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Reflection Paper 1 of 2: Plato vs the Sophists  
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### **Summary of the Debate**

Plato argued that the sophistic methods of finding justice were inadequate and would lead to an immoral society. The Sophists sought to find justice by examining both sides of an argument (dissoi logoi), allowing them to understand the argument from both points of view (Herrick, p.37). The Sophists claimed to empower people through the artful use of language. Their verbal techniques for persuasion promised to help people win in court and in life (Herrick, p.36). Plato worried that the methods of the Sophists would lead the city away from laws that were rooted in justice to laws created from beliefs.

In Plato's early and transitional writings, like the *Gorgias*, Plato mounts a case against the Sophists. He accuses the Sophists of using rhetoric to create belief without regard for justice. Herrick says of Socrates view, "The Sophists must, therefore deal only with popular beliefs and opinions about justice. Gorgias agrees that what rhetoricians do in the law courts is to produce belief about justice, and not real knowledge" (Herrick, p.57).

Plato accused the Sophists of inventing a reality and persuading the public that it was true. Herrick quotes Poulakos regarding the Sophists, "the world could always be recreated linguistically" (Herrick, p.40). In other words, Plato accused the Sophists of creating false knowledge instead of uncovering truth.

It is true the Sophists created persuasive speeches for money, and many Sophists moved public opinion of the city (polis) in a direction that favored the person

paying them. If this charge encompassed all the Sophists accomplished, Plato's charge would be justified. Plato, at least in the *Gorgias*, could not see past the potential for sophistic abuse.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates tells Gorgias that rhetoric is like flattery. He explains this by giving examples of counterfeits. Just as makeup is a counterfeit to exercise for making the body look healthy, so, for Plato, rhetoric was a counterfeit to justice (*Gorgias*, 463b). Socrates goes so far as to tell Polus that rhetoric aims for pleasure, ignoring the good (*Gorgias*, 465a). Socrates meant that rhetoric sought the easiest route to persuasion; even if truth, justice and the Athenian way were harmed.

Throughout the works of Plato, he often challenges the idea that the strong should have advantage over the weak. When Gorgias wrote his *Encomium on Helen*, he stated "In fact, it is a universal law, not that stronger should yield to the weaker, but the weaker to the stronger; that the stronger should lead, and the weaker follow" (*Encomium on Helen*, paragraph 4). Gorgias taught that persuasion created strength. Plato feared that rhetorical persuasion would begin to form the basis of law and justice instead of true knowledge (*episteme*). To Plato, the best way to true knowledge was the competing art (*techne*) of dialectic. Socrates tried to show the Sophists did not seek true justice. Herrick quotes Bruce Gronbeck, saying "...for Gorgias, persuasion (*peitho*) was 'an art of deception, which works through the medium of language to massage the psyche'" (Herrick, p.41).

In true political form, Plato was not below mudslinging to diminish the Sophists. Herrick points out that Plato criticized the Sophists for taking money, making exaggerated pedagogical claims and boastfulness (Herrick, p.55). Gorgias, like most of

the Sophists, was a foreigner. Plato surely held this against the Sophists. Greek society called non-Greeks “barbarians.” Plato did not want the laws of Athens shaped by barbarians.

### **Absolutism versus Relativism**

To a great extent, Plato’s contention with the Sophist was a debate between relativism and absolutism. Socrates was always trying to unify the virtues, and the Sophists were always finding plurality in the virtues. Socrates sought to uncover true knowledge. He would use the dialectic to whittle away at an issue until he got to its single definition. This, he called logos. It was pristine knowledge that was true absolutely, regardless of belief. It could not be shaped by words, but it could be revealed through words using dialectic as the vehicle. In contrast, the Sophist Protagoras was famous for saying that “Man is the measure [metron] of all things” (Herrick, p.43). To Protagoras, people determine what is true by testing ideas. This type of truth was in direct contrast to the logos of Plato. Herrick writes, “According to Sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras, truth was not to be found in transcendent sources such as the gods or a Platonic realm of universal forms. Sophists believed that truth emerged from a clash of arguments” (Herrick, p.39).

To argue for the certainty of absolute truth, as Plato did, there must be something greater than man who creates and communicates an absolute truth. Most Sophists were agnostic about the gods. Herrick quotes Susan Jarratt, “the Sophists ‘were skeptical about a divine source of knowledge or value...’” (Herrick, 39). Similarly, Herrick writes, “Protagoras affirmed that the existence of a god or gods was virtually unknowable given the difficulty of the subject and shortness of human life” (Herrick, p. 43). The Sophist

took their moral Zeitgeist from their multicultural experiences, merging Ionian, Macedonian, Corinthian, Spartan and Athenian ideas to form their ideas of truth.

This is where I am torn between Plato and the Sophists. Plato, through Socrates, champions an ideal that I admire deeply. My world view is intricately linked with this ideal. Namely, there is danger in creating belief regardless of truth. This is a lesson I have learned the hard way, especially in my impressionable youth.

My observation is that the average pedestrian can be very gullible. For example, I have a friend who really believes that she must forward to me every chain letter she receives. She feels she will be cursed or rewarded depending on her actions as described in the letter. This was reinforced when her cat became ill after she forgot to forward an email. Apparently, Beelzebub has a devil put aside for cat punishment, all because an email was not dutifully forwarded.

I grew up in the buckle of the Bible belt. I was taught by people of excellent moral character (ethos) that the Bible was literally true. Every word was God-breathed. The Bible was inerrant, evolution was a lie, and the earth was only six-thousand years old. I was taught that women should be submissive to their husbands (1 Peter 3:1-7) because man was the head of the house. In fact, our church taught that women should only wear dresses and never wear pants (even if they are playing sports or working in the garden) because women wearing pants was an abomination to God (Deuteronomy. 22:5). We were told women should not wear jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9-10), and they should not wear makeup like that evil Jezebel did. Makeup was only for seduction (2 Kings 9:30). Women also should not cut their hair, because... well, apparently God just doesn't like women with short hair (1 Corinthians 11:1 -15). I was taught that the Apostle Paul said

of women, "verse 34- women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35- If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians. 14:34-35). Paul was writing to the churches in Corinth, only fifty miles from Athens.

I was reminded of this when Herrick spoke of the Greek writer Democritus (b.460 – d. 370 BCE) who wrote the edict, "It is prohibited to women to plead on behalf of others. And indeed there is reason for the prohibition: lest women mix themselves up in other people's cases, going against the chastity that befits their gender" (Herrick, p.47).

When beliefs are taken from a document believed to be divinely perfect and which cannot change, the beliefs are trapped in the sphere of its absolutism. Morality becomes paralyzed. Millions of women are still affected by the beliefs that are created from the words of the Apostle Paul written 2000-years ago due to absolutist's interpretations. The women who submit to these beliefs often do so because they are persuaded rhetorically, regardless of a higher moral truth (that the emancipation of women is ethically superior to the command of a 2000-year old document). This is the danger about which Socrates warned. This is what tempts me to side with Plato. It is dangerous when beliefs are created regardless of superior moral truth or empirical data. However, this danger is empowered by the absolutism to which Socrates clung. If this were the end of the matter, I could embrace neither Plato nor the Sophists as a model for justice.

Socrates ideal of the logos begins with absolutism. To him, true knowledge existed outside of man (his theory of forms) and justice was established by the gods.

These laws were immutable. It drew a circle around truth, stopping its ability to evolve as the community evolved.

As I grew up, I was persuaded to the beliefs of Christian fundamentalism because I was told that the Bible was inerrant and the source of absolute truth. This is analogous to Plato's absolutism. It was this absolutism that caused Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 – 1902 CE) to say "The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation." - quoted from Free Thought Magazine (Sept. 1896). Elizabeth Stanton was an American feminist and social reformer who paved the way for early woman's rights movements.

This absolutism shows its true colors in Plato's Republic, which was really nothing more than a tyranny. Just as the fundamentalists of my youth forced women to live a certain way (by the power of their defective rhetoric), Plato's interpretations of his absolutism drove him to imagine a city that controlled people. His philosopher king would tell the people what to believe and how to live. For example, his republic told citizens how many children they could have and how much property they could own (Republic, Book 5, 460a). Plato was so convinced that his absolutism should be forced on others that he advocated strict censorship of all literature saying, "The first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction" (Republic, Book 2, 377c). With absolutism and its human interpretation, a person is told what is true. Regardless of our belief, we must be able to shake it from time to time to make sure it still seems true.

At the beginning of Herrick's book, he asks the reader to consider whether rhetoric is manipulative, neutral or deceptive (Herrick, p.3). Rhetoric is as neutral as a knife. It is just a tool that can be used for good or bad. Plato points out the misuse of a

good tool, and says that we should dismiss it because of its potential for abuse. The Sophists may have used rhetoric to earn a living, but history appreciated their contribution. Herrick quotes Janet Sutton, “Many of the ancients...paint a brilliant picture of Protagoras, Lysias, Antiphon, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus as ambassadors and statesmen, as superb stylists of poetic expression and orators of civic discourse, and as practical educators and intimates of political leaders” (Herrick, p.40). If the Sophists consistently used their power of persuasion to produce unfair results, I believe History would have taken notice. The Sophists provided the tools for the average citizen to defend himself (and sometimes herself), to participate in politics and to discover what he or she believed to be true. It placed rhetorical education within reach of the average middle class, and even gave some opportunities to women (Herrick, p. 39).

I do not mean to diminish Plato’s contribution to rhetoric and philosophy. Plato was often the first to ask the questions that others would spend their lives trying to answer. However, Plato is most renowned for asking questions, and the Sophists were renowned for hammering out answers. The debate is whether Plato’s view of justice negates the sophistic approach to finding justice. While I appreciate Plato’s insistence on intellectual integrity, Plato fails to prove that the Sophists cannot argue with equal ethical veracity. Therefore, if it is Plato’s way or the highway, I am thumbing a ride with the Sophists.

**Footnote:** For scholars who defend absolutism because of religious ideas, relativism is often defined as a wishy-washy view of truth. People who define relativism this way might say, "One person believes it is okay to lie, another does not- but all opinions are equally valid because it is all relative." I disagree with this definition of relativism, and it is not the type of relativism to which I believe the Sophists subscribed. Relativism does not proclaim all views equally valid. Regardless of their epistemology, Sophists defined truth through a clash of arguments. Something was true or right depending on its relationship to the event or item. For example, someone might ask, "Is it wrong to lie that Anne is upstairs?" The relativist asks, "It depends. Can you give me more information?" More Information: "Is it wrong to lie that Anne Frank is in the attic. The Nazis at the door want to know."