Sophistic appearances[1]

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The *Sophist* begins with the need to distinguish the philosopher from two other characters with whom he appears to be identical: the statesman and the sophist (216c). While the philosopher's appearance becomes the topic of the *Statesman*, the sophist is the subject of the eponymous dialogue. After six failed attempts to define the essence of the sophist (221c–31b), the Eleatic Visitor and his interlocutor, young Theaetetus, reach an impasse (in ἀπορία) about what the sophist is (231b9–c2). They then decide to begin a new attempt (232b), starting from the observation that the sophist characteristically engages in controversies (ἀντιλέγειν), (b6; cf. 225a–6a, 231e1–2). In fact, he has the ability to engage in controversies about every subject, which makes him seem 'wiser than everyone else about everything' (233b1–2; cf. 233c1–2, 233c6), without actually being so (233c8). By analogy with a painter, who makes pictorial representations, the sophist uses words (λόγοι): he makes 'spoken images of everything' (εἴδωλα λεγόμενα περὶ πάντων, 234c6) (cf. 240a1–2). But since he does so without having any real knowledge about these things, he is 'a kind of cheat who imitates [or represents] real things' (τῶν γοήτων ἐστί τις, μιμητὴς ὢν τῶν ὄντων, 235a1) and 'makes our souls believe what is false' (240d2–3).[2] What can justify this harsh characterization?

The starting-point is a distinction between the production of originals or the things themselves (τὰ αὐτά), and the production of images or representations (εἴδωλα), i.e. things that are similar to the originals (ὁμοιωμάτων τινῶν) (235d–36c). These representations are similar to the originals or, as I suggest here, they are appearances of them: they make the originals appear. But the category of representation is then subdivided into two species: likenesses (εἰκόνα) – their production is called εἰκαστικὴ τέχνη (235d6–36b3) and apparitions (φαντάσματα), which are produced by an εἰκαστικὴ τέχνη (236b4–c5). Since the sophist is defined as a species of apparition-maker, it is important to note the difference between these two kinds of representation, but unfortunately this is neither easy nor uncontroversial.[3]

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1 One of Øivind Andersen's main interests is rhetoric and its history, especially in Antiquity. The sophists are crucial in this history, and Plato's dialogue devoted to this topic is therefore an appropriate subject for my contribution to this *Festschrift*.

2 Translations are from White 1993, sometimes emended.

3 I follow Notomi's reading; see Notomi 1999, 147–55. The choice of 'image' for εἴδωλον and 'apparition' for φάντασμα is due to Notomi; White 1993 has 'copy' and 'appearance'.

Likenesses and apparitions are distinguished by two criteria: (1) their inherent correctness and (2) the viewpoint from which they are apprehended. A likeness is defined as *correct* if it keeps 'to the proportions of length, breadth, and depth of the model, and also by keeping to the appropriate colours of its parts' (235d7–e2). The likeness is correct because it represents the properties of the model as they are, independently of how they are seen by (or appear to) the addressee of the representation. An apparition, on the other hand, will *distort* the properties of the original; the example given is a large sculpture whose upper parts are in fact larger than that of their model. The reason for this intentional distortion is that in this way the sculpture will in fact better represent its model to the intended spectators, since they will see it from a low viewpoint. Thus the distortion is motivated by the desire to make the model appear the way it is. But, and this is the problem, while a likeness is in itself correct, an apparition is not – the latter depends on the spectator being appropriately situated (at a good viewpoint; cf. 236b4–5) for it to truly represent, and it is thus held hostage to his competence and understanding.[4]

To represent something is to make it appear, i.e. to make it apparent or (somehow) present. Something can be represented, i.e. made to appear to somebody, either by using pictures or by using 'speeches' (*logoi*): we have pictorial and logical representation. A pictorial representation will represent by being *perceptually* like the original being represented: a picture of my car looks like my car. But a logical representation does not represent in virtue of this kind of similarity: a proposition does not look like what it represents. (The proposition 'Theaetetus sits' does not look like the sitting Theaetetus, or Theaetetus' sitting.) Nevertheless, we may say that the logical representation (the proposition) is *structurally* like what it represents in that its form, '*a* is *F*', is somehow isomorphic to the property *F*'s inhering in the object *a*. The person asserting this proposition (the speaker) can see, i.e. understand or intellectually grasp, this isomorphism, and so can the addressee of this assertion. When the speaker produces his proposition, he aims to make the fact (*F*'s inhering in *a*, or *a*'s being *F*) apparent (intellectually visible) to the addressee, and he can do this only if the latter is able to understand it ('see the point'). Moreover, he is able to do so in virtue of his mastery of the concept of *F*, and of representing to himself *a*'s falling under this concept. This kind of representation is not imagistic/pictorial, but it is a matter of seeing or grasping structural similarities nevertheless (the visual metaphors are neither arbitrary nor misleading here), and it is this common feature of grasping similarities that justifies treating pictorial and logical representation as two species of the same genus.

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4 Cf. Notomi 1999, 149–50.

Even with these distinctions in hand, however, there is unclarity about the sophist (236c9–d4), and the main reason for this is that all this talk of representation, likeness, and apparition raises deep problems about appearance, not being and being, and false speech (236d9–7a4). It is precisely these difficulties that a sophist would latch onto if he were presented with this argument (239c9–d5). These problems therefore occupy the interlocutors for a good 20 Stephanus pages (241b–64b), before they return to the account of the sophist as a maker of apparitions (264c–8e). But however important these topics may be in their own right, they are taken up in this dialogue because this is necessary in order to determine the nature of the sophist and meet his counterattack against the proposed definition of him as a maker of apparitions.

The problem is as follows. Any statement is saying something. A false statement is taken to be saying that which is not. But that which is not is nothing, i.e. not something. So a false statement seems to be saying nothing, i.e. not to be a statement at all, i.e. to be impossible. And if representations (images, likenesses, and apparitions) are false or illusory, they too will seem to be representing nothing, i.e. not be representations, i.e. be impossible.

The solution to this puzzle is controversial, but I follow Michael Frede and assume the following.[5] For the purpose of this discussion, we can take a statement to have the form '*a* is *F*'. Here '*a*' denotes the subject of the statement (the object talked about), and '*F*' (the predicate term) the property ascribed to the subject. If the statement is true, then *F* is 'about [περί]', or 'with reference to', *a* – *F* is present in, or appears in, *a* – and this is what the statement says. This means that *F*'s presence/appearance in *a* is made apparent by the statement; the statement is a true appearance of an appearance. However, if the statement is false, then *F* is not about/with reference to *a* – *F* is not present in, it does not appear in, *a* – although this is what the statement says. Thus, the statement appears to be making the presence/appearance of *F* in *a* apparent, without actually doing so; the false statement is a 'mere appearance', i.e. a false appearance of an appearance.

How can this solve the problem of defining the sophist? The sophist, remember, was defined as a maker of 'spoken images' or 'apparitions', without a real knowledge of what he makes appear. However, when the interlocutors discuss the problem of false statement – or, rather, false *logos* – the examples they use are simple, individual propositions: 'Theaetetus is sitting' and 'Theaetetus is flying'. Thus the question is as follows: How can a philosophical analysis of these statements, and in particular of the latter, false statement, help us understand what we want to understand, namely what a sophist is?

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5 Frede 1992, section III, esp. 417–23.

The activity of the sophists is essentially tied to rhetoric, i.e. to public speaking in the assembly or court of law, or at special public events such as funerals. This context is what gives us the three rhetorical genres that Aristotle identifies in the *Rhetoric* (I 3). The sophists are either orators themselves or they write speeches for orators, as well as educating them and giving them advice. So their *logoi* are speeches, orations before an audience, and their purpose is to persuade the audience that their case is the right one, that their claim is true or justified. But if that is so, it seems that the problem with the sophist is not that he presents us with straightforward lies, i.e. individual propositions that he knows are false – that would be too risky as a rhetorical strategy. Rather, the problem is that he can speak falsely without uttering a single false proposition. The falsity of his activity is therefore a property of his speech (*logos*) as a whole, not of any individual proposition produced as part of this speech. However, this raises the following questions: What is the relation between such a *logos*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the *logoi* (statements) discussed in the digression on non-being and false statement? And how can an analysis of false statements help us understand the nature of untruthful or deceitful speeches?

Perhaps a place to start is with a very basic assumption about language or *logos* that seems to underlie the entire discussion, and, in fact, the origins of philosophy with the Greeks. On this assumption, the purpose of language – i.e. assertive speech, *logos* – is to make reality apparent to us, so that we can represent reality to each other by means of it. Thus, the function (task, *ergon*) of *logos* is practical: we want to tell (or show) each other (and ourselves) how things are so that we can conduct ourselves accordingly; and true *logos* represents reality as it is. This can be done in simple cases, in the form of individual propositions that are true or false, but it can also be done in complex cases such as when we describe a house, tell a story about what happened, summarize the contents of a book or a movie, explain what causes water to freeze, or argue why a certain course of action is better than the alternative because it is more prudent or just. All these cases are examples of *logos*, and they represent – or present themselves as representing – reality: the way things are. And they do so in order to affect us: to make us act in certain ways, to make us take up certain attitudes towards certain people, or to make us understand a certain part of reality. But the difference between these complex cases of *logos* and the simple cases exemplified in the dialogue is that the relation between the *logos* and the way things are, the relation of representation, is much more subtle in the complex cases than in the simple cases. A single statement or proposition is true or false, period, but a speech can be more, or less, adequate, truthful, objective, balanced, informative, reliable, trustworthy, etc.

We may get a better handle on this point if we imagine that the sophists' *logos* can be condensed, as it were, into a single proposition. What kind of proposition could this be? Here are a few possibilities: (1) 'We ought to sack Troy'; (2) 'Those who fell at Marathon were heroes'; (3) 'Raising the taxes is unjust'; (4) 'Euaeon is guilty of murder'. These seem to be representative examples of statements that an orator might make in one of the Classical rhetorical contexts, and they can all be schematized in the same way as the examples used in the *Sophist*, in the form '*a* is *F*'. If so, even a rhetorical *logos* can be seen as a matter of subsuming an object under a concept, or of ascribing a property, conceptualized by the predicate-term, to the object. In the simple cases discussed in the *Sophist*, this ascription is a straightforward matter: Theaetetus is either sitting or he is not, and he is either flying or he is not; the concepts of sitting and flying are easy to apply. But in the rhetorical cases we imagined, the relevant concepts ('ought to be sacked', 'hero', 'unjust' (or 'just'), 'murder') are not so easily applied. A concept is a rule, containing criteria for its application to all cases belonging to a certain class. Sometimes, as in the case of sitting or flying, these criteria are more, or less, straightforward. But in other cases they are not, and then the concept can only be applied after a rather elaborate process involving the survey of a large amount of relevant information that must be interpreted before one can reach a balanced overall judgement. The conclusion may be stated in the simple form '*a* is *F*', as in the examples given, but the statement expressing this conclusion may perhaps better be regarded as a condensed summary of the entire judgement, rather than as the judgement itself – it is the case in a nutshell, as it were.

So how can this line of reasoning justify the proposed account of the sophist as a maker of 'apparitions' or of 'spoken images of everything'? The sophist's *logoi* appear – are made by him to appear – to represent the way things are, in particular in ethical, legal, and political contexts. That is, we could say, they appear to be representing the way certain properties, picked out by our concepts (in particular ethical, legal, and political properties), are present in, or appear in, the cases he is discussing; but this appearance of representing this presence is false, deceptive. Thus, the sophist's speech – (1) what he *says* – is deceptive: it merely appears to be true. But that also means that (2) what he *does* in presenting these speeches appears to be to speak truly; and that (3) what he *is*, insofar as he engages in this activity, appears to be wise.[6] So the sophist's deceptive appearance is threefold, and he is in every way an 'apparition-maker' and 'a kind of cheat who imitates [or represents] real things'.

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6   Cf. Notomi 1999, 120f, 134.

References

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