguous status of psychoanalysis in light of this teaching -- this speech which one pays for, this *pharmakon* which is bought and sold, just as the sophist were reproached for. For it is obvious that Freud, then Lacan, occupy the site that Aristotle assigned to the recalcitrant sophists, the site of the signifier. Yet there is a crucial difference, which changes everything: they occupy this site as Aristotelians. Thanks to psychoanalysis, even drivel, even homonymy fall into the embrace of meaning. Freud's definition of the "pun" (one of the categories of which, let's not forget, is the "sophism") as "sense within non-sense" stands as sufficient witness that speaking for one's pleasure or, as Lacan puts it, "speaking to no end" (*parler en pure perte*) is today a sophistical activity which has been embraced or taken over by Aristotelianism.

It is also up to us to grasp in what way Aristotle's gesture in the *Metaphysics* is repeated in front of our own eyes. Meaning, consensus and exclusion is precisely the structure of what Karl-Otto Apel calls "the *a priori* of the communicative community." The basic question for Apel, who views himself as following in the footsteps of Wittgenstein and Peirce, but is really the follower of Aristotle, is "the condition of possibility of meaningful discourse or meaningful argumentation." It is the same problematization of the notion of an ultimate ground; just like with the principle of all principles, one must both ground and cease to ground. The resolution of the aporia is also the same: one takes a step back, a regress towards the transcendental condition of human language. The proof-strategy is the same: an opponent is required, be it Popper or Protagoras, who is refuted by showing him that "the rules of the transcendental language-game" are such that he has "always already implicitly acknowledged their validity."<sup>3</sup> In other words -- those of Aristotle, precisely --: "If one is to destroy the *logos*, one must surely have a *logos* of one's own." Lastly, and above all, one finds the same exclusion of the radical, evil other, who persists in denying the "meta-institution of all

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<sup>3</sup> "La question d'une fondation ultime de la raison," trans. S. Foisy & J. Poulain, *Critique* (octobre 1981).

possible human institutions," whether it is termed language-game or decision of meaning, and must pay for this refusal by "losing his own identity as a meaningful agent," namely, suicide or dementia. In short, Aristotle's plants today would be headed for the morgue or the asylum. But, as you will have understood, the point of contention of this exclusion remains the same: by making an entire dimension of speech philosophically and ethically inaudible, one has confused otherness with nothingness.

*From the Deer-Goat to the Novel*

The consequence of the decision of meaning is twofold. First, and most radically, as we have seen, there is the exclusion from the community of all those who "speak for the pleasure of speaking," in the terms of *Gamma* 5. The sophist, whom Aristotle and Apel find so disagreeable, is not human. But there is a second consequence which is more subtle, that has to do with the topology of meaning sketched out by Aristotle's statement of equivalence. To speak is to say being; such was Parmenides's thesis, and such, again, *mutatis mutandis*, is the ordinary regime or daily lot of Aristotelian language. Ordinarily, indeed, when one speaks, the meaning of the word expresses the essence of the thing. This is the case when the thing exists; the essence of the entities is the meaning of the word that refers to them -- if "man" means "animal with two feet," then, providing man exists, man is an two-footed animal --, and it is precisely in this that the ontological necessity of excluding "idle talk" is rooted, all the way to Heidegger. Now, faced with the sophist, the Aristotelian response in kind opens up a radically new possibility. One is no longer forced to speak of something which exists in order to mean something; one can very well speak of the "deer-goat" (which is the great example in *De Interpretatione*) without putting ontology at risk. One can speak *non-being* because one can *speak* non-being, because with the language of possibility comes a meaning which is no longer bound to reference. This is in fact why truth values are nothing more than a question of *sun*, syntax and synthesis, between a subject who is or is not, and a predicate which is or is not. Thus we may utter the truth when we speak about things which do not exist (the statement 'A deer-goat is not a cow' is true), things which, when one speaks about them, continue not to exist. Aristotelian semantics, on its part, produces parallel worlds in which

true sentences assign non-existent predicates to non-beings -- stemming not from the false which is, but from the true which is not. From the ontology which has thus been reassured by Aristotle, the possibility flows of an assumption of logology: by speaking of things which have no existence, and therefore, in Aristotle's terminology, no essence or definition, by discarding the physical or phenomenal reference, one has opened up the possibility of promoting meaning alone, meaning itself. Just as Parmenidean ontology had always already become sophistical logology, here, on Aristotelian ground, sophistical logology is assigned to a new dwelling-point: literature, as a case which is legitimized by the interpretation of the *legein ti* as *sêmeinein ti*.

In the wake of rhetoric, which had already chosen the expression "to speak to" over the expression "to speak of," it is an entirely different corpus which becomes more intelligible, that of the second wave of the sophists, still Greek yet already Latin, and this marks the inception of the novel. If the novel is considered in this light, it shows itself to be an extremely original response to philosophical prohibition. For the novel is self-consciously a *pseudos*, and presents itself as such; it is a discourse which forgoes any ontological adequation and follows its own demiurgical path, namely, speaking for the pleasure of speaking rather than speaking in order to mean something, and thus producing a world-effect, a novelistic "fiction." And the popularity of novels, which resumes the foundational tradition of the Homeric poems, ends up constituting the cultural avatar of a political consensus, extended to the limits of the inhabited world by means of the *pax Romana*. As Dion said, not everyone sees the same sky, but even the Indians know Homer.

Thus the paradigm of truth has been transformed. From now on, sophistic no longer has to do battle with philosophical authenticity, but rather with the exactness of historical fact. It is now the gaze of the historian which brings the accusation of the *pseudos* to bear against sophistic, and its literary kin. Lucian's *How to Write History*, in particular, bears witness to the existence of this new conflict: the historian as mirror is completely opposed to the poet, who is entitled to "overthrow the fortress of the Epipoles with a stroke of the pen," and defines himself by not being a novelist. However, Lucian practices the art of the sophists on sophistic itself; in *The Genuine History*, his irony ends up jeopardizing his own practice: "I

will tell the truth on one point, which is that I tell lies." Here, "genuine" history takes up the liar's paradox again, and against the history of the chroniclers and the faithful account of events, it responds with the unmatched power of invention.

When confronted with philosophy, the early sophists preferred a consensus-building discourse to that which sought to conform to the entity, or to the being of the entity. This very shift from adequation to political and cultural consensus also impacts on the shift in the relevant opposition: the later sophists had to confront history rather than philosophy. We have thus moved from ontology to the human sciences, and from the art of the sophists to literature.

#### IV. Ethical Correctness

The epicentre of the history of philosophy, once it is rewritten under the influence of sophistics as the history of the delimitation of philosophy, becomes the problem of the regulation of language. Ordinary philosophy (of which I speak with the same respect as of ordinary language) musters up all its forces, at all levels and by all the means at its disposal -- Platonic, Aristotelian, Kantian, Heideggerian, Levinasian, analytic, Habermasian, Foucauldian and even Perelmanian -- to reinforce this regulation ethically. As ideology is lacking, we are given moral lectures instead. As a result, from Allan Bloom to Vaclav Havel, the consensus that sophistics should be the prime target has reached remarkable dimensions, extending as far as politics.

Allow me to return once more to the mutual demarcation of the space between the philosopher and his bad other. Its most tangible effect is to relinquish the distinction between good and evil, the foundation of ethics, and hand it over to the most slippery genre, that of resemblance; as Nietzsche noted, "the border between good and evil disappears -- that is sophistics." As a result, the two major themes which philosophy develops in order to distinguish the good side from the bad side of resemblance are cancelled out by sophistics, in such a way that ethics is displaced.

The first theme is that of the mask of "hypo-crisis" which one slips on. We are familiar with the accusation of flattery and deceit which runs throughout the *Gorgias*: rhetoric and

sophistry are *eidôla* which "slip beneath" justice and legislation. But generally one fails to notice that Protagoras, who proudly describes himself as showing his face, literally undoes this accusation, when he shows, at the end of his myth, why the only mask one need wear is indeed that of justice:

As for the other excellences [...] if one someone wishes, for instance, to be good at playing the flute or some other art, while he is not, he is mocked and becomes angry, and those who are close to him come and reproach him for his folly. If, on the contrary, the issue is justice and the political virtue in general, when a man who is known to be unjust, when this man ends up saying the truth about himself in public, this frankness which previously was viewed as wisdom, is in the present case considered to be madness, and one states that all must declare themselves to be just, whether they are or not, and that he who does not put on the mask of justice is mad.

The social bond is created by pretending it exists, and when philosophy reproaches the sophists for being hypocritical, this hypocrisy is none other than the essence of political virtue. Hence the sophistical *alter ego* is the one who drags ethics onto the political terrain.

The second elaboration in lieu of a distinction is, in Aristotelian terms, that pertaining to intention, *proairesis*. The sophists once again "slip" into "the same form as the philosopher," but this time, the difference between the two has to do with "their choice of a way of life." The intimate character of intention makes it even harder to grasp the difference. This is seized upon by Latin rhetoric and the second wave of sophistics, in order to lead the moral problematic to its other point of reversal. "Philosophia enim simulari potest, eloquentia non potest" (Quintilian, *Oratorical Institution*). In the second part of the sentence, Quintilian forces one to definitively reevaluate the first part; he leaves the question of intention to philosophy, both as regards its contestable criterial status, and its concretely or effectively ungraspable [*inassignable*] character (this is why philosophy "always presents simulations // counterfeit material"), whereas eloquence, once again, as always, produces the effect which is unfailingly *index sui*. Philosophy never relinquishes its claim to unmask sophistics, by banking on the concept of intention; sophistics never ceases to distinguish itself from philosophy by emphasizing the accounting of effects. The consideration of effects can match that of intention because the effect is no longer at the mercy of a dichotomy: faced with the polarized duplicity of intention, there is or there is not an effect, *de facto*, precisely. When one

responds to the question of intention with the effect, one has shifted the grounds of the ethical problematic, the definitional shield of philosophy, onto another terrain, that of aesthetics.

This twofold destabilization or upsetting of ethics is obviously what leads one to cry wolf. The most common name for the wolf today is "relativism." This underscores in eminently philosophical, that is, Platonic fashion that the ethical upset is dependent on the refusal to subject discourse to the criterial verdict [*instance*] of truth. Unfortunately for whoever ends up repeating him, Joseph Moreau is one of those who has maintained this most consistently, for example when, regarding the media in particular, he denounces "the great failing of a sophisticated civilization," one defined (like ours) by "technological power and the power of the word": "the absence of a function which can regulate the usage of technology and of *logos*, without which the one is in the service of boundless appetites, and the other consents to justify undisclosable interests."<sup>4</sup> This should be taken quite literally, for "sophistic reason" is responsible in particular for the demise of the gold standard, in economics: "To be sure, gold is just an idol, but one which was indispensable for lack of universal good faith. We are merely beginning to see the damage that this sophistic challenge to common sense and honesty can cause."

What is interesting in Moreau's argument is that he is intelligent enough to plead guilty at the right moment, thereby justifying the impression one might have from the outset: one feels annoyed, but also stifled by his position, which I would venture to term 'ethical correctness'. As he writes, "one cannot avoid being accused of intolerance, when one invokes the right of truth, faced with those who proclaim the sovereignty of opinion. However, the accusation of intolerance is unjustified, for if I assert that truth must live up to absolute demands, of which one must take account, I do not thereby claim that I am in possession of it, or that I must impose my view at any cost." This reflection enables one to distinguish two ways of being an anti-relativist, in the current debate. One is more "crude" or unbearable than the other, because it is dogmatic and non-critical. A position is dogmatic when it operates as if truth were not merely a regulative idea, a site, but also a content that must be respected, that

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Moreau, *Platon devant les sophistes* (Paris: Vrin-Reprise, 1987), especially the 1979 article "Qu'est-ce qu'un sophiste ?".



one must make people respect. François Furet's reaction against the "denunciation of European culture" he finds characteristic of political correctness most likely falls under this category. Furet regrets that this new political vulgate leads one, on the intellectual level, to "relativize all works of art and of the spirit, to wreck the idea of the universality of truth, without which the notion of education itself loses its meaning."<sup>5</sup>

The second kind of anti-relativist takes care to leave the site of truth empty. Dogmatism and relativism then become symmetrical dangers for him. Allan Bloom, waging war against political correctness, thus specifies that "there are two threats to reason, the opinion that one knows the truth about the most important things, and the opinion that there is no truth in these matters; the first one asserts that the quest for truth is unnecessary, and the second one asserts that it is impossible."<sup>6</sup> Hence the right attitude, with due classicism, is the Socratic knowledge of ignorance. Alain Badiou's modality of anti-relativism makes for a radically different perspective, insofar as he strives both to demarcate himself from the consensual discourse on ethics and to make room for a structural perception of sophistics. Notice in passing that it is hardly inconsequential for such different standpoints to come together on this issue. In *Conditions*,<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou reenacts a Platonic gesture, faced with "modern sophistry" (Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) and its "contemporary" form (Lyotard, Rorty, Vattimo and Derrida). There is no philosophy without sophistics, and no philosopher who does not define himself as an opponent of the sophist ("every definition of philosophy must distinguish it from sophistics"). However, it is not only the definition of philosophy in general which is dependent on sophistics, but also the distinction between good and bad philosophy:

Philosophy must never give way to anti-sophistical extremism. When it nourishes the dark desire to do away with the sophist *once and for all*, philosophy goes astray. This is precisely what defines *dogmatism*, in my view: claiming that the sophist should not exist, simply because he is a perverse twin of the philosopher. No, the sophist *must simply be assigned to his place*.

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<sup>5</sup> "L'utopie démocratique à l'américaine," *Le Débat* 69 (mars-avril 1992).

<sup>6</sup> *Giants and Dwarfs* (Touchstone, 1990); the quotation is from the preface, "Western Civ."

<sup>7</sup> (Paris: Seuil, ?). See also *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

Faced with "disaster," with "dogmatic terror," which lies in declaring that "the sophist must not be," and hence decreeing the "eradication of its other," the "ethics of philosophy," on the contrary, maintains "the sophist as its opponent," and "preserves the *polemos*": "At all times, the sophist is required for philosophy to keep hold of its ethics. For the sophist is the one who reminds us that the category of Truth is empty. To be sure, he only does so in order to deny truths, and in this regard he must be fought. But this fight takes place on the ground of ethical norms." For a dogmatic Platonism, the first type of anti-relativism, the sophist as such is a danger to ethics; for a "Platonism of the manifold," which refuses to give up the category of truth as understood through sophistics (which then becomes ethically necessary, as "operation" and as "void"), to keep a firm hold on philosophy can only mean to withdraw the manifold "from the authority of language," to not be obliged to "recognize the constitutive character of linguistic variation."

In my opinion, it is exactly at this point that a more intelligent form of terror rears its head, if we are to believe the philosophical rewriting of the history of philosophy. Indeed, it teaches us that the margin, the degree of freedom separating the act of eradication from that of assigning a place, is perilously slim. How might one separate the initial gesture, which is good, from its chain of effects, which are bad, when from Plato to Habermas, the issue is always Book X of the *Laws*, where the place that is assigned to those who speak as atheists is prison, followed by death without burial, and book *Gamma* of the *Metaphysics*, in which he who denies the principle of non-contradiction is a plant, whose place is outside of humanity? The difference between morals and moralism, or ethics and morals, regardless of the chiasmas with added value, has yet to be fulfilled, from this standpoint.

Anti-Platonism seems like such an outdated notion! Anti-sophistics, too, seems so outdated! Haven't we moved beyond these exchanges of threats long ago? Well, neither a Heideggerian problematic, nor the return to Kant appear to be sufficient to me. They fail, in any case, to prevent the French scene, within philosophy and without, from reducing ethical discourse to something dangerously inane.

