

Philosophy Seminar at Komaba, 5 February, 2008

Who is the Sophist?  
Problems and Approaches

Noburu Notomi (Keio University)

"Sophist" is the name of professional intellectuals and teachers active in ancient Greece (and Rome). I have discussed in my book *Who is the Sophist?* (Jinbun-shoin, 2006) whether, and how, the sophist matters to philosophy. Aren't the sophists historical figures who no longer existed after the Middle Ages? I argue that confronting the sophist is an essential way of doing philosophy, and also that the sophist challenges philosophy in an essential way. The tension between the two has been lying at the very basis of Western philosophy. I demonstrate the significance of the sophist as a philosophical problem in the contemporary world.

In the seminar I will introduce some of the main topics treated in my book. Those interested in this issue might also like to read my *The Unity of Plato's Sophist: Between the Sophist and the Philosopher* (Cambridge University Press, 1999; Japanese translation, Nagoya University Press, 2002).

In the *Who is the Sophist?*, I translate and analyze three works of Gorgias and one treatise of Alcidas. For the European translations of these sophists, see T. Buchheim, *Gorgias von Leontini, Reden, Fragmente und Testimonien*, Felix Meiner, 1989 (Greek Text, German translation, and commentary); J. V. Muir, *Alcidamas: The Works & Fragments*, Bristol Classical Press, 2001 (Greek Text, English translation, and commentary).

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Topics to discuss at the seminar

- (1) Why is the sophist ignored? [Introduction 1, 4]

After the Roman Empire, the sophists disappeared from the history, and have been ignored in philosophy. In modern Japan, there was only one monograph that dealt with the sophists, Michitaro Tanaka's *The Sophists* (February 1941), before my book. While Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are regarded as Great Philosophers (even Saint!), the sophists are totally neglected as mere negative figures.

The modern scholarship in Europe and America provides divergent views on the

sophistic movement.<sup>1</sup>

1) Many people did and still do criticize the sophists as teachers of apparent wisdom and empty rhetoric; manipulators of eristic arguments and fallacies. They are bitterly condemned as amoralists in respect of relativism and atheism.<sup>2</sup>

2) After Hegel, the sophists are sometimes placed as subjectivists who prepared the full-blown philosophy of Socrates and Plato. They are positively evaluated as a negative factor in the history of philosophy.

3) The recent revival (among the specialists) of the "Sophistic Movement" tends to evaluate the sophists as important thinkers, i.e. philosophers. They engaged in natural sciences (such as mathematics and astronomy), logic, linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, ethics, epistemology, and religion.<sup>3</sup>

4) After Nietzsche, the sophists are praised as heroes of anti-philosophy; in contrast to Plato, who is elitist, anti-democratic, totalitarian, and absolutist, the sophists represent freedom, egalitarianism, and democracy.<sup>4</sup> Their teaching of rhetoric and relativism attracts modern human and social scientists.

(2) Is there any relevance to the contemporary Japan? [Introduction 5]

Our contemporary world is full of sophistic phenomena; skeptical or agnostic attitudes toward social and ethical values, religions, and human life. Individualistic relativism is universal, especially due to the postmodern social and human sciences. Rhetoric is powerful in mass-communication, legal and political procedures, and the academic world. Hedonistic and ephemeral ways of living prevail among the young. Without absolute ethical values, Power (money, authority, status, etc.) is deemed justice. We can see similar situations in ancient Greece where sophist were active. They advanced some of these ideas, with more critical and more careful attitudes.

(3) How can we approach the sophist's thinking? [Introduction 6]

There are both practical and theoretical difficulties in reconsidering the sophist. First,

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of views on the sophists, see G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 1; G. B. Kerferd, "The future direction of sophistic studies" in Kerferd ed. *The Sophists and their Legacy* (Wiesbaden, 1981), 1-6; E. Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos; A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1991), ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Judging from the famous statement of "On the gods" (DK 80B4), Protagoras was not atheist in a proper sense, but has often been treated as such since antiquity.

<sup>3</sup> Following the classical work of G. Grote, *A History of Greece* (1884), this trend is represented by G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Part 1: The Spell of Plato* (London, 1945); E. A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (London, 1957).

we lack the sources of their thinking. Apart from the three short pieces of Gorgias (which I translate in my book) little is left of the older sophists.<sup>5</sup> Probably the books of the most influential sophist Protagoras were already lost soon after his death.<sup>6</sup> This is partly because their formidable enemies, especially Plato, have dominated the image of the sophist through the history of philosophy. But it may also be the case that the sophists did not write much from the beginning, unlike Plato and Aristotle who left substantial and systematic works of philosophy. We cannot judge from the remaining sources.

I try to look at the issue from two sides, i.e. from the philosopher's and the sophist's points of view. But is it possible to discuss the sophist from the sophistic viewpoint? Whenever we discuss the sophist, we already use philosophical concepts, which are designed to criticize him. It is extremely difficult to reconstruct a faithful (non-philosophic) picture of the sophist within our inherited philosophical framework. On the other hand, the essence of the sophist's thinking lies in demolishing the very distinction between philosophy and sophistry (image and original / appearance and reality). Therefore, we cannot assume the opposition between the philosopher and the sophist, in discussing the sophist.

Instead, we should look at their remaining pieces and testimonies as carefully as possible, and try to avoid the Platonic prejudice. This is an intellectual challenge for us, which amounts to reconsidering what philosophy is.

(4) How was the philosopher distinguished from the sophist? [Chapter 1]  
Socrates was condemned by the contemporary Athenians as dangerous sophist, who "does not believe in the gods and corrupts the young". His intellectual activities (critical and devastating argument, paradoxical claims, ethical concerns, and education) looked very similar to those of the sophists. Indeed many of their concerns are common, and Socrates can rightly be included in the Sophistic Movement. It is Plato who tried to dissociate Socrates from the other sophists, by defending Socrates as "philosopher". Other Socratics were not concerned with this distinction. Aristippus and Antisthenes were themselves sophists!<sup>7</sup> Plato's criticism may aim at

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<sup>5</sup> Except three long papyrus fragments of Antiphon's *Truth* (discovered in the Egyptian desert), and one report of Prodicus' story of "The Choice of Hercules" (in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* II.1)

<sup>6</sup> I am currently working on editing the testimonies of Protagoras in collaboration with the classicists of Leiden University.

<sup>7</sup> This point is fully developed in my *The Birth of the Philosopher: People around Socrates* (Chikuma-shinsho, 2005).

these contemporary rivals (as well as the earlier sophists).

(5) Isn't the name "sophist" a mere label for criticism? [Chapter 2]

Many ancient thinkers and writers used the word "sophist" in order to criticize their rivals: Apart from Socrates, Plato himself is said to be called "sophist" by Isocrates and Lysias! Then one may suspect that this name lacks any substance but is used as a mere label for criticism. I argue that some group of intellectuals can be properly called "sophists". The substantial criterion for this is their professionalism in teaching. An obvious mark of this is to charge a fee to pupils, which activity Socrates and Plato severely criticize.

(6) How does Plato define the sophist? [Chapter 3]

While Plato depicts major sophists in his earlier dialogues: *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Euthydemus*, and *Republic I*, it is the later dialogue, *Sophist*, which gives a full account of the sophist in a general way. It was necessary for Plato to *define* the sophist as "non-philosopher" in order to secure the possibility of genuine philosophy. For only by showing what philosophy really is, the sophist can be properly defined. A crucial problem Plato faces in the *Sophist* is how to distinguish Socrates (true philosopher) from the sophist.<sup>8</sup>

(7) What does Gorgias do in his written speeches? [Chapter 5]

In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias uses mythical figures to introduce his notion of "persuasion". By proposing the power of *logos* (wielded by Paris upon Helen), Gorgias, the author of the speech, tries to persuade the readers, us. He advertises his power of *logos* by exhibiting and exercising it.<sup>9</sup> This self-conscious deception is typical of the sophists, especially of Gorgias (he calls the *logos* "magical" and "play"), but it urges a reflexive study of language and argument among the sophists themselves, as well as in the philosophers.

(8) What is "truth" in rhetoric? [Chapter 5, (6)]

Gorgias insists that he tells the truth, but he appears not to care for the truth in his speeches. He shifts his claim from truth to deception, and deliberately confuses the

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<sup>8</sup> See my *The Unity of the Sophist: Between the Sophist and the Philosopher* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. Ch.2.

<sup>9</sup> I discussed this in "Plato's Critique of Gorgias: Power, the Other, and Truth", in M. Erler & L. Brisson eds. *Gorgias-Menon* (Academia Verlag, 2007).

two. "I tell the truth" is a typical statement of orators, for rhetoric assumes that persuasion creates a truth in an audience's mind. Whatever it seems to the audience, it is *true*, because their judgement decides and makes a reality. Therefore, persuasion is power.

This "rhetorical truth" is different from the "absolute truth" to which philosophers appeal. The essential conflict(?) between the philosopher and the sophist lies in the notion of truth (in *logos*).

(9) Is Gorgias' argument a parody of philosophy? [Chapter 7]

Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus (called Eleatics) pushed their arguments to the extreme. There is only one, unchanged reality (monism). Isn't this too radical, even to be a non-sense? By using their arguments Gorgias subverts the Eleatic position and leads to the strange conclusion that "there is nothing" (nihilism?).

Using the other's argument to conclude a paradox (*reductio ad absurdum*) is also a typical method of Eleatics (esp. Zeno). Gorgias is parodying them, and demonstrates their absurdity by pushing it to the further extreme.

Gorgias continues the argument: even if there is something, it is unknowable (the second stage); even if it is knowable, it is incommunicable to others (the third stage). Is Gorgias serious? Then, what is "seriousness"?

(10) What role does "laughter" play in sophistry? [Chapter 7]

Gorgias advises to *laugh* at a serious argument:

"The seriousness of the opponents should be destroyed by laughter, the laughter by seriousness." (Arist. *Rh.* III.18)

This is an effective device to devastate philosophical arguments. However, isn't the "seriousness" of philosophy a mere excuse? If someone is serious, can anything be allowed? (think of the Eleatic paradoxes!) The sophist challenges this solemn belief of philosophers.