Sophist

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INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS.

The dramatic power of the dialogues of Plato appears to diminish as the metaphysical interest of them increases (compare Introd. to the Philebus). There are no descriptions of time, place or persons, in the Sophist and Statesman, but we are plunged at once into philosophical discussions; the poetical charm has disappeared, and those who have no taste for abstruse metaphysics will greatly prefer the earlier dialogues to the later ones. Plato is conscious of the change, and in the Statesman expressly accuses himself of a tediousness in the two dialogues, which he ascribes to his desire of developing the dialectical method. On the other hand, the kindred spirit of Hegel seemed to find in the Sophist the crown and summit of the Platonic philosophy—here is the place at which Plato most nearly approaches to the Hegelian identity of Being and Not-being. Nor will the great importance of the two dialogues be doubted by any one who forms a conception of the state of mind and opinion which they are intended to meet. The sophisms of the day were undermining philosophy; the denial of the existence of Not-being, and of the connexion of ideas, was making truth and falsehood equally impossible. It has been said that Plato would have written differently, if he had been acquainted with the Organon of Aristotle. But could the Organon of Aristotle ever have been written unless the Sophist and Statesman had preceded? The swarm of fallacies which arose in the infancy of mental science, and which was born and bred in the decay of the pre-Socratic philosophies, was not dispelled by Aristotle, but by Socrates and Plato. The summa genera of thought, the nature of the proposition, of definition, of generalization, of synthesis and analysis, of division and cross-division, are clearly described, and the processes of induction and deduction are constantly employed in the dialogues of Plato. The 'slippery' nature of comparison, the danger of putting words in the place of things, the fallacy of arguing 'a dicto secundum,' and in a circle, are frequently indicated by him. To all these processes of truth and error, Aristotle, in the next generation, gave distinctness; he brought them together in a separate science. But he is not to be regarded as the original inventor of any of the great logical forms, with the exception of the syllogism.

There is little worthy of remark in the characters of the Sophist. The most noticeable point is the final retirement of Socrates from the field of argument, and the substitution for him of an Eleatic stranger, who is described as a pupil of Parmenides and Zeno, and is supposed to have descended from a higher world in order to convict the Socratic circle of error. As in the Timaeus, Plato seems to intimate by the withdrawal of Socrates that he is passing beyond the limits of his teaching; and in the

Sophist and Statesman, as well as in the Parmenides, he probably means to imply that he is making a closer approach to the schools of Elea and Megara. He had much in common with them, but he must first submit their ideas to criticism and revision. He had once thought as he says, speaking by the mouth of the Eleatic, that he understood their doctrine of Not-being; but now he does not even comprehend the nature of Being. The friends of ideas (Soph.) are alluded to by him as distant acquaintances, whom he criticizes ab extra; we do not recognize at first sight that he is criticizing himself. The character of the Eleatic stranger is colourless; he is to a certain extent the reflection of his father and master, Parmenides, who is the protagonist in the dialogue which is called by his name. Theaetetus himself is not distinguished by the remarkable traits which are attributed to him in the preceding dialogue. He is no longer under the spell of Socrates, or subject to the operation of his midwifery, though the fiction of question and answer is still maintained, and the necessity of taking Theaetetus along with him is several times insisted upon by his partner in the discussion. There is a reminiscence of the old Theaetetus in his remark that he will not tire of the argument, and in his conviction, which the Eleatic thinks likely to be permanent, that the course of events is governed by the will of God. Throughout the two dialogues Socrates continues a silent auditor, in the Statesman just reminding us of his presence, at the commencement, by a characteristic jest about the statesman and the philosopher, and by an allusion to his namesake, with whom on that ground he claims relationship, as he had already claimed an affinity with Theaetetus, grounded on the likeness of his ugly face. But in neither dialogue, any more than in the Timaeus, does he offer any criticism on the views which are propounded by another.

The style, though wanting in dramatic power,—in this respect resembling the Philebus and the Laws,—is very clear and accurate, and has several touches of humour and satire. The language is less fanciful and imaginative than that of the earlier dialogues; and there is more of bitterness, as in the Laws, though traces of a similar temper may also be observed in the description of the 'great brute' in the Republic, and in the contrast of the lawyer and philosopher in the Theaetetus. The following are characteristic passages: 'The ancient philosophers, of whom we may say, without offence, that they went on their way rather regardless of whether we understood them or not;' the picture of the materialists, or earth-born giants, 'who grasped oaks and rocks in their hands,' and who must be improved before they can be reasoned with; and the equally humourous delineation of the friends of ideas, who defend themselves from a fastness in the invisible world; or the comparison of the Sophist to a painter or maker (compare Republic), and the hunt after him in the rich meadow-lands of youth and wealth; or, again, the light and graceful touch with which the older philosophies

are painted ('Ionian and Sicilian muses'), the comparison of them to mythological tales, and the fear of the Eleatic that he will be counted a parricide if he ventures to lay hands on his father Parmenides; or, once more, the likening of the Eleatic stranger to a god from heaven.—All these passages, notwithstanding the decline of the style, retain the impress of the great master of language. But the equably diffused grace is gone; instead of the endless variety of the early dialogues, traces of the rhythmical monotonous cadence of the Laws begin to appear; and already an approach is made to the technical language of Aristotle, in the frequent use of the words 'essence,' 'power,' 'generation,' 'motion,' 'rest,' 'action,' 'passion,' and the like.

The Sophist, like the Phaedrus, has a double character, and unites two enquirers, which are only in a somewhat forced manner connected with each other. The first is the search after the Sophist, the second is the enquiry into the nature of Not-being, which occupies the middle part of the work. For 'Not-being' is the hole or division of the dialectical net in which the Sophist has hidden himself. He is the imaginary impersonation of false opinion. Yet he denies the possibility of false opinion; for falsehood is that which is not, and therefore has no existence. At length the difficulty is solved; the answer, in the language of the Republic, appears 'tumbling out at our feet.' Acknowledging that there is a communion of kinds with kinds, and not merely one Being or Good having different names, or several isolated ideas or classes incapable of communion, we discover 'Not-being' to be the other of 'Being.' Transferring this to language and thought, we have no difficulty in apprehending that a proposition may be false as well as true. The Sophist, drawn out of the shelter which Cynic and Megarian paradoxes have temporarily afforded him, is proved to be a dissembler and juggler with words.

The chief points of interest in the dialogue are: (I) the character attributed to the Sophist: (II) the dialectical method: (III) the nature of the puzzle about 'Not-being:' (IV) the battle of the philosophers: (V) the relation of the Sophist to other dialogues.

I. The Sophist in Plato is the master of the art of illusion; the charlatan, the foreigner, the prince of esprits-faux, the hireling who is not a teacher, and who, from whatever point of view he is regarded, is the opposite of the true teacher. He is the 'evil one,' the ideal representative of all that Plato most disliked in the moral and intellectual tendencies of his own age; the adversary of the almost equally ideal Socrates. He seems to be always growing in the fancy of Plato, now boastful, now eristic, now clothing himself in rags of philosophy, now more akin to the rhetorician or lawyer, now haranguing, now questioning, until the final appearance in the Politicus of his departing shadow in the disguise of a statesman. We are not to suppose that Plato intended by such a description to depict Protagoras

or Gorgias, or even Thrasymachus, who all turn out to be 'very good sort of people when we know them,' and all of them part on good terms with Socrates. But he is speaking of a being as imaginary as the wise man of the Stoics, and whose character varies in different dialogues. Like mythology, Greek philosophy has a tendency to personify ideas. And the Sophist is not merely a teacher of rhetoric for a fee of one or fifty drachmae (Crat.), but an ideal of Plato's in which the falsehood of all mankind is reflected.

A milder tone is adopted towards the Sophists in a well-known passage of the Republic, where they are described as the followers rather than the leaders of the rest of mankind. Plato ridicules the notion that any individuals can corrupt youth to a degree worth speaking of in comparison with the greater influence of public opinion. But there is no real inconsistency between this and other descriptions of the Sophist which occur in the Platonic writings. For Plato is not justifying the Sophists in the passage just quoted, but only representing their power to be contemptible; they are to be despised rather than feared, and are no worse than the rest of mankind. But a teacher or statesman may be justly condemned, who is on a level with mankind when he ought to be above them. There is another point of view in which this passage should also be considered. The great enemy of Plato is the world, not exactly in the theological sense, yet in one not wholly different—the world as the hater of truth and lover of appearance, occupied in the pursuit of gain and pleasure rather than of knowledge, banded together against the few good and wise men, and devoid of true education. This creature has many heads: rhetoricians, lawyers, statesmen, poets, sophists. But the Sophist is the Proteus who takes the likeness of all of them; all other deceivers have a piece of him in them. And sometimes he is represented as the corrupter of the world; and sometimes the world as the corrupter of him and of itself.

Of late years the Sophists have found an enthusiastic defender in the distinguished historian of Greece. He appears to maintain (1) that the term 'Sophist' is not the name of a particular class, and would have been applied indifferently to Socrates and Plato, as well as to Gorgias and Protagoras; (2) that the bad sense was imprinted on the word by the genius of Plato; (3) that the principal Sophists were not the corrupters of youth (for the Athenian youth were no more corrupted in the age of Demosthenes than in the age of Pericles), but honourable and estimable persons, who supplied a training in literature which was generally wanted at the time. We will briefly consider how far these statements appear to be justified by facts: and, 1, about the meaning of the word there arises an interesting question:—

Many words are used both in a general and a specific sense, and the two senses are not always clearly distinguished. Sometimes the generic meaning has been narrowed to the specific, while in other cases the

specific meaning has been enlarged or altered. Examples of the former class are furnished by some ecclesiastical terms: apostles, prophets, bishops, elders, catholics. Examples of the latter class may also be found in a similar field: jesuits, puritans, methodists, and the like. Sometimes the meaning is both narrowed and enlarged; and a good or bad sense will subsist side by side with a neutral one. A curious effect is produced on the meaning of a word when the very term which is stigmatized by the world (e.g. Methodists) is adopted by the obnoxious or derided class; this tends to define the meaning. Or, again, the opposite result is produced, when the world refuses to allow some sect or body of men the possession of an honourable name which they have assumed, or applies it to them only in mockery or irony.

The term 'Sophist' is one of those words of which the meaning has been both contracted and enlarged. Passages may be quoted from Herodotus and the tragedians, in which the word is used in a neutral sense for a contriver or deviser or inventor, without including any ethical idea of goodness or badness. Poets as well as philosophers were called Sophists in the fifth century before Christ. In Plato himself the term is applied in the sense of a 'master in art,' without any bad meaning attaching to it (Symp.; Meno). In the later Greek, again, 'sophist' and 'philosopher' became almost indistinguishable. There was no reproach conveyed by the word; the additional association, if any, was only that of rhetorician or teacher. Philosophy had become eclecticism and imitation: in the decline of Greek thought there was no original voice lifted up 'which reached to a thousand years because of the god.' Hence the two words, like the characters represented by them, tended to pass into one another. Yet even here some differences appeared; for the term 'Sophist' would hardly have been applied to the greater names, such as Plotinus, and would have been more often used of a professor of philosophy in general than of a maintainer of particular tenets.

But the real question is, not whether the word 'Sophist' has all these senses, but whether there is not also a specific bad sense in which the term is applied to certain contemporaries of Socrates. Would an Athenian, as Mr. Grote supposes, in the fifth century before Christ, have included Socrates and Plato, as well as Gorgias and Protagoras, under the specific class of Sophists? To this question we must answer, No: if ever the term is applied to Socrates and Plato, either the application is made by an enemy out of mere spite, or the sense in which it is used is neutral. Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates, Aristotle, all give a bad import to the word; and the Sophists are regarded as a separate class in all of them. And in later Greek literature, the distinction is quite marked between the succession of philosophers from Thales to Aristotle, and the Sophists of the age of Socrates, who appeared like meteors for a short time in different parts of Greece. For the purposes of comedy, Socrates

may have been identified with the Sophists, and he seems to complain of this in the Apology. But there is no reason to suppose that Socrates, differing by so many outward marks, would really have been confounded in the mind of Anytus, or Callicles, or of any intelligent Athenian, with the splendid foreigners who from time to time visited Athens, or appeared at the Olympic games. The man of genius, the great original thinker, the disinterested seeker after truth, the master of repartee whom no one ever defeated in an argument, was separated, even in the mind of the vulgar Athenian, by an 'interval which no geometry can express,' from the balancer of sentences, the interpreter and reciter of the poets, the divider of the meanings of words, the teacher of rhetoric, the professor of morals and manners.

2. The use of the term 'Sophist' in the dialogues of Plato also shows that the bad sense was not affixed by his genius, but already current. When Protagoras says, 'I confess that I am a Sophist,' he implies that the art which he professes has already a bad name; and the words of the young Hippocrates, when with a blush upon his face which is just seen by the light of dawn he admits that he is going to be made 'a Sophist,' would lose their point, unless the term had been discredited. There is nothing surprising in the Sophists having an evil name; that, whether deserved or not, was a natural consequence of their vocation. That they were foreigners, that they made fortunes, that they taught novelties, that they excited the minds of youth, are quite sufficient reasons to account for the opprobrium which attached to them. The genius of Plato could not have stamped the word anew, or have imparted the associations which occur in contemporary writers, such as Xenophon and Isocrates. Changes in the meaning of words can only be made with great difficulty, and not unless they are supported by a strong current of popular feeling. There is nothing improbable in supposing that Plato may have extended and envenomed the meaning, or that he may have done the Sophists the same kind of disservice with posterity which Pascal did to the Jesuits. But the bad sense of the word was not and could not have been invented by him, and is found in his earlier dialogues, e.g. the Protagoras, as well as in the later.

3. There is no ground for disbelieving that the principal Sophists, Gorgias, Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias, were good and honourable men. The notion that they were corrupters of the Athenian youth has no real foundation, and partly arises out of the use of the term 'Sophist' in modern times. The truth is, that we know little about them; and the witness of Plato in their favour is probably not much more historical than his witness against them. Of that national decline of genius, unity, political force, which has been sometimes described as the corruption of youth, the Sophists were one among many signs;—in these respects Athens may have degenerated; but, as Mr. Grote remarks, there is no reason to suspect any greater moral corruption in the age of

Demosthenes than in the age of Pericles. The Athenian youth were not corrupted in this sense, and therefore the Sophists could not have corrupted them. It is remarkable, and may be fairly set down to their credit, that Plato nowhere attributes to them that peculiar Greek sympathy with youth, which he ascribes to Parmenides, and which was evidently common in the Socratic circle. Plato delights to exhibit them in a ludicrous point of view, and to show them always rather at a disadvantage in the company of Socrates. But he has no quarrel with their characters, and does not deny that they are respectable men.

The Sophist, in the dialogue which is called after him, is exhibited in many different lights, and appears and reappears in a variety of forms. There is some want of the higher Platonic art in the Eleatic Stranger eliciting his true character by a labourious process of enquiry, when he had already admitted that he knew quite well the difference between the Sophist and the Philosopher, and had often heard the question discussed;—such an anticipation would hardly have occurred in the earlier dialogues. But Plato could not altogether give up his Socratic method, of which another trace may be thought to be discerned in his adoption of a common instance before he proceeds to the greater matter in hand. Yet the example is also chosen in order to damage the 'hooker of men' as much as possible; each step in the pedigree of the angler suggests some injurious reflection about the Sophist. They are both hunters after a living prey, nearly related to tyrants and thieves, and the Sophist is the cousin of the parasite and flatterer. The effect of this is heightened by the accidental manner in which the discovery is made, as the result of a scientific division. His descent in another branch affords the opportunity of more 'unsavoury comparisons.' For he is a retail trader, and his wares are either imported or home-made, like those of other retail traders; his art is thus deprived of the character of a liberal profession. But the most distinguishing characteristic of him is, that he is a disputant, and higgles over an argument. A feature of the Eristic here seems to blend with Plato's usual description of the Sophists, who in the early dialogues, and in the Republic, are frequently depicted as endeavouring to save themselves from disputing with Socrates by making long orations. In this character he parts company from the vain and impertinent talker in private life, who is a loser of money, while he is a maker of it.

But there is another general division under which his art may be also supposed to fall, and that is purification; and from purification is descended education, and the new principle of education is to interrogate men after the manner of Socrates, and make them teach themselves. Here again we catch a glimpse rather of a Socratic or Eristic than of a Sophist in the ordinary sense of the term. And Plato does not on this ground reject the claim of the Sophist to be the true philosopher. One more feature of the Eristic rather than of the Sophist is the