

First chop your *logos*...

Socrates and the sophists on language, logic and development.

I. THE PROBLEM: CHOPPED LOGOS

1. What's in a word?

You might think that the sophists are the villains of Plato's pieces: Protagoras, for example, espousing an extreme relativism *post mortem* in the *Theaetetus*; or Critias, emulative in the *Charmides* about definitions of virtue. Worst of all, perhaps, are the twin sophists of the *Euthydemus*, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus:

.... so clever have they become at fighting in sayings [*logoi*],¹ and refuting whatever is said, whether it be true or false. (272a7-b1)

... so clever have they become that no-one is able to resist them at all. Why not? Is it because they are unscrupulous arguers?² Is the problem their unscrupulousness? Or their arguments? Or should we be wondering about *Plato's* scruples, in putting views he wishes to rebut in the mouths of such beastly characters?³

¹ I have chosen to use 'say' and cognates for the Greek verb *legein* and its cognates, including *logos*. In what follows I amplify the point; but it is important to keep in play from the outset the possibility that the semantic field of *leg-* and cognates is somehow unified. I have followed this strategy for the verbal form, *legein* ('say'), for the nominal form, *logos* ('saying'), and for the compound verb *antilegein* ('countersaying'); see below n. 5. I am defeated by *dialegesthai*, which appears in Socrates' opening speech at 271a4, to describe something like conversation – the conversation which the sophists, by the end of the dialogue, are unable to enjoy. For reasons of space I have not given the Greek text; and I have transliterated the Greek expressions throughout.

² Is this the point of *deinô* – 'wicked-clever', to adapt Charles Brittain's phrase – to describe their skill?

³ This is a common account of the role of the sophists: see Chance, 1992, 18 ff. on the *status quaestionis* at his time of writing. Compare what may be the misguided view of the Anonymous [Isocrates] at 305a.

To these questions I shall return. But first consider the dialogue's theme with variations on the expression *logos*. If the sophists 'fight in *logoi*,' what do they do? 'Fight in *words*? Anyone who has ever worried about translating philosophical Greek may feel nauseous right away: for *logos* is said to mean all sorts of things – 'word' or 'statement' or 'argument' or 'reason' or 'principle' or even 'amount' – any or all of these, only roughly connected in meaning.⁴ We might despair from the outset of finding in the *Euthydemus* any clarity on a term so vexed, and beset by the nasty habits of sophists.

2. Death and countersaying

Things get worse. For at the centre of the dialogue lies a sequence of arguments about the workings of *logoi* and about the correlate verb, *legein*.⁵ The sophists (notoriously) persuade their interlocutors to agree to three claims:

- *Killing Cleinias*: In wanting Cleinias to become wise, where he is now ignorant, Socrates and Ctesippus wish him dead (283c-e);
- *Saying falsehood* is impossible (283e-284e);
- *Countersaying* is impossible (285d-288a).⁶

⁴ S.v.LSJ *ad loc.* Compare, for example, *Apology* 26b for 'discussion'; *Protagoras* 336c for 'account'; Heraclitus DK 22B31 for 'amount' or 'reckoning'. On the realist account of truth, suggested by the sophists, there is a counterpart expression which has been better treated in the literature than *legein*: *einai*, 'is'. See, notably, Brown, 1999, Burnyeat, 2002, Frede, 1967, Kahn, 1973.

⁵ On the principle enunciated above, n.1, I prefer 'say' as the most neutral translation for *legein* throughout, in order to show up the shiftiness of the argument – but see Denyer, 1991, who starts out with 'state'.

⁶ *Antilegein* is often translated 'contradiction' but this, in English at least, gets confused with a connected theme in the dialogue, the Principle of Non-Contradiction (see McCabe 2006, 2012). 'Countersaying' is obsolete in English, unfortunately, but I use the expression to ensure that the *legein* root is with us all the time. I have wondered about 'counterspeaking' (but it seems to describe the physical utterance) or 'counterstating' (perhaps too technical; but here see Denyer, 1991), and their correlates 'speaking' and 'stating' throughout. But all of these are themselves theory-laden; so I use this defunct expression just to keep theory out from the outset.

The denial of false saying and of countersaying is deployed by the sophists to rebut Ctesippus' rejection of the first claim, that he wishes Cleinias dead.⁷ That connection, in turn, is fixed by the overarching programme of the dialogue, to find a protreptic to philosophy for Cleinias (275a).⁸ And the goal of that protreptic is to make him good: not just clever, but wise, and virtuous as well.⁹ So – not only in terms of Socrates' interests, but also in terms of what the sophists seem to have agreed to provide – there is a link between Cleinias' moral development and his changing. That change is here treated as a death, as the replacement of the old Cleinias with a new one. This claim, which so upsets Ctesippus at the time, is itself underpinned by the pair of arguments that follows it, the arguments to deny both false saying and countersaying. It is these arguments which imply the impossibility of becoming wise, and hence – on the assumptions of the first Socratic episode – of becoming virtuous in general.¹⁰ Socrates, to be able to turn Cleinias towards wisdom, badly needs to rebut what the sophists say.

All this seems to offer us sophistry at its most extreme; but can we rebut the arguments? Without offering proper *grounds* for resisting what the sophists invite us to conclude, neither we, nor their interlocutors, are entitled to reject these unsavoury conclusions (and, of course, if the conclusions are right, it is hard to make sense of resisting what someone would say, anyway). One way of thinking about this is to say that the charge of fallacy is theory-laden: and the theory in question is some general theory in philosophical logic. For to suppose that an argument that

⁷ It is important throughout to notice that the sophists themselves eschew theory: their project is to foist theoretical positions on others. So their dialectical position is quite tricky; and this too affects how we should take Socrates' attempt to show that they self-refute. However, in what follows I short-circuit the complexity of whether these are or are not theories that belong to the sophists, and label them simply as 'sophistic'. I think there is in the end, for my present purposes, no heavy price to pay for that ellipse. In a full consideration of the self-refutations, however, this is a fundamental issue.

⁸ This is one reason to reject the recent fashion for describing *only* the Socratic episodes of the dialogue as 'protreptic'.

⁹ Hence the strong ethical content of the first Socratic episode, 278-281.

¹⁰ Notice the opening gambit of what the sophists teach, 273d ff.

produces (what we take to be) a false conclusion is a *fallacy* (rather than, for example, something more challenging like a paradox) and so unsound, requires us to have in place principles of argumentation to show what soundness is. Without those principles, we are faced instead with a more worrying tension between arguments which seem plausible, and a conclusion which seems false. The very radical nature of the sophistic arguments requires our rebuttal to be well-founded in logical principle; and yet logical principle is what is under attack.

3. Chopped *logos*

Consider the third phase of the sequence, the denial of the possibility of countersaying (285d-286b). Ctesippus says:

‘I am not annoyed with Dionysodorus; but I countersay the things which seem to me not to be well said to me. But, my noble Dionysodorus, do not call countersaying annoyance: for countersaying is something different.’

And Dionysodorus said, ‘On the basis that there is countersaying, this is how you make your *logoi*?’

‘Absolutely,’ he said, ‘and very much so. Or is it that you, Dionysodorus, think that there is no such thing as countersaying?’

‘Well, you could not demonstrate that you have ever heard any one person countersaying another.’

‘Are you saying the truth?’ he said. ‘But right now¹¹ I am hearing and demonstrating to you Ctesippus countersaying Dionysodorus.’

‘Well, and would you stand by the saying [*logos*] of this?’

‘Absolutely,’ he said.

‘Well,’ Dionysodorus said. ‘Are there sayings [*logoi*] for each of the things that are?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And is a saying for each thing as the thing is or as it is not?’

‘As it is.’

‘Yes, for if you remember, Ctesippus,’ he said, ‘we showed just now that no-one says [a thing] as it is not. For it became clear that no-one says what is not.’

‘So what?’ said Ctesippus. ‘Do we countersay any the less, you and I?’

‘Would we countersay if we both say a *logos* of the same thing [*pragma*], or would we then say the same?’

¹¹ The resolute present tenses here are, I think, deliberate, and tricky to render; they connect with the dialogue’s running themes of persistence and change.

He conceded.

'But when neither of us speaks the *logos* of the thing, do we countersay then? Or rather in that case neither of us has the thing in mind at all?'

He agreed this too.

'But when I say the *logos* of the thing, and you another *logos* of some other thing, do we countersay then? Or I say the thing, and you don't say [speak] at all? How could the person who does not say, countersay the person who does?' And Ctesippus was silent. (285d3-286b7).¹²

Dionysodorus traps Ctesippus with this:

1. There are sayings [*logoi*] for¹³ each of the things that are.¹⁴
2. A saying [is for each thing] either as the thing is or as it is not.
3. No-one says what is not [*previously argued* 284c].
4. No-one says [things] as they are not.¹⁵
5. So each saying [is of¹⁶ each thing] *as it is*.
6. If two people both say a saying of the same thing (of the same *pragma*),¹⁸ they say the same, and do not countersay each other.

¹² My translations throughout.

¹³ The construction is a possessive dative; so 'belong to' *vel sim*. I just give 'for'.

¹⁴ If we grant from the argument at 283e-4e that any *logos* is of something that is, then here the converse is claimed: that every thing that is has a corresponding *logos*. The argument then works by narrowing the scope of that claim by insisting that the relation between each of the things that are and some *logos* is exclusive and exhaustive: this is the *exactness* stipulation.

¹⁵ I do not here offer a detailed account of where we might say things go wrong here; one obvious problem is the shift between 1 & 2, and between 3 & 4 (between *logoi* of what is not, and *logoi* of things as they are not). See here Denyer (1991). The *Sophist*, of course, concerns itself with these issues, perhaps anticipated in the *Euthydemus*. But time and space preclude more on this here. I have discussed it elsewhere, e.g. McCabe 1994, 2000.

¹⁶ The construction changes here to the possessive genitive, suggesting an ever-narrowing scope for the relation between a thing, a *pragma*, and a saying, a *logos*. Again, there is more to be said here, not least about how one should understand the intentionality of a *logos*. In what follows I avoid the vagaries of 'aboutness' by simply translating the genitive of *pragmatos* as the relation between a *logos* and the thing it is *of*, and taking this relation to exhaust, for the sophists' purposes, the relation of aboutness. It is notable, I think, just how the argument demands a richly contextual theory from the person who would rebut it.

¹⁸ *Pragma*: this word has already been the focus of attention in the first Socratic episode, where Socrates discussed *how* we might 'fare well', *eu prattein* (278e3 ff.).

7. If neither of two people say the saying of the thing, neither of them has the thing in mind, and they do not countersay each other.
8. If one person says the *logos* of the thing, and the other another *logos* of another thing, they do not countersay each other.
9. If one person says the *logos* of the thing, and the other does not say anything at all, they do not countersay each other.

Ctesippus is silent. His countersayings are stopped¹⁹ and so is his power of speech. Should he have something to say?

Dionysodorus' argument, to go through, may be thought to trade on a quite specific, and restricted, sense of *logos*: as what is *said or stated* – a *logos* is a *saying*.²⁰ Sayings have content, describing what the sayings are *of*; and what they are of is their thing, their *pragma*. This thing they are of *fully determines* the content of the statement, so the 'of' relation between *logos* and *pragma* is, as I shall say, *exact* – exclusive, exhaustive and fully determinate. Indeed, one might think that this is the default position about saying: when we say, we say exactly what we say, of what we say it.

And you might, at first, find it plausible: if I state

'Peregrine pushed the pumpkin'

my statement is *of* Peregrine's pumpkin-pushing (out there in the world full of pumpkins). But if the 'of' relation is exact, then *only* what my statement is of can be its truth-maker; 'Peregrine pushed the pumpkin', if it is indeed *of* Peregrine's pumpkin-pushing, will be *true* of it, too. Anything different ('Peregrine poisoned the pumpkin', for example) will just be *of* something else; and so irrelevant to what I

That discussion turned on the contrast between faring well as amassing good things, (*pragmata*), and faring well as having the right state of soul (*prattein* as a general state or activity or actualisation). The things we do are, on the account that Socrates suggests, merely incidents in a life well lived: so here faring or doing well is, one might say, metaphysically prior to acts done well.

¹⁹ NB 285e6; it is a notable feature of this dialogue that the arguments turn out to apply to what is going on in the frame dialogue; at the same time, the frame dialogue interrupts the arguments, notably at 290e.

²⁰ For interesting discussion, see Denyer 1991.

stated first. If there is an exact correlation between a *logos* and what it is of, then the *logos* I say will correspond exactly to what it is of, whatever that is; and what it is of is what makes it true. Then individual *logoi* must either replicate each other or talk past each other. In that case, countersaying is indeed impossible. Whenever I do some *saying*, I say what I say of the saying's object; and that object *just is* what I do my saying about. Equally, when you do some saying, you say what you say about your saying's object; and that object just is what you do your saying about. If saying is like this, Dionysodorus takes us to agree *just when* we 'say the same'; when we say something different, we are talking about different things, talking past each other; so countersaying is impossible.

This argument tells a story about *logos*: the relation between a *logos* and its object is one-to-one correlation, the exact fit between what is said and what it is said of. I call this **chopped logos**.²² It is implicit in the argument about falsehood (an argument to which I shall return) that precedes the discussion of countersaying:

1. The relation between a *logos* and what it is of is *exact*: exclusive, exhaustive and determinate.
2. For exactitude, the *logos*, like its *pragma*, is taken to resist disaggregation; the correspondence is one-to-one as a whole, or not at all.²³
3. The relation between a *logos* and what it is of is *truth-determining*. Since each *logos* is chopped according to its *pragma*, this account is a realist one, and

²² Because it comes in bite-sized chunks... Non-Anglophone readers will, I hope, forgive the pun: sophists are often known as 'logic-choppers'; and I take them to offer a feast of 'chopped logic'.

²³ The disaggregation of a *logos* is the main strand in the *Sophist's* defence of the possibility of falsehood: 251e ff. The *Sophist* restricts its solution to the problem of falsehood to an account of the structure of individual *logoi*, and shows how any *logos* can succeed in being about something, while failing to state what is true of what it is about (so the *Sophist* resists the thought that these sophists press, that any *logos* is somehow atomistic). The *Sophist* does not, however, engage (in ways that the discussion of falsehood in the *Theaetetus* does) with the role of the speaker in falsehood, or with how we might understand, as I take the *Euthydemus* to suggest, what the *project of legein* might be.

cheap at the price. For it explicates both truth and meaning at once. What the *logos* means, it says; and what it says, is so.²⁴

4. If 1, 2 and 3, there are no relations between *logoi*:

- *no truth-functional relations* between *logoi*;²⁵
- *no higher-order relations* between *logoi*.²⁶
- it is even questionable whether we could repeat the same *logos*.²⁷

And notice something else. This discussion between Socrates and the sophists turns in part on what it *means* to say: on the semantics of *legein* and *logos*. The sophists' arguments (must) treat these words as univocal to resist refutation: a *logos* is a saying, single and atomic, and resistant to the complex relations of truth-functionality and order. The correlate verb, *legein*, is equally determinate. Moreover it will not display differences of tense and aspect (for fear of falsifying the

²⁴ How far does chopped *logos* countenance truths that may be unexpressed, *pragmata* that no-one mentions? The discussion of countersaying allows for this possibility; and the argument to deny falsehoods is not falsified by unexpressed truths. However, the project here is not whether truth can be exhausted (more truths will not contribute to the possibility of falsehood), but rather whether it can be missed.

²⁵ Consider the so-called tautology: Not {p & ~p}. On standard assumptions about truth-functionality, the truth of p determines the falsity of ~p, or vice versa. But suppose *chopped logos* holds: if p is a chopped *logos*, then ~p is either a chopped *logos* and so true, or meaningless. The same observation applies to other truth-functional relations: if anything said is true, there is no scope for falsification at the level of logical structure: first-order truth-functional relations (conjunction, material conditional etc.) do not apply.

²⁶ Such as the relation between one *logos* and another which falls within its scope. Suppose I say 'p'. If p is a chopped *logos*, it is true. Now suppose I say 'I say that p is true'. If this too is a chopped *logos*, it is true. But what happens if I say 'I deny that p is true'? Either that is true, and p is false; or p is true and what I say is false. But not so, on chopped *logos*. The sophistic argument blocks, or precludes, higher-order relations between *logoi*. I have discussed this and related issues further in McCabe, 2000.

²⁷ But see Socrates' remark at 303d1 about the sophists' always talking to those like themselves.

statements in question); saying is exact – essentially present and immediate.²⁸ Chopped *logos*, then, is a suitable rider to the argument to kill Cleinias.

Chopped *logos* is clearly indigestible: but how are we to get it off the menu? If false saying is impossible, and countersaying is impossible, there is no such thing as a counter-argument – any argument will simply miss its target. So, on the sophists' own terms, they cannot be refuted. If their opponent insists on trying to refute them, she can only do so by assuming what they deny; and so by (obstinately) begging the question against them. That will leave the sophists unscathed. And it will leave Cleinias without philosophy.

5. Socrates' Problem

It is, of course, an old problem: if someone attacks the basic principles of philosophical argument, how, without relying on the same basic principles, are they to be refuted?²⁹ The *basicness* is important: the principles in question are taken by one party to govern all discourse, but denied in the same terms by the other.³⁰

This makes trouble for Socrates. Three times he attempts to show that the sophists face self-refutation.³¹ He twice argues that there is self-refutation of their³² *logoi* (at 286c;³³ 288a;³⁴):

²⁸ Killing Cleinias turns on a denial of change and aspect in the object of a *logos*; and this is immediately converted into discussion of the *logos* itself at 283e9. The structure of the second sophistic episode as a whole brings into focus the question of change and process in the object of a *logos* and the differences of aspect and tense in the *logos* as stated.

²⁹ Consider the dialectical situation described by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV; I have argued that Plato too is interested in the question of the defence of basic principle in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Philebus*; McCabe, 2000.

³⁰ Aristotle tried to deal with the standoff by saying that someone who takes a position like this, utterly inimical to dialectic, is either a vegetable; or they are refuted out of their own mouths *Metaphysics* 1006a1-15. Aristotle got the idea from Socrates, who here says just that: the sophists, he insists with increasing desperation as the dialogue wears on, sew up their own mouths: 303d.

³¹ Burnyeat, 1976, Castagnoli, 2010.

1. The sophists' *logos*, by applying to the *logoi* of others, applies to itself.
2. The sophists' *logos*, by applying to other *logoi*, silences the other *logoi*.
3. So the sophists' *logos* silences itself.

And he once argues that there is self-refutation of those who say the *logoi* (303c-e³⁵):

1. The sophists' *logos*, by applying to the *logoi* of others, applies to the sophists themselves.
2. The sophists' *logos*, by applying to others' *logoi*, silences the others.
3. So the sophists' *logos* silences the sophists themselves.

These short arguments must assume that the sophists' *logos* (in this case the argument by which they reduce their interlocutor) is a *logos* in just the same way as any other: because it is *by* applying to other *logoi* that it applies to itself, and so self-refutes. The expression '*logos*', therefore, must be treated as univocal for the argument to go through. The sophistic arguments concede univocity; but they deny that any chopped *logos* applies to any other, so that the self-refutation never gets going at all. The sophists' response to the objections is rightly to remain silent.

The self-refutation, contrariwise, insists that (some) *logoi* are able to apply to other *logoi*. If this does not beg the question against the sophists, it seems at least to use '*logos*' in different ways: *higher-order-wise* in 'the sophists' *logos*' and *chopped* in 'the

³² See above, n. 7, on whether these *logoi* even belong to the sophists or whether they are committed, in the dialectic of the dialogue, to any theory at all. Compare *Euthydemus* 296d-297a where the two brothers start to squabble, as a consequence of Dionysodorus' apparently committing himself to something in particular.

³³ 'It always seems to me to me to be an astonishing *logos*, which *both overturns others and itself*.' (286c4)

³⁴ 'This *logos* both stays in the same place and yet, as in the old saw, throwing another it falls.' 288a3-4

³⁵ 'And your *logoi* have this other, public-spirited and gentle side: whenever you say that no thing is fine or good or white or anything else like that, nor, in short, that anything is different from anything else, you actually sew up men's mouths as you speak; but the fact that you seem not only to do this to others, but also to sew up your own mouths, this is a charming feature, and robs your *logoi* of their hostility.' 303d5-e4.

logoi of others and itself'. But then does Socrates cheat? For the first premise either he needs both sorts of *logos* (both higher-order and chopped) and then he equivocates (behaving no better than any sophist); or he simply offers a flat denial of chopped *logos*, and no argument at all. After all, if *logos* is chopped through and through, the argument collapses; only if *logos* is not chopped can it apply to itself and to others. So does Socrates beg the question against his opponents?³⁶

II. A FORMULA FOR A SOLUTION: ASPECT DIFFERENCES

5. The knowledge arguments

Would Socrates understand what it would be to equivocate? Perhaps he would: and just in this dialogue. For it is often claimed that central to the *Euthydemus* is the diagnosis of ambiguity and equivocation: the discovery that words may have more than one meaning, and that arguments are vitiated if the meanings of the words do not remain constant throughout. Such a discovery – it is regularly claimed – is a major weapon in Socrates' armoury against the sophists.³⁷ (All the worse, then, if Socrates exploits it: Socrates' Problem just got more pressing.)

Early in the dialogue the sophists induce Cleinias to agree, twice, both that it is the ignorant who learn; and that it is the wise who learn:

- *First sub-argument*, (276a1-b5). Cleinias proposes that the wise learn. He concedes that there are teachers, who teach those who learn, like himself and his friends. But surely when they learned, they did not yet know what they were learning, and were not wise? In that case, Cleinias admits, when he and his friends were learning, they were not wise, but unlearned.³⁸

³⁶ His ethical spin on the matter doesn't seem to help: he says that if whatever *logoi* you are committed to are disgraceful, you had better be ashamed. What does shame (you might well ask) have to do with logic? More below.

³⁷ See here e.g. Sprague, 1962, Chance, 1992. We find the same in Aristotle's rerun of some of the arguments of the *Euthydemus*, in *Sophistici Elenchi* from 165b25 ff. .

³⁸ *amathês* is usually translated 'ignorant': but *amathês* is importantly cognate with *manthanein*, so literally 'not-learned', 'unlearned'.

- *Second sub-argument* (276c3-7) When the grammar-teacher dictates to Cleinias and his friends, which of the pupils learned what was dictated -- the wise or the unlearned? Cleinias responds that it was the wise, so the wise learn.
- *Third sub-argument* (276e9-277b3). Do those who learn, learn what they know or what they do not know? Cleinias answers that those who learn, learn what they do not know. Surely Cleinias knows all his letters? Yes. But when someone dictates, they dictate letters? Yes. So someone who dictates, dictates some of the things Cleinias knows? Yes. Now surely Cleinias learns what someone dictates? Yes. So Cleinias learns what he knows.
- *Fourth sub-argument* (277b5-c7) Surely, learning is coming to get knowledge of what one learns, and knowing is already having knowledge of something? Yes. But then are those who are coming to get something, those who have it already, or those who do not? Those who do not; so those who learn are those who do not know.

Cleinias seems to be going under – but Socrates consoles him. Cleinias should not be amazed at these arguments, unfamiliar as they are: for he doesn't see what is being done to him. It is as if the sophists were engaged on a Corybantic rite, dancing round him and playing games before he is initiated. To resist them, Socrates says, Cleinias needs to learn 'the correctness of names'. But even this, the skill of Prodicus,⁴⁰ will not get Cleinias what he really needs, the proper understanding of the way things are. What is the Prodician skill? And does Socrates have it? Does Socrates want it? How else are we to get at the way things are?

⁴⁰ Prodicus advanced a realist argument for the impossibility of falsehood, in contrast to the relativist argument attributed to Protagoras by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*: compare the evidence from Didymus the Blind (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes* I. 8b). That Socrates also speaks of 'those around Protagoras', 286d, should not make us confuse realism and relativism here.

There are lots of things we might think go wrong with the knowledge arguments. There are times when there seems to be a shift in scope, or some kind of compositional mistake (as when we know the letters but not the words in a dictation). There are times when the arguments seem to trade on a contrast between a disposition (being clever or smart at learning) and a process (beginning to learn, being in the middle of learning). But the appeal to Prodicus may suggest that he was good at exposing ambiguity, and so that we should worry about equivocation here.⁴¹ Socrates offers us the example of 'learning'.

'First, as Prodicus says, you should learn the correctness of names. This is what our visitors are showing you, that you don't understand that learning is the name men use for cases when someone from the beginning has no knowledge about some matter, and then later gets knowledge of it; but they use the same name for cases when someone already has the knowledge, and with this same knowledge considers that very same matter either in action or in saying. They more often call the latter understanding than learning, but they sometimes call it learning, too. But you had forgotten this, as they have demonstrated, that the same name is used for people in quite opposite conditions, for someone who knows, and for someone who does not. Pretty much the same thing was going on in the second question, too, when they asked you whether men learn what they know or what they do not know.'
(277e5-278b2)

The arguments of the sophists, Socrates suggests, turn on ignoring a distinction between acquiring knowledge, 'learning', and understanding, 'having learned'. What is Socrates complaining about?

He *may* be suggesting that the verb 'to learn' is used of two quite different mental processes or states ('learning' and 'understanding'), and used of them in such a way that there is no substitution of one use by another in transparent contexts so as to preserve truth. His advice, therefore, to consult the correctness of names may be advice not to be caught out by such ambiguity: the lesson we learn from the sophists is a lesson in linguistic practice. Such a lesson, of course, would have ramifications: if 'learn' is used in two quite different senses, or with two quite different meanings;

⁴¹ See Mayhew, 2011, Bett, 2012.

and if Socrates is made to call our attention to that, Plato would need to have some grasp of the meaning of 'meaning'. While we may be asking just what that grasp would involve, exactly, and why it might be *important*,⁴² a different diagnosis is available.

6. Socrates on the correctness of names

Socrates may, instead, be distinguishing two different *aspects* (in the grammatical sense) of learning: imperfective (the endeavour of learning: 'I learn') versus perfective (the learning that one has when one has learned: 'I have learned', 'I am learned').⁴³ This contrast is not straightforwardly a difference in sense between the two expressions. Instead, for learning, the grammatical difference of aspect reflects a difference in the process, in the context, in the circumstances in which I find myself when I talk about what I know and understand (what I learned), and what I am trying like mad to comprehend (what I am continuing to learn); or when I deny that I am ignorant ('unlearned') but concede that I have not yet learned the lesson well (I am still 'unlearned'). And just those differences reflect stages in the process of learning, stages which are obscured by the paired arguments of the sophists. Yet, some of the difference had better not be a difference in sense, rather than aspect: otherwise, the endeavour that I undergo when I learn won't reliably issue in what I aim at, learning.⁴⁴

The shift from one aspect to another in the course of an argument is not, perhaps, an equivocation (a failure to get to grips with the lexicon). It might instead be a failure properly to conjugate, or to parse, the expression in question (as when the difference in aspect is marked by what is often wrongly taken to be a difference in

⁴² Is it that a grasp of the meaning of meaning would allow Plato to contrast sense and reference? Would that help later in this dialogue? Does it matter? Why?

⁴³ The contrast is obscured, notice, in the past tense in English: 'I learned' can be both imperfective and perfective: 'I learned the piano when I was a child'. I acknowledge a debt here: this aspect-reading of the verbs here was first suggested to me by a remark made by David Sedley in a seminar some 30 years ago.

⁴⁴ Instead, we may kill Cleinias.

tense: in Greek, the difference between an imperfect and an aorist). But that might involve a failure to place the expression in question within its proper context (I learned when I went about acquiring understanding; I learned when I completed the endeavour: that is what learning is like). Such failures may affect whether or not a particular sentence comes out true; but once the context and the grammar and even (in this case) the epistemology are sufficiently taken into account, there should be no risk that within an argument there would be illicit shifts of *meaning* that fail to preserve truth.

On this account, Cleinias fails fully to consider the state of affairs to which some sentence refers (its *pragma*) rather than merely failing to grasp the meanings of words, or falling victim to an equivocation. This diagnosis fits well with Socrates' contrasts between the *play* that goes with the correctness of names; and the *seriousness* that goes with the things, the *pragmata*. In the first, shifts of aspect may escape unnoticed; in the second, we apply to the things, the way they are – and here differences of aspect should be inescapable in a serious investigation of context, or in a serious account of process and change: accounts which are challenged from the beginning of the dialogue to the end (consider the sophists' new learning, 271b; the date of the dialogue, yesterday and today, 271a; Socrates as a curmudgeonly old man, 272d, a Kronos (287b); the Killing Cleinias argument; the plays on 'always' in the third sophistic episode, e.g. at 296a; the discussions with the Anonymous [Isocrates] about education in philosophy (304d ff.); the conceptualisation of protreptic, e.g. the shift between 'protreptic to philosophy and virtue' at 275a or 278c and 'protreptic wisdom' at 278c).

Of course, even differences of aspect – as the sophistic arguments show – may *behave* as ambiguities: differences of aspect may fail the substitution test. When I say that I am learning Latin or philosophy, I can't *mean* by that that I *have* completely learned them – otherwise my first lesson would be my last (and we might all be out of a job). So, in some sense Socrates' response to the sophists disambiguates. But it does so by focussing our attention on something important:

on the complexity of the nature of learning itself, and of its processes. And then, if we generalise, we may see that there is a great deal more to be said about the things that correspond to the words than is allowed by an 'exact' sophistic account of language, of truth and of meaning.

III. CONTOURS OF THE SOLUTION: ASPECT CHANGE, FAILURE AND NORMATIVITY

7 Constraining differences of aspect

If Socrates shows up the differences of aspect in the contrast between 'learning' and 'learned', *and* if this figures in the contrast between words and things, *and* if this is not designed to be an account of ambiguity or equivocation ... then he will need to give an account of just how different aspects are co-ordinated in relation to a single thing or *pragma*. For the contrast between aspects is itself theory-laden. It depends, most strikingly of all, on the thought that there can be *aspect-change*: something that corresponds to the changes in a verb when a process (such as learning) occurs, without the process collapsing into distinct and separate episodes. Recall Killing Cleinias: the sophists there urge that any change in Cleinias gives us a new Cleinias, so that to wish him changed is to wish him out of existence. For Cleinias, there is no such thing as becoming *better*; all he can hope for is a better future self (and even that is difficult both to parse and to take as consolation). So, to defend the view that there is a distinction between learning and having learned (so that the sophists' arguments about knowledge and learning can be stopped) Socrates needs also to insist that there is **some continuity** between learning and having learned, such that the aspect changes describe different parts of the same process. This defence needs to occur, moreover, at the level of metaphysics rather than language. Socrates needs to show that there is such a thing as process and continuity and development rather than a succession of new and distinct events.

What would that mean for the case of knowledge or learning or learning to be good? Socrates might say, for example, that the *thing* in question is knowledge itself; and

that the differences in aspect are simply differences in the relations we bear to the *thing* at the core, knowledge. This might connect to aspect-differences most of all if we think here about knowledge as rather a grand kind of thing: as a science, or a body of knowledge, or understanding as a whole.

Or perhaps the *thing* in question is a general property, such as being knowledgeable, and the change of aspect in the verb 'learn' reflects differences in the ways and the extents to which we possess the property 'knowledgeable'.⁴⁷ So here the aspect-change focuses on the changer, the agent undergoing the process of acquiring that property. In either case, the *pragma* would be both broad enough to capture the concept, and determinate enough to avoid the possibility of equivocation.⁴⁸

And certainly, the dialogue does offer us some such account – maybe not as a theory of meaning in general, but at least for learning. After all, that is the central issue of the dialogue – why we should learn, and how. The process must be serious and engage properly with the way things really are, rather than just play at competition in argument. But learning the way things really are, is somehow integrated – Socrates wants to find, not only consistency, but knowledge, the one thing that is good itself by itself, the one thing that is worth aiming for (281). This wholesale knowledge, reasonably enough, is not to be acquired easily nor quickly – witness the case of Ctesippus who, by the end of the dialogue, has discovered nothing except how to imitate the sophists (303e) and his last utterance is a despairing 'I give up: these men are invincible' (303b). Indeed even Socrates doesn't know how to get there (even if he does have an account to give of how to start, vide the reflections on Meno's paradox at 293-7). But it is a process that is both coherent and important, a process that is directed at the only good, knowledge (281b); and it is this process that frames and determines all of the individual discussions and arguments of the

⁴⁷ Compare and contrast the sophists' treatment of this at 293 ff.

⁴⁸ There are many different models for the metaphysics of this: there might be degrees of learning or stages of learning or just a gradual process of getting better at something.

dialogue. This process, indeed, integrates this dialogue which at first glance seems thoroughly fractured.

But now consider the character of learning as it is thus described. Crucial to all of Socrates' demands is their normativity: we *should* engage on this process, and in the *right* way, to the *right* end.⁴⁹ Learning, that is, is to be understood teleologically, as an action or a series of actions, or even a lifetime's endeavour to an end, where the nature of the end and the nature of the person aiming at it *jointly determine the norms* that apply to the endeavour itself. The learner decides to learn, learns and has learned all with the same aim (and all under the description 'learner'): the knowledge that is acquired by learning. And that knowledge – or, better, wisdom – is, on Socrates' account, the only good itself by itself; it is, at least, good in itself, and probably also constitutive of the good of anything else at all.⁵¹ So the centre of ethical explanation is knowledge or wisdom;⁵² and becoming wise is (however the argument may be constructed) central to the best life. That is why the protreptic to philosophy, or protreptic philosophy, matters.⁵³

There is (there must be for the teleology to make sense) no ambiguity here, just a familiarly complex teleological structure. That structure, in turn, is determined by three things: the object of the endeavour (knowing how things are); the subject of

⁴⁹ Notice, for example, the shift from the request to the sophists that they should turn young Cleinias to wisdom, so to give him some protreptic to knowledge, where the object of the protreptic is distinct from it, 274c; and Socrates' own characterization of philosophy as itself protreptic wisdom, 278c-d.

⁵¹ I have discussed this elsewhere, McCabe 2015, chs. 12 and 13; however we take Socrates' discussion at 280-1, he at least concludes that wisdom is good itself by itself.

⁵² Some part of the Socratic enterprise is to distinguish between the ways in which some models of knowledge may fall short of the virtue of wisdom; this for another time.

⁵³ Is the protreptic to philosophy understood as the means to an end but excluded from it, or as somehow or other continuous with the end (so inclusive)? Is wanting to acquire the end of wisdom distinct from the acquiring, or is the protreptic itself part and parcel of the learning? If I am right about what Socrates says about the aspects of learning here, we should prefer the inclusive version of protreptic.

the endeavour (the person who aims to learn) and the endeavour itself (effective learning). Each of these will constrain differences in aspect in the verbs we use to describe the process. Notice, moreover, that this teleological structure implies that the aiming may *fail*: I may try like mad to learn quantum mechanics; and fail at the first particle-or-wave. It is, we might say, built in to normativity that sometimes an 'ought' ...*didn't*. So the teleological structure also accounts for where claims to learn may turn out false. This matters, as we shall see.

8 Back to *logos*: failure conditions

Does this account of the teleology of learning bear on Socrates' Problem, which was an issue about the ambiguity of '*saying*'? Socrates' Problem turned, you will recall, on whether Socrates' insistence that the sophists' account of *legein* is self-refuting – that it refutes either itself, or those who give it – itself equivocates on *legein* and *logos*. I have suggested that Plato may not be interested, in this dialogue, in the problem of equivocation; and of course in the worst case neither he nor Socrates may have understood what sort of a mistake it is. However there is *something* about meaning in this dialogue: Socrates' account of 'learning' gives a normative account of the process, which explains differences of aspect in the corresponding verbs. Does this help with *logos* and *legein*? (How – we might then ask – do questions about linguistic complexity bear at all on how best to live?).

It is common ground to Socrates and the sophists that to say, *legein*, is an action (*prattein*), and that *logoi* are somehow related to (some corresponding) *pragmata*.⁵⁴ Now actions, as Socrates' first arguments show, are somehow or other integrated by the mental state of the agent: individual actions are rendered good (however that occurs⁵⁵) by the wisdom of the person who is doing the actions; and it is this state of

⁵⁴ Compare and contrast, however what Socrates says about the correctness of names, *hê orthotês onomatôn*, and the correctness of things, *hê orthotês pragmatôn*, at 277-8.

⁵⁵ See the literature on this discussed recently in Jones, 2013; McCabe, 2015 ch. 12 and Bobonich, 2002.

the agent that integrates her life, and provides the right (and correctly located) answer to the question ‘how shall we fare well?’ (279a). In answering that question, that is to say, the first place to look is the person who lives the life, not the individual actions that may contribute to making it up. Living a life – as Socrates maintains throughout the dialogue – is a matter of continuity, not fissure.

But for the activity of *legein*, the sophists declare – and Socrates and his friends seem to agree – that the relation between the sayings and the things is the truth-telling relation. For the sophists, the relation is one of exact equivalence:

if and only if I say, what I say is about the *pragma* in question and *true*.

For Socrates, I suggest, the relation is a teleological one:

if I say, what I say is directed at the *pragma* in question.⁵⁶

Teleology, as I suggested above, requires the possibility of failure: directing, aiming, aspiring, developing towards the best all suppose that aiming and developing may go wrong, may not succeed at all. Notice, then, how the teleology of saying shows up in the arguments about saying at the centre of the dialogue, if we focus on how they account for failure.

The first section of the argument takes the verb of saying to have a direct object.

‘Is it in saying [*legein*] the thing about which the saying [*logos*] is, or not saying it?’

‘Saying it,’ he said.

‘Surely if indeed he says it, then he says none other of the things that are than the thing he says?’

‘So what?’ said Ctesippus.

‘That which he says is some one of the things that are, distinct from the others.’

‘Certainly.’

‘So he who says it says what is?’

‘Yes.’ (283e9-284a5)

⁵⁶ Consider, for example, Socrates’ advice to Cleinias at 275d-e; his interest in past agreements at 280b or 297b; his interest in how the protreptic *logos* (nb 283b2) might be tackled, both by himself (278d-e) and by the sophists (283a). That this assumption is shared by others is brought out by Ctesippus’ anger at being traduced by the argument that he wishes Cleinias dead (283e).

Here 'saying' is analogous to 'hitting': its success condition is hitting the mark, failure is missing it altogether.⁵⁷ Here success is, we might say, 'all-or-nothing' – failure is simply grasping at thin air.

The next section is more complex:

'But he who says what is and the things that are says the truth? So that Dionysodorus, if indeed he says what is, says the truth and in no way gives the lie to anything about you.'
'Yes,' Ctesippus said, 'but the person who says these things does not say the things that are.'
And Euthydemus said, 'The things that are not, surely they are not?'
'They are not.'
'So the things that are not, aren't they things that are nowhere?'
'Nowhere.'
'So is it possible for anyone whosoever to do anything at all in respect of these things that are not, so as to make them be those and to be nowhere?'
'I don't think so,' said Ctesippus. (284a5-284b8)

Here saying is construed as a case of doing and making,⁵⁸ so as an action that has some effect on things ('things' here rendered as relative pronoun). The analogue is causation; its failure condition is failing to have any effect at all. Success here may not be all-or-nothing; after all, causation is complex, and some event may have *some* effect without determining the outcome entirely. Failure, equally, may be less definitive than in the previous argument – a cause may fail when it does not achieve total success, but still have some effect.

The next move is more complex still.

'Well, then: When orators say [speak] before the people, do they do nothing?'
'No, they do something.'
'And if they do something, they make something?'
'Yes.'
'So saying is doing and making?'

⁵⁷ The nominal equivalent is *peri* +genitive; this is not a claim about the intentionality of the *logos* but about its object in these raw terms.

⁵⁸ *prattein* cognate with *pragma*, and *poiein*, which expects there to be a product, 284b6-c2.

He agreed.

'Therefore no-one says what is not, for that would be already to make something and you have decisively agreed that no-one can make what is not. So according to your saying, no-one says falsehoods, but if indeed Dionysodorus says, he says truths and what is.' (284b8-c6)

The discussion of the orators here imports the idea that saying is somehow extended ('make a speech'). As before, saying is treated as a case of doing and making, but here in an expressly practical context, so that saying has an end or purpose. It is therefore an extended activity; and it is contextualised as saying things to others, and as sharing speech and discussion.⁵⁹ Here, then, there are two failure conditions on saying: failure to complete what is said; failure to have the requisite effect with it (failure to win the argument).⁶⁰ Now the failure conditions are complex, and consist in some failure in respect of two relations: the relation between one saying and another; and the relation between one sayer and another. In either case, the saying is contextualised and normative: it can succeed or fail within a wider context, and its normativity (and its failure) is underwritten by the aims and aspirations of the subject who says.

In the next sequence, which is striking and strange to the modern eye, the question of normativity is central:

'By Zeus, Euthydemus,' said Ctesippus, 'he says the things that are in some way, but not as they are.'

'How are you saying, Ctesippus?' said Dionysodorus. 'Are there those who say the things that are as they are disposed?'

'There are, he said – the good people, those who say the truth.'

'Well, then, he said, aren't good things well-disposed, bad things badly disposed?'

He conceded.

'And you say the same, that the good people say things as they are?'

'I agree.'

⁵⁹ Witness the use of the same vocabulary in the frame dialogue, where Ctesippus 'says the same' (agrees) *hômologêsen*, e.g. 284c2.

⁶⁰ This extended kind of saying is picked up here: e.g. 'saying the same' 284c4, taken as a perfective, hence 'decisively agree'; or 'according to your saying', 284c5, a *logos* as the (spoken) grounds for something else which is said or agreed.

‘So then the good say bad things badly, if indeed they say them as they are disposed.’

‘Yes, by Zeus,’ he said, ‘very much so, and bad men too; among whom, if you will take my warning, you should take care not to be, lest the good say you badly. For, be sure that the good say the bad men badly.’ (284c7-e2).

This sequence explores how *legein* may be qualified, especially how it may be said to be done well or badly. It focuses attention, thus, on whether the evaluation is of the object of saying (the bad men), of the saying itself (saying badly), or of the sayer (good men) – and on just how this evaluation fits with the truth. The failure conditions for saying are here lax; but the failure conditions for saying well or badly depend on the disposition of three different things: the object, the saying and the sayer. This allows *legein* to figure as ‘talking about someone’ in the sense of discussing their moral qualities and contributing to their reputation; so the activity of saying, now broad in context, is also rich in moral and evaluative content.

The denial of the possibility of falsehood rests on supposing that saying is exact, so that saying, if there is any, cannot fail (failures are just not events of saying at all). But the development of the argument against falsehood is itself said; and, as it proceeds, it develops the activity of saying as an analogue of acting or doing (*prattein*). Acting or doing are conditioned by context (284a-b), object (284b) and the disposition of the person who carries them out (284d-e). These conditions may be understood as failure conditions; but they signify the failure of a complex activity, not of distinct kinds of act. They do not, therefore, import ambiguity into the language used to describe them – that language needs to be complex, but is not thereby equivocated. Failure is exactly what the exact account of saying denies, as it denies the possibility of falsehood. But as the sophistic account of saying is developed and discussed, it becomes richer and broader, so that in the semantic field of *legein* are included these complex dimensions. The sequence of thought, that is, endorses the suggestion that Socrates’ (or Plato’s) diagnosis of the problem lies, not in the complaint that the verb is equivocated, but in the observation that the verb describes a process that is complex and therefore inexact. For it is contextual (so

inexact) and conative (so normative), and that these two features of it make it liable to fail.

This picture is amplified in the discussion of countersaying, discussed above. Here Socrates revisits his interest in the question of what it is to say well (285d5) and its connection with the emotional content of saying (is Ctesippus annoyed? 285d); he reminds us of the connection between saying and making (285d8); and the entire argument is resolutely phrased in the present (tense and temporal modifiers, 285d-e, notably e5). But now there is more emphasis on the sayer. The sophists deny the relation between the person who says, and the person to whom they say it: countersaying is impossible, because the exact account of truth takes saying the truth to be completed by the saying. The frame argument, contrariwise, provides the suggestion that the present aspect can include both the sayer and hearer (285e3) and turns on the question whether one saying can provide a demonstration of another, to the person who hears (285e5-8). This passage, then, amplifies the failure conditions for saying. Those conditions include, firstly, whether what is said is also heard (the condition of the relation between the sayer and the hearer); and, secondly, whether what is said is grounded in something else that is said (the condition of the relation of accountability between sayings). These conditions in turn pose their challenge to the exact account of truth by supposing that truth is communicable; and by supposing that it may be ordered: there are relations of grounding or accountability within the activity of saying. Throughout this passage, note further, the focus of attention is on the way in which the verbs work: the exact account of saying is here challenged by a rich and ample account, which accommodates context and aspect change, and which allows for the normativity of saying.

Falsehood on this account is possible, therefore, just if we understand the relation between saying and truth in ways that are inexact. In place of the exact notion of truth-saying, thus, Socrates offers us truth-directedness. This inexact notion tells us something not only about the target of the direction (truth, where falsehood is

possible) but also about the person engaged on the direction.⁶¹ That inexactitude will allow saying to be an aspiration towards a body of truths (and so contextualised); and it allows truth to be a proper object of aspiration: we understand truth, on this account, normatively and systematically. It is for this reason that the resolution of the sophistic arguments is to be found in the resolution of aspect change and difference. For the normativity of saying gives an account of how aspect change and development can be held together, and not disintegrated in the sophistic mode.

This truth-directedness has further features which amplify both its logical complexity and its normativity. In proffering the arguments he does, Socrates relies on what the sophists deny:

What we say should be *truth-functional* – liable to falsification, for example, if it implies a countersaying.

So what I say is affected by its relation to other things I say. That may be a requirement, of course, objectively (that truth-functional relations obtain between propositions); but *subjectively*, too: that is to say, it is a requirement on how things are for the subject. If when I speak I aim at the truth, then I may be worried, anxious, lest, for example, what I say turns out to imply a contradiction, or to commit me to an inconsistency. This is a psychological phenomenon which both Socrates and the sophists observe over and over in this dialogue, whatever their diagnosis of it. And it is a phenomenon that is essentially reflective: the psychological affect of unease at a threatening contradiction has the contradiction in its expressed scope. 'I worry that p and not p are inconsistent'. Consequently,

If when I speak I aim at the truth, my speaking may be also *reflective* on how the things I say are (can be) themselves the object of further things I say.

⁶¹ This focus on the person explains the way in which the central sophistic episode about truth is bracketed by two Socratic discussions of virtue and wisdom; the episodes are continuous, if they are understood as an extended discussion of the notion of truth-directedness.

And this is just what happens in the dialogue. The interlocutors obsessively go over and over what they have said and what it implies, and where those implications leave them. This reflectiveness, however, is not merely empty or vain; instead, it works to check and check again the relation between what I say and what I aim at: the truth. Saying, in this account, is extended, continuous and responsive to questions, just because what it is directed at is something complex: a body of truth (like a body of knowledge) rather than just a single claim.

But this reflectiveness has an outcome for the subject, too:

Not only do I try to speak the truth; but I reflect on whether I am doing so, and *commit myself* to the result of that reflection when I speak, or revise what I say (e.g. first at 275d-e).

This reflective commitment is, I suggest, the *subjective or psychological* dimension of aiming at the truth. It is manifested in a running theme of the dialogue: the responses of individual speakers to what is said. They may agree, disagree, or sometimes even fall silent; but, throughout, the dialogue *itself* ensures that what they say is interconnected, reflective and, on the part of Socrates and his friends, committed (and if it is, countersaying *is* possible).

In that case, it seems that the structure of *saying*, on Socrates' account, echoes the structure of his account of *learning*, and the structure of *doing* too: all are (what I called) endeavours, engaging both an aim (knowledge, the truth) and an agent (the speaker, the learner), which jointly constrain the process. This structure is teleological (compare, for example, Crito's astonishment at what Cleinias may or may not have said, 291e; or the complex discussion of saying, meaning (*noein*) and utterance (*rhêma*) at 287a-e). In the case of learning, the end is knowledge; in the case of *practising* the end is faring well; in case of saying, the end is truth – where truth is understood as the analogue of knowledge or understanding or wisdom: as the body of truth, rather than the odd chopped lump. In all these cases I may try (described in an imperfective aspect), succeed (perfective) or equally fail (this can be both imperfective and perfective). When I fail, even if I fail to reach the end of the

process, the imperfective aspect still allows – what the sophists deny – that the verb can describe what I was doing. The normativity of saying, thus, is complex; it allows for trying and failing, for agreeing and disagreeing, and for both first order sayings and a reflective dimension, sayings about sayings. And it accounts, I think, for the many translations of *logos*: all of which fall on some teleological continuum such as this (consider: ‘word’; ‘statement’; ‘account’; ‘speech’; ‘argument’). If this account of *logos* is on offer here, it captures the linguistic phenomena without equivocation.

9 Defending the self-refutations

Does it also do what he needs it to do? On this account is self-refutation possible? In the dialogue as a whole, if I am right, we are offered two accounts of what a *logos* is.

- The first is exact – sophistic chopped *logos* – and supposes that all *logoi* are as some may be: simply a one-to-one relation between what is said and what it is about.
- The second, conversely, is inexact, both loose and normative: Socratic talk, which allows that one *logos* may be related to another and subject to the speaker’s reflective commitment, aiming at the body of truth. Here the explanatory priority is to be found in the activity, in the state and the aims of the agent, even when those aims are realised in the best case by truths which are properly integrated into some kind of consistent body.

The sophistic view, chopped *logos*, can block self-refutation by denying that there are any relations, reflective or otherwise, between *logoi*. But the Socratic version of *logos* – Socratic *legein* – allows the self-refutation to go through by legitimating the reflective relations between *logoi*; and by allowing that we can say things that are false without falling silent. Normativity allows for failure.

This, it seems, gives us something like a formal resolution of one limb of Socrates’ Problem: on this account, the self-refutation he urges is not equivocated, but goes through on the reflective, teleological account of *logos* he offers. The other limb,

however, remains: how can he convince the sophists – or, failing them, his audience – that the normative account of saying is to be preferred?

The dialectical situation seems still to be at stand-off; but the ethical situation may not be. Recall, first, that there are in fact two distinct self-refutations: in the first (at 286c and 288a) it is the *logos* that overturns itself; in the second (at it is the *sophists* who do. Why might this be significant?

Socrates supposes that there are normative constraints on saying. This is not just about getting the rules of the saying game right – but about why we *should* get them right. This question is not self-contained, not a question that can be answered by appeal to principles of logic, or of language: for it (like the sophists' challenge to Socrates) asks about the basis of those very principles.

One tale to be told here might be simply that, while I can make mistakes, the truth *works* (I get to Larissa, I produce an edible cake, a valid argument, a noble action). But this pragmatic teleology may be no better than the opportunism of the sophists (whose universal truth, after all, can give you a successful plea of alibi in court). And it doesn't tell us much about what I described earlier as a subjective dimension: that speaking involves *reflective commitment*. This demands a broader account than mere pragmatism, an account about the *endeavour*, about how we might wish to spend our lives, how to govern, guide and make consistent what we say and do. Socrates has a big story to tell here – for which this paper is too short – but in part we all know what it is: Socrates insists that knowledge is somehow the sovereign good, both the source and the pinnacle of the goodness of all ethical endeavour. But to explain our lives in terms of this end must be, or must aspire to be, reflective; having an end that is broader than the piecemeal deliverances of prudence requires us to check what we do and what we say; to check, further, what we say about what we do and about what we say; and to have a careful account to be given of how our commitments hang together. If, that is to say, teleology is to be understood as a broad account of a life (not a narrow account of some individual action) it cannot

dispense with reflection. That reflection, I take it, should be continuous. If it is done by conversation and talk, and if that conversation and talk is not to be subject to the sophists' objections, it must be itself understood on a continuum, imperfectly, rather than as a set of perfected acts, one after the other. But such an account is not only inimical to the sophists, it is unavailable to them. For the sophists deny connections between what we say and anything else at all; their philosophical logic comes piecemeal.

Is what they say, then, self-refuting? There is a strict sense in which it is not: they could always choose chopped *logos*. But there is a broad sense in which what their principles refute is not those principles, but their exponents: they are not self-refuting, but refuters of the self (leave on one side what kind of metaphysics this may buy into – my point is that it buys into the ethical subject, rather than merely the propositions she spouts).

This, then, goes to the question of just how the stand-off between Socrates and the sophists is to be resolved. It is often thought that this dialogue – as so many others – attacks Plato's opponents by *representing* them as somehow naughty, or bad-tempered, or stupid, or arrogant, or just plain bad (think of them – not only Euthydemus and Dionysodorus but also Alcibiades, Callicles, Euthyphro, Critias); by representing his target as naïve and impressionable (Cleinias, Charmides, Adeimantus, Theaetetus); and his hero as – just – heroic (Socrates, of course – whatever we should say of the Eleatic Stranger, or Timaeus, for that matter). Matters seem to me to be a bit more complicated than this; and Dionysodorus and Euthydemus provide a clear example. For they are not straightforward villains; not just (or not even) bad men. Instead, I suggest, they are bad *at being men*; bad at integrating their lives, bad at having the kinds of commitment that make up intellectual and moral endeavour.⁶² It is not how they are represented, the character they seem to have, that is at issue here: but how they can be represented at all. If we

⁶² Hence, they are new-fangled, *kainoi*, 271b.

are to choose between the life of reflection and the unreflective way of sophistry, is there any choice at all?⁶³

⁶³ As always, I have incurred many debts in writing this paper: I would like to thank everyone whom I have bored with the *Euthydemus* over the last years; and Michael Sharp for his patience in waiting for what should be a longer discussion of the dialogue.. I should like especially to thank Joachim Aufderheide, Peter Baumann, Dom Bailey, Charles Brittain, Tim Clarke, Nick Denyer, Gail Fine, Verity Harte, Fiona Leigh, Nils Kurbis, David Sedley and Raphael Woolf; I also owe a great debt to the students with whom I have discussed the dialogue – notably Merrick Anderson, Ian Campbell, Mike Coxhead, Saloni de Souza, Marta Heckel and Daniel Vazquez. [Note: this paper was completed in 2015, and I have left it, including its acknowledgements, as it was sent to the commentators then, apart from some minor corrections. I have incurred many further debts in thinking about the *Euthydemus* since, which I shall acknowledge in the appropriate place.]

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