

Plato's Definition(s) of Sophistry

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There is something about the *Sophist* that has always bothered me. Why are there so many definitions of sophistry in the dialogue?¹ Here is the problem: either all the definitions are right, or all of them are wrong, or some of them are right and some of them are wrong. But it cannot be that *all* the definitions are right, because, after all, they are all *different*. It cannot be that sophistry is *nothing other than* the private hunting of rich, prominent young men by persuasion (*Soph.* 223b) *and* that it is *nothing other than* the wholesaling or retailing of one's own or others' knowledge of virtue (224c-e) and that it is *nothing other than* the money-making branch of expertise in debating (226a), and so on. It seems pretty clear that if sophistry is appropriately defined as one of these *technai*, then it cannot be appropriately defined as any of the others. Besides, the whole sweep of the dialogue suggests that we are moving from definitions that are in some way inadequate to the one correct definition at the very end, according to which sophistry is *none other than* a kind of imitation (μιμητική) in the form of short questions and answers accompanied by insincere belief. And this means that it cannot be that all the definitions are wrong, either. Because, after all, the last one is right.² But if the last definition is right and all the rest are wrong, then why does Plato give us all those faulty definitions?

I want to consider one influential answer to what we might call 'the puzzle of the many definitions', criticize it, and then provide an answer of my own. The answer I am going to criticize appears most clearly in the work of Kenneth Sayre, but there are echoes of it in the work of Mary Louise Gill and Noburu Notomi. It is, I think, a very clever and compelling answer, but, as I will argue, it is mistaken.

I start with a brief discussion of the way in which Plato goes about constructing the various definitions of sophistry in the dialogue, what has come to be known as 'the method of collection and division'. Sayre himself captures the nature of this method well. The main idea is that collection involves bringing a number of different things into a unity, by finding some necessary feature that they all have in common. So, for example, we can consider learning (τὸ μαθηματικόν), recognition (τὸ τῆς γνώσεως), commerce (τὸ χρηματιστικόν), combat (τὸ ἀγωνιστικόν), and hunting (τὸ θηρευτικόν) together, and when we do this, we see that

¹ A similar question arises for the *Statesman*, but that is a topic for another occasion.

² Here I agree with Cornford 1935 and Notomi 1999, as against Cherniss 1944, Ryle 1966, and Brown 2008.

all of these kinds of activities 'take things that are or have come into being ...[taking] possession of some of them with words and actions, and [keeping] other things from being taken possession of' (219b5-7). By virtue of this necessary common feature, we can place all of these kinds under the umbrella of more general kind, namely, the category of acquisitive expertise (τέχνη κερτική). Collection, so construed, is then supposed to prepare the way for division: the next step in the dialectical process. As Sayre 2007, 214 describes the method, kinds are classes of particulars that get divided into sub-classes *according to forms* (κατὰ εἶδη, or κατὰ γένη), that is, in such a way that 'all the members of given sub-class are instances of the same general Form'.

A cursory examination of the *Sophist* clearly indicates that every one of the seven definitions of sophistry constructed therein is the direct outcome of an application of the method of collection and division, indeed of something approaching the method of *dichotomous* division, in which every class (other than the classes at the terminal nodes of the relevant tree) is divided into exactly two sub-classes.

Thus far, Sayre and I agree. But Sayre takes a further step, and it is by taking this extra step that he thinks he can solve the puzzle of the many definitions. The extra step is to apply the method of collection to the kinds of expertise that correspond to the first five definitions of sophistry. When this is done, it becomes clear, says Sayre, that all five forms of expertise have one main necessary feature in common: they are all different kinds of *productive* expertise, indeed the kind of expertise that is characteristic of sophistry according to the seventh and final definition of it. Sayre 2007, 39 says:

Despite their failure to isolate a set of features that apply to sophistry in general, each of [the first five] definitions picks out a particular branch of sophistry. The branches thus characterized serve as a set of examples among which a common property (production) is then identified that provides a beginning for the successful definition of sophistry that ensues.³

According to this picture, the first five definitions are inadequate because they do not capture the *essence* of sophistry, the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that characterize all and only forms of sophistry. For example the fifth definition seems to capture the kind of sophistry Plato describes as *eristic* and which may have been used by the members of the Megarian school, while other definitions seem to capture the salesmanship of Gorgias or Hippias, and yet another the hunting of Protagoras. On this score, Sayre's view is echoed by Gill 2006, 10:

The first five [definitions] specify some feature of the sophist's activity that enables one to pick out a sophist, but none of those divisions captures his essence... Once we finally uncover the

essence of a sophist on the seventh round, we see that the first five divisions specified him by accidental features or by some feature that follows from his essence. They failed to specify what it is that makes someone a sophist (as opposed to, say, a lyric poet or a speech writer) and what it is about his activity that makes him so seductive and dangerous. Division of the sophist repeatedly misses the essence of the target until the Stranger collects the first six definitions...and then observes that the appearance of manifold expertise is somehow unsound... The problem lies with us and our experience. We are missing that feature of the sophist that links the appearances together: his *essence*.⁴

And Gill's interpretation is itself influenced by Notomi 1999. Notomi argues that one of the main functions of the *Sophist* is to distinguish between genuine and false appearances (1999, 94). The sophist appears in many guises, indeed as many as are captured by the first six definitions. The sixth definition is problematic inasmuch as its characterization of the sophist appears to capture the activity of Socrates, whom Plato would surely not wish to classify as a sophist.⁵ At the end of the dialogue, claims Notomi, the reader is brought to see that the sixth definition is 'false' while the first five are 'genuine'. As he puts the point: 'the sophist of [the sixth definition], though like a sophist, is *not* a sophist' (1999, 275) but rather, a philosopher (1999, 80). The individuals characterized by the first five definitions, by contrast, *are* sophists, and indeed 'the nature of the sophist's art' lies in the 'variety of activities' described in those definitions (1999, 81). The function of the seventh and final definition, then, is to grasp the sophist's art 'in its unity', by isolating 'the *essential* point of his art which makes that variety [of activities] possible' (1999, 81).

It is an interesting corollary of this interpretation, and indeed one on which it strongly depends, that the first five definitions accurately describe five types of sophistry. As Sayre and Gill see it, the inadequacy of these definitions does not hinge on their *falsity*, but rather on their *contingency*, their inability to capture the *essence* of sophistry. The important point, on their view, is that *some but not all* sophists are hired hunters of rich young men, that *some but not all* sophists are wholesalers of their own intellectual wares, that *some but not all* sophists are retailers of the intellectual wares of others, and so on.

This picture is worth a thousand words. It solves the puzzle of the many definitions by supposing that the first five definitions, though inadequate in themselves, are necessary for the second stage of a two-stage application of the method of collection and division. And this explains why Plato provides us with some definitions that he takes to be *wrong* before providing us with the single

⁴ Gill 2006, which concerns Plato's use of models in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, only touches lightly on the problem of the many definitions. But see Gill 2005, sections 4.1 and 4.2, for further elaboration of the point summarized in the main text.

⁵ For more on this, see Notomi 1999, 64-68.

³ This interpretation echoes Cornford 1935.

definition he takes to be *right*.

Unfortunately, there is one major reason for thinking that the Sayre-Gill-Notomi solution to our puzzle, despite all of its attractive features, is wrong. The major difficulty is that the first five definitions *cannot* in fact capture *any* kind of sophistry. To see this, we need to delve a little more deeply into the nature of the method of division. As Plato both describes it and illustrates it, the method of division involves cutting classes into exclusive and exhaustive sub-classes. By this, I mean that a proper division of class C into C1 and C2 means (i) that no element of C1 is an element of C2 and no element of C2 is an element of C1 (*exclusiveness*) and (ii) that every element of C is an element of C1 or an element of C2 (*exhaustiveness*).⁶

Every case of division, without exception, satisfies these two requirements. When the Stranger begins his investigation into the nature of sophistry by providing a simple paradigm for the application of the method of collection and division, he starts by collecting a variety of different forms of expertise and dividing the class of expertises into two, one type (*productive expertise*) that brings something into being that was not in being before (219b5-6), and one type (*acquisitive expertise*) that takes possession of things that have already come into being (219c5-7). Importantly, the Stranger says (or, at least, implicates) that 'every expertise falls under acquisition or production' (219c11-d1)—this satisfies the *exhaustiveness* requirement, and describes acquisitive expertise as a kind of expertise that does not produce (219c4-5)—this satisfies one part of the *exclusiveness* requirement.⁷

From then on, every division that is part of the paradigmatic definition of angling is both exclusive and exhaustive. Acquisitive expertise is divided, exclusively and exhaustively, into acquisition through exchange and acquisition through actions or words (possession-taking, 219d4-8); possession-taking in turn is divided, exclusively and exhaustively, into the part that is done openly and the part that is done secretly (hunting, 219d12-e1); hunting in turn is divided, exclusively and exhaustively, into the hunting of lifeless things and the hunting of living things (animal-hunting, 219e6-7); animal-hunting is divided, exclusively and exhaustively, into the hunting of animals with feet and the hunting of animals that swim (220a7-10); and so on and so forth. In many, even if not all, of these cases, the exclusive nature of the division is purchased by means of a straightforward contrariety of properties: open vs. secret (219d12-e1), living vs. lifeless (219e6-7), daytime vs. nighttime (220d5-10), and downward from above vs. upward from below (220e2-221a4). Similar instances of contrariety obtain across all the definitions provided by the Stranger: wild vs. tame, public vs. private, within vs. without, short vs. long, expert vs. inexperienced, particular vs. general, like vs. unlike, better vs. worse, inside vs. outside, sincere vs. insincere, and so on.

⁶ The importance of the exclusiveness requirement is stressed by Brown 2008, who uses it to criticize the view in Moravcsik 1973 that each definition in the dialogue provides a correct characterization of sophistry.

⁷ For further discussion of this point, see Brown 2008, 8.

If we take the *exclusive* nature of division seriously, we recognize immediately that since expertise in general divides into productive expertise and acquisitive expertise, no form of productive expertise is acquisitive and no form of acquisitive expertise is productive. Now it is clear that each of the first five forms of expertise characterized by the first five definitions is *acquisitive*: the first concerns the acquisition of young men, and the other four concern the acquisition of money. But the form of expertise characterized by the seventh and final definition, which is clearly taken to be the *correct* definition of sophistry, is *productive*: it involves the production of copies that are themselves appearances, rather than likenesses (266d5-e1). So from the exclusive nature of division, it follows directly that none of the forms of expertise characterized by the first five definitions is a form of genuine sophistry. For example, because the hunting of rich young men is a form of acquisitive expertise, it follows from the fact that no acquisitive expertise is productive that the hunting of rich young men is not a kind of productive expertise, and hence that it is not a kind of sophistry at all.

I would add that it is for a slightly different reason that the form of expertise characterized by the *sixth* definition cannot be a kind of sophistry either. It is commonly thought that the initial division that leads to the sixth definition is totally independent of the initial division that leads to the first five definitions (as well as the seventh). The Stranger begins the process of dividing the class of expertises into two classes, productive expertise and acquisitive expertise. He classifies the first five forms of sophistry as types of acquisitive expertise, and the last form of sophistry as a type of productive expertise. But when it comes to the sixth definition, the Stranger begins, not with the productive/acquisitive dichotomy, but rather with the distinction between separation (*διακριτική*) and combination (*συνκρητική*, 226c),⁸ and ends up defining sophistry as involving the separation of better from worse opinions in the soul, keeping the former and throwing out the later, all by means of elenctic refutation of those who do not know but think they know. The separation/combination distinction is an entirely new principle of division. But it is not, I think, *completely independent* of the distinction between production and acquisition. Consider combination first. Combination involves bringing things together to form something new: combining threads in spinning the warp *produces* the warp, combining threads in spinning the woof *produces* the woof, combining warp and woof by intertwining them *produces* a garment, and so on. Separation too is a kind of production: to card wool, for example, is to produce a set of fibers that are ready for spinning by removing lumps and dust particles; to cleanse the body is to produce health by removing impurities; to cleanse the soul is to produce knowledge of one's ignorance by separating true beliefs from false beliefs. If I am right about this, then the sixth definition of sophistry, like the seventh, isolates a particular kind of productive expertise. The difference between them lies in the fact that while cleans-

⁸ Combination *per se* is not mentioned in the *Sophist*, but it does come up explicitly as the counterpart of separation in the *Statesman*, at 282b.

ing the soul is a kind of production through *separation*, imitation is a kind of production through *combination*. What the imitator does is to combine words in such a way as to produce the appearance of knowing what he is talking about. It is then the exclusiveness of the division between separation and combination that explains why the cleansing of the soul through elenctic refutation is not a kind of sophistry at all.

Even leaving the sixth definition aside, the claims I have made entail that the Sayre-Gill-Notomi solution to the puzzle of the many definitions just will not work. This solution, recall, starts from the assumption that the first five definitions characterize forms or branches of sophistry, and that the inadequacy of these definitions derives *not* from the fact that they *mischaracterize* sophistry, but rather from the fact that they pick out features that are shared by some but not all kinds of sophistry. The point of the seventh and final definition, then, is to bring out the features that are shared by the first five forms of sophistry, and that are therefore essential to sophistry *per se*. But this cannot be. For, as we have seen, the first five definitions do not characterize forms of sophistry at all: the hunting of rich young men, as it turns out, is not a kind of sophistry; nor is the wholesaling or retailing of one's own or others' knowledge of virtue; nor is the money-making branch of expertise in debating. If you collect the expertises isolated by the first five definitions, you will find that they *do* share one major feature in common. But this feature is not the bringing of something into being that was not in being before (such as a likeness or an appearance), but rather the acquisition of something that already exists.

'But look', Sayre, Gill, and Notomi might say, 'is it not just plain as day that the Stranger's listing of all five forms of expertise characterized by the first five definitions at *Sophist* 231d-e constitutes a kind of collection that involves the discovery of a common feature that helps define a new kind that then becomes the target of division?' The answer to this question is a resounding 'yes': there is indeed a collection at 231d-e, and the collection does begin a process that yields the division that leads to the correct definition of sophistry. Sayre, Gill, and Notomi are not wrong about *this*; they are wrong about *the nature of what is collected*.

To see what gets collected, it helps to take a closer look at the text. At 231b10-c1, Theaetetus points out that 'the sophist has appeared in lots of different ways', and at 231c9-d1, the Stranger asks, 'how many different *appearances* has the sophist presented to us?' Later, the Stranger says that 'sophists do *seem*...to know about the things they engage in controversies about' (233c1-2), that 'to their students they *appear* wise about everything...without actually being wise' (233c6-8), and that 'the sophist has now *appeared* as having a kind of belief-knowledge about everything' (233 c10-12). The point of these passages is to underline the fact that the various accounts of sophistry provided in the first five (indeed, six) definitions appropriately describe the way that sophistry *appears* to those who witness the various activities in which sophists *qua* sophists engage. It is clear from these passages that sophistry sometimes *appears* to be this kind of

expertise and sometimes *appears* to be that kind of expertise, without actually *being* either kind of expertise. In other words, sophistry appears to be, without being, the hunting of young men; it appears to be, without being, the wholesaling of one's own intellectual wares; it appears to be, without being, the retailing of the intellectual wares of others; and so on. What the Stranger is busy collecting at 231d-e, then, is not the properties that figure in the first five definitions of sophistry, but rather *the appearing to possess these properties*. What the Stranger wants to know is why sophistry *appears* in so many different guises: what is it about the expertise of sophistry that explains why we take sophists to have a number of different forms of expertise, forms of expertise that they do not actually possess? And the answer, of course, is that sophistry is a kind of expertise *in the production of appearances*: it is *because* the sophist possesses this kind of expertise that he *appears* to be, without actually being, knowledgeable about so many different kinds of things.⁹

Contrary to the Sayre-Gill-Notomi hypothesis, then, there is no relevant difference between the first five definitions of the sophist and the sixth. All six definitions are inadequate, for the same reason, namely, that none is even so much as an accurate rendition of a branch or kind of sophistry. Sophistry is no more the hunting of rich young men than it is the cleansing of souls by means of elenctic refutation; it is no more the wholesaling of one's own intellectual wares than it is the retailing of the intellectual wares of others. This is how sophistry *appears* to those who watch the sophist at work. And the only reason for describing the sixth definition as a capturing of a 'sophistry of noble lineage' (231b8-9) is that it is in the guise of a noble, eminently Socratic activity that sophistry sometimes *appears*.¹⁰

⁹ Unlike Sayre, Gill and Notomi notice that what is missing from the first five definitions of sophistry is a feature 'that links the appearances together' (Gill 2006, 10). Here the interpretations of Gill and Notomi definitely point in the right direction. But, like Sayre, Gill and Notomi claim that the failure of the first five definitions stems not from the fact that they *mischaracterize* sophistry, but that they characterize sophistry by means of features that are only *accidentally*, rather than *essentially*, true of it. In *this* respect, as I have argued, the interpretations of Gill and Notomi point in the wrong direction.

¹⁰ Notomi 1999, 67 and 274-275 makes much of the fact that the sixth definition is not mentioned when the Stranger restarts his seventh attempt to define sophistry at 265a (see also Gill 2005, section 4.2). As Notomi sees it, the fact that the sixth definition is not mentioned at 265a strongly suggests that Plato thinks of it as different from the first five inasmuch as it presents sophistry under a false guise. But this strikes me as an overreading of 265a. The relevant passage reads as follows:

Stranger: Didn't we begin by dividing expertise into productive and acquisitive?

Theaetetus: Of course.

Stranger: And under the acquisitive part the sophist appeared in hunting, combat, wholesaling, and types of that sort. (265a4-9)

The fact that the activities characteristic of the sixth definition do not appear on the Stranger's list *here* is easily explained by the fact that the Stranger is listing only those definitions of sophistry that fell under the *acquisitive* part of expertise. Given that the sixth definition falls under the part of expertise that involves *separation* (and, as I argued above, quite possibly *production*), it is no surprise that it is not listed at 265a4-9, and no deep interpretive significance should be assigned to its absence.

'But now look', Sayre, Gill, and Notomi might ask (and, I might add, reasonably so), 'what on earth is the *point* of trotting out six flatly wrongheaded definitions of sophistry on the way to providing the correct definition? Why does Plato go to the trouble of providing us with *completely mistaken* definitions, if the whole point of the enterprise is to come up with the single *correct* definition?' Good question.

My answer to it relies on aspects of the dialogue to which many commentators (including Sayre, Gill, and Notomi) have rightly drawn our attention. The *Sophist* and *Statesman* are known for their applications of the method of collection and division. But this method is not applied in a vacuum. In particular, the method is *always* preceded by, and also guided by, a conspicuous *paradigm*. As Sayre rightly notes, Plato uses the term παράδειγμα in the late dialogues in a specifically *dialectical* sense. A paradigm is a model to be relied on in the use of dialectic. It is supposed to be familiar to the learner, it is supposed to 'share with the thing being learned salient features that are essential to the latter's nature', it should be 'less significant than the primary topic of inquiry', and (in the case of important things) it should be verbal (2007, 80–81).

The Stranger begins his investigation into the nature of sophistry in the *Sophist* by using a definition of the relatively unimportant but familiar expertise of angling (218e ff.) as a paradigm (218d9) for the proper definition of sophistry. Importantly, angling is a kind of *expertise* (a feature that is indeed shared with sophistry, as it is finally defined), but it is also a kind of *acquisitive* expertise. As is well known, this is the paradigm that guides the Stranger's generation of the first five definitions of sophistry. According to the picture I have been painting, though, the definition of angling turns out to be a *poor* paradigm for the definition of sophistry. The main reason for this, of course, is that sophistry is correctly defined as a form of *productive* expertise, rather than as a form of *acquisitive* expertise. As is also well known, the *final* definition of sophistry is guided by a *completely different* paradigm, something akin to a children's birthday party magician. Between the end of the sixth division and the beginning of the seventh division, the Stranger describes an individual who claims 'that by a single kind of expertise he could know...how to make and do everything...[including] you and me and all the other living things, [and also] the sea and earth and heaven and gods and everything else; and furthermore he makes them each quickly and sells them at a low price' (233d–234a). This individual is an illusionist, a magician who, being an 'expert at drawing', 'produces things that have the same names as real things', and thereby fools 'the more mindless young children into thinking that he can actually produce anything he wants to' (234b). The magician, then, is a producer, one who produces *copies* of real things, rather than the real things themselves. And it is this magician who guides the collections and divisions that eventually lead to the final definition of sophistry.

What, then, is the point of starting the dialogue with a number of incorrect definitions? The answer, I think, is that the Stranger is telling Plato's bright eyed Academicians how they should expect the *three-stage* (not two-stage) method of

paradigm-collection-division to work in general, and how the method's failure in lead to success. The three-stage method has this in common with the middle period method of hypothesis. It begins with a hypothesis. The hypothesis is a paradigm, a model that *both* identifies a very general kind in which the kind to be defined falls *and* provides an example of how to go about collecting and dividing to define the relevant kind. Like the method of hypothesis, the three-stage method can go *wrong*. The method of hypothesis goes wrong when mutually contradictory consequences are derived from the initial hypothesis (see *Phaedo* 11d). The three-stage method goes wrong when the initial paradigm leads to definitions that do not apply to (or isolate) the kind one is seeking to define.¹¹ The difference between the two methods is that, whereas the failure of the method of hypothesis requires the philosopher to go back to the drawing board and come up with an entirely new hypothesis *without any further guidance*, it is possible for the failure of the three-stage method to yield dividends. For the faulty definitions that issue from the initial paradigm can help the philosopher identify a better paradigm (as in this case through a collection of appearances), indeed a paradigm that will eventually lead her to the truth.

Now it might be argued against this that paradigms are not well suited to play a methodological role akin to the role played by hypotheses in the method of hypothesis. The reason for this is that while paradigms provide us with some sort of visual and intuitive grasp of the relevant subject matter, the method of hypothesis is logical.¹² But this argument contains a mistake born of confusion about the role that paradigms play in relation to the method of collection and division. It is true, of course, that the method of hypothesis is 'logical', at least in the following sense. Whether a hypothesis is to be kept (at least provisionally) or abandoned depends on its logical consequences: if those consequences are mutually logically inconsistent, then the method recommends abandoning the hypothesis, but if the consequences are mutually logically consistent, then the method recommends keeping the hypothesis. It is also true that the three-stage (paradigm, collection, division) method does not involve the derivation of logical consequences from paradigms. In *this* sense, paradigms and hypotheses differ. But it does not follow from this that the three-stage method is not *logical* in the relevant sense. *For the very proposal of a paradigm for a particular application of the method of collection and division is a hypothesis.* To claim, for example, that the paradigm of angling should guide the definition of sophistry is to hypothesize that sophistry, like the relevant art of angling, is an *acquisitive* art involved in the manufacture of appearances, and that the way to define sophistry is to collect and divide within this larger category in a way that mirrors the collections and divisions involved in the correct definition of angling. What makes this a hypothesis is the fact that it is put forward as a tentative proposal that may be confirmed or

¹¹ I say 'isolate' because the failure of the initial definition of statesmanship in the *Statesman* derives, I think, from the fact that the initial paradigm of the divine shepherd in the *Statesman* applies to more than one kind. But this is by the bye.

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

disconfirmed depending on the acceptability or unacceptability of its results. If the implementation of the three-stage method in such a case yields a definition that is not true to its object, then the hypothesis is disconfirmed; but if the method's implementation yields a definition that *is* true to its object, then the hypothesis is confirmed. The confirming or disconfirming results can be obtained by logical inference. So, for example, one may legitimately infer (logically) that sophistry is not productive from the hypothesis that it is acquisitive, and if it turns out that sophistry *is* a kind of productive knowledge, then the hypothesis that sophistry is a kind of acquisitive art is *logically* disconfirmed. Properly understood, then, the three-stage method *is* logical in exactly the way that the method of hypothesis is logical. And the fact that the use of paradigms may involve intuition and visualization is a difference between the methods that does not *make* a difference.

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