

INTERPRETING PLATO ON SOPHISTIC CLAIMS AND THE PROVENANCE OF THE "SOCRATIC METHOD"

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INTRODUCTION

POPULAR WISDOM refers to a particular pedagogical procedure which employs a series of logically related questions and answers as the "Socratic method." Traditional philosophical studies have understood the bulk of Plato's earlier dialogues to be paradigmatic of this method (also called "elenchus")¹ and have generally taken the conversations therein to be typically illustrative of the work of the historical Socrates.² For all this, real uncertainties remain about the origins of this technique.

The following works will be cited by the author's name only, or, in the case of multiple titles by one author, by the author's name and short titles: N. Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (London 1968); W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 3 (Cambridge 1969) = HGR 3; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 5 (Cambridge 1978) = HGR 5; E. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (London 1957); C. Kahn, "Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?," *CQ* NS 31 (1981) 305-320; G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden 1981) = *Sophists*; G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge 1981) = *Sophistic Movement*; A. Meyer, "Dialectic and Questioning: Socrates and Plato," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1980) 281-289; A. Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985) 1-30; H. D. Rankin, *Sophists, Socratics and Cynics* (London 1983); J. de Romilly, *Les Grands sophistes dans l'Athènes de Périclès* (Paris 1988); G. Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge 1966); H. Sidgwick, "The Sophists," *JP* (1872) 288-307 and (1873) 66-80; C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford 1976); G. Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983) 27-58 = "Socratic Elenchus"; G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca 1991) = *Socrates: Ironist*; P. Woodruff, *Plato: Hippias Major* (Indianapolis 1982).

¹R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*² (Oxford 1953) 7, begins his chapter on the elenchus as follows: "The outstanding method in Plato's earlier dialogues is the Socratic elenchus. 'Elenchus' in the wider sense means examining a person with regard to a statement he has made, by putting to him questions calling for further statements . . ."

²G. Vlastos, "Introduction: The Paradox of Socrates," in *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, N.Y. 1971) 1, describes the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues as a "faithful and imaginative recreation of the historical Socrates." In terms of the elenctic method, this assumption does not change significantly throughout his later works: e.g., Vlastos, "Socratic Elenchus" and Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist*. R. Kraut, "Introduction to the study of Plato," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge 1992) 4, reckons that in the early "works that search for ethical definition" we have "a portrait of the historical Socrates." D. W. Graham, "Socrates and Plato," *Phronesis* 37 (1992) 141-165, argues in part that the existence of philosophical deficiencies is evidence that what we are reading in the early dialogues is an accurate historical picture of Socrates. Ryle (123) summarizes his comments on the Socratic method by stating that "we are warranted in taking it

Modern discussion of the provenance of what we call the Socratic method is nothing new; it arose quite naturally during the Victorian era as one element within the general reconsideration of the sophists which was prompted by the analysis in Grote's *History of Greece*.³ In our own century, the challenge to understand fifth-century sophistic as a philosophical phenomenon, or at least to take Protagoras and company more seriously as thinkers, has intensified the challenge to Socrates' place as originator of the method which bears his name. A typical current account suggests that among the sophists contemporary with or earlier than Socrates a "question-and-answer technique" was one of two commonly utilized "teaching methods"; the other was extended eloquence.⁴ Beginning with such a general account, one important commentator concludes that "we have every reason to attribute to Protagoras" the so-called Socratic method, and "no reason to suppose that this originated with Socrates."⁵

There seems, at first glance, a certain irony in the fact that much modern scholarship finds some of its strongest evidence for a sophistic, pre-Socratic origin for the Socratic method in Plato's dialogues. Was not Plato constantly struggling to set Socrates, in his manner and his method, apart from the sophists? Nevertheless, among the several interesting questions

that the Socratic Method was the method of the real and not only of the Platonic Socrates." And in his comments on the Socratic question, Gulley (23) adds: "This is the aspect of the method which yields the familiar picture of Socrates, presented by Plato and Xenophon, as a person who persistently questions his fellow-citizens . . ." Kahn (305, 317) offers a note of caution when he writes that the "Socrates of the dialogues is an ambiguous figure, at once Plato's historical master and his literary puppet," but he is nevertheless prepared to accept the elenctic format in the early dialogues as "no doubt . . . a genuine conversational practice of the historical Socrates." Of course, the questions posed by Socrates in the early Platonic dialogues may be studied simply as a Platonic problem, without regard to questions of historicity. See, e.g., G. Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (London 1979) 59-96.

³See, e.g., Sidgwick 1872 and 1873. In these articles he is reacting to the conclusions reached by G. Grote in the deservedly famous sixty-seventh chapter of his *History of Greece* 8 (New York 1854) 317-399. A. Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*⁴ (London 1885) 131-133, offers an account similar to that of Sidgwick.

⁴See, e.g., Guthrie, *HGR* 3.42-44; Kerferd, *Sophists* 32-33; and Rankin 15-17.

⁵Kerferd, *Sophists* 34. He is not alone in taking this position. Rankin (154) writes, admittedly with less certainty, that Socrates' "question and answer method of philosophical enquiry may have its proximate origin in Protagoras' *Kataballontes* and *Antilogiai* I find it hard to accept that his [sc. Protagoras'] works on eristic did not involve questions and conversational material." Though Ryle (119), by virtue of the particular thesis he is arguing, distinguishes Socratic method from real "philosophical discussions" and sees the former as mere eristic, "rule-governed concatenations of questions," he nonetheless suggests that "We have good reason to think that he [sc. Socrates] did not invent it [sc. Socratic method] or introduce it into Athens . . ." Ryle (123) adds that, in his opinion, "save for their [sc. Protagoras' and Socrates'] pupils, Protagoras seems more important in the history of dialectic than the real Socrates."

which one might consider within the larger, general investigation concerning the origins of the Socratic elenchus, none seems more crucial than the role assigned to the Platonic treatment of the sophists.⁶ Therefore, in what follows I wish to focus upon what I take to be an unfortunate example of misrepresentation of Plato's description of the methodological claims made by individual sophists. Specifically, I submit that the twin sophistic claims *to answer any question put to them* and *to speak more briefly than anyone else* are misconstrued when taken as evidence for the existence of a Socratic method before Socrates.⁷ Consider the evidence *from Plato*; how does he present the sophistic claims?

TWO SOPHISTIC ADVERTISEMENTS IN PLATO

Characteristic of leading fifth-century sophistry, according to Plato, is the claim to a twofold skill in public speaking. Profession of the ability to answer any question is specifically attributed to both Hippias and Gorgias. In response to a query in the *Hippias Minor*, the former states:⁸

Yes, he may ask, for I would be acting poorly, Eudicus, if I should try to sidestep Socrates' question in the present circumstances, when at every Olympics as I travel from my home in Elis to Olympia for the gathering of the Greeks, I repeatedly exhibit my ability to deliver whichever of my prepared pieces is requested, and to answer whatever question is posed (καὶ ἀποκρινόμενον τῷ βουλομένῳ ὅτι ἂν τις ἐρωτᾷ).⁹ (363c7-d4)

⁶The prominent position given to the Platonic testimony in recent arguments for the sophistic origin of the Socratic method may be conveniently, but not uniquely, illustrated in the case made by Kerferd (*Sophistic Movement* 32) for the "two recognised methods of instruction." Here he cites ten specific passages, of which eight are from Plato. In order of presentation they are: *Dissoi Logoi* 8.1 and 8.13; *Protagoras* 329b1-5 and 334e4-335a3; *Gorgias* 449c1-8 and 461d6-462b3; *Phaedrus* 267a6-b9 (full translation included); and *Protagoras* 334d4-7, 335a6 and b1-2. Whatever the Platonic passages mean for the explanation of the origins of the Socratic method, it is first necessary to offer a reasonable interpretation of them in context, a necessity which is not removed by reference to documents such as the anonymous sophistic orphan *Dissoi Logoi* or the biographical material one finds in such writers as Diogenes Laertius, a late source, often of questionable value.

⁷I have not dealt with the sophistic claim to be able to speak at great length (e.g., *Protagoras* 329b and 334e-335a and 335b). This claim is regularly taken to refer to lengthy rhetorical display, something routinely recognized by commentators as quite obviously distinct from anything Socratic just by virtue of its form. Whether this distinction is quite so obvious and so easily explained as has been suggested by some (e.g., H. Barrett, *The Sophists* [Novato, California 1987] 55-62) is questionable. Nevertheless since this (supposed) sophistic form plays no part in the issue of the origins of the Socratic method, I have chosen not to include it here.

⁸All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁹Anyone seeking to find in Hippias' claim a reference to the continuous give and take of dialectic exchange is confronted with the difficulty felt by Vlastos (*Socrates: Ironist*

A claim to the same skill is made on behalf of Gorgias in two different dialogues. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles prompts Socrates to ask of Gorgias in person any question he might wish:

There is nothing like asking the man himself. For indeed this was one element of his display. In fact, just now he urged any of us present to ask whatever we wanted, and he said he would answer all such questions (ἐκέλευε γοῦν νυνδὴ ἐρωτᾶν ὅτι τις βούλοιοτο τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων, καὶ πρὸς ἅπαντα ἔφη ἀποκρινεῖσθαι). (447c5–8)

And Gorgias himself confirms the accuracy of Callicles' remarks when the former is questioned by Chaerephon.

Tell me, Gorgias, is Callicles here right in saying that you profess to answer whatever question anyone might ask you (ἀποκρίνεσθαι ὅτι ἂν τις σε ἐρωτᾷ)?

He is right, Chaerephon. In fact, I was announcing this very thing just a moment ago, and I might add that no one has asked me a new question for many years now. (447d6–448a3)

And again, in the *Meno*, when poking fun at the philosophical pretensions of Meno and the Thessalians, Socrates recounts the reputation of Gorgias, seemingly from personal knowledge:

And in particular he accustomed you to this habit of fearlessly and confidently answering whatever anyone might ask, just like men of knowledge, indeed just as he offers himself to any Greek who wishes to pose any sort of question, and always has an answer for everyone (ὥσπερ εἰκὸς τοὺς εἰδότας, ἅτε καὶ αὐτὸς παρέχων αὐτὸν ἐρωτᾶν τῶν Ἑλλήνων τῷ βουλομένῳ ὅτι ἂν τις βούληται, καὶ οὐδενὶ ὅφρ οὐκ ἀποκρινόμενος). (70b5–c3)

In these passages, then, Plato recognizes the first element of professed speaking skills among the older sophists: their willingness and alleged ability to respond to any question, an ability which has been interpreted as a claim to excel in a "technique of question and answer."¹⁰

The second element of advertised sophistic prowess takes the form of *βραχυλογία*—"brief speaking," for Gorgias and Protagoras profess to be able to speak on a given subject more briefly than anyone else. It is Gorgias who tells Socrates that he will avoid the longwindedness which he had taught to Polus and

116) upon reading the *Hippias Major*. He described Hippias as "hopelessly inept in dialectical argument," and continued "his answers to the 'What is the *F*?' question are so wild as to be wholly devoid of philosophical interest" Vlastos (*Socrates: Ironist* 116, n. 43) goes on to comment in a note: "One could scarcely imagine less promising answers to the question 'What is that by which all beautiful things are made beautiful?' (288A8–11 *et passim*) than 'a beautiful girl' (287E), 'gold' (289E), and the still more naively parochial one (too long to quote) at 291D–E." Such is Plato's portrayal of the "expert" answerer.

¹⁰So Guthrie (*HGR* 3.42) interprets the invitation to ask any question.

... attempt to answer as briefly as possible (ὥς διὰ βραχυτάτων). And in fact this is, again, one of my claims, that nobody can say the same things as briefly as I (ἐν βραχυτέροις ἐμοῦ).¹¹ (449b10-c3)

And in the same vein in the *Protagoras*, the eponymous sophist is said to claim a talent for both βραχυλογία and μακρολογία when Socrates opines as follows:

Well, I have heard, I said, that you yourself are able, and that you can teach others, to speak at such a length, if you have a mind, that your speech never ends, or again with such brevity that no one can speak more briefly than you (καὶ αὐὸ βραχεῖα οὕτως ὥστε μηδένα σοῦ ἐν βραχυτέροις εἰπεῖν).¹² (334e4-335a1)

And again,

For you say yourself, and it is said about you, that you are able to speak in a company both at great length and with extreme brevity [καὶ ἐν μακρολογίᾳ καὶ ἐν βραχυλογίᾳ]—for you are a wise man¹³ (335b7-10)

Thus we can see in the Platonic portrayal of the sophists a claim to βραχυλογία, which has suggested to some a connection between the teaching methods of the sophists and Socratic question-and-answer.¹⁴

“ANSWERING ANY QUESTION”

The “art of responding” which is advertised by the sophists in the Platonic dialogues bears at least a *prime facie* resemblance to the Socratic elenchus in so far as some combination of asking questions and giving answers is the formal evidence of each exercise. The resemblance is, however, only *prime facie* since the similarities immediately apparent between sophistic and Socratic practices are only apparent, belying the significant

¹¹One might also compare *Gorgias* 449b-c, as well as 461d-462 where Polus makes the same claim.

¹²Cf. *Protagoras* 328e-329b. It should be pointed out that Protagoras is not credited with *being able to instruct in two methods*—lengthy discourse and short answers, but rather with *being able to function in both ways himself and to teach another to do the same*. Thus when Havelock (211) paraphrases *Protagoras* 334e4-335a1 as “I have been told that you, yes you, Protagoras, can give instruction [my emphasis] in a topic either with a lengthy and indeed inexhaustible discourse or with short statements that out-do anyone else in their brevity,” he gives the reader a wrong idea of the passage. Similarly, when Hippias makes the claim that he too is able to teach the skill of answering briefly (*Hippias Minor* 364d3-6), he does not say that he teaches *by means of* the short-answer method, but only that he teaches others to answer briefly. Nothing specific is said which would help the reader to determine his pedagogical methodology.

¹³It is noteworthy that the same sort of claim is made for Gorgias (and Tisias) at *Phaedrus* 267b, where βραχυλογία is listed among a series of identifiable techniques within the study of rhetoric. The context would suggest that brief speaking was an element of rhetorical style rather than an instructional technique.

¹⁴Kerferd (*Sophistic Movement* 32-33) makes this connection.

differences between the interrogation prompting the sophist and the cross-examination of the Socratic method. Both at the level of the individual question and in terms of the enquiry as a whole, the attempt to find a prototype of the Socratic method stumbles.

Consideration of the sophists' purpose in making the claim "to answer any question" suggests the basic differences between the queries invited by Gorgias and Hippias and cross-examination at the hands of Socrates. The boasts advertised displays (*ἐπιδείξεις*)¹⁵ the purpose of which was the enhancement of a sophist's reputation. Even if he performed in the private houses of prominent citizens—Protagoras in Callias' (*Protagoras* 314e–316a) or Gorgias in Callicles' (*Gorgias* 447b7–8)—the exhibition was nonetheless meant to have advertisement value, and to attract attention to the practitioner.¹⁶ In short, the epideictic display of the sophist is portrayed by Plato primarily as a public-relations exercise, not as a teaching method.

To the untrained eye of the average fifth-century Athenian the sophist's invitation to any and all questions appeared to put his knowledge to the test with each new question. Receiving the inquiry, this travelling teacher would bring to bear upon the suggested dilemma the vast powers of his intellect and the infinite store of his knowledge. But sitting, as the reader does, beside Plato, one sees the author's intent to portray the sophist as one who adapts previously prepared material to fit the moment, a fact which seems obvious in light of sophistic claims to be able to teach the "technique" of answering.¹⁷ What is elicited from any sophist when he answers is nothing more than a rehearsal of established material, perhaps repackaged in a

¹⁵E.g., *Gorgias* 447c3, 6; *Hippias Major* 282b7, c5, and *Hippias Minor* 363d2. Since Plato labels *βραχυλογία* an *ἐπίδειξις* (*Gorgias* 449c4), it is not exactly correct to give the impression, as Kerferd (*Sophistic Movement* 28–29) does, that the *ἐπίδειξις* was "normally a single lecture," a speech in the sense of a complete oration of some length. It would be more accurate to say simply that the epideixis is a "public display" of any one of a number of different types, and to leave the options open. But even with this advice precision in the use of vocabulary continues to be a difficulty. Guthrie (*HGR* 3.41–42), for example, reckoned that "The Sophists gave their instruction either to small circles or seminars or in public lectures or 'displays' (*epideixeis*)." Such displays took the form either of inviting questions from the audience or rehearsal of "continuous eloquence on a prepared theme and from a written text." By this analysis he divides the small group seminar from the epideictic use of question-and-answer, but does not distinguish between epideictic and teaching.

¹⁶At least that is the explicit reason which Plato relates, in a rather heavy-handed way, in *Protagoras* 317c–d through the mouth of Socrates.

¹⁷The ability to teach sophistic skills is claimed at *Meno* 70b–c and at *Gorgias* 449c–d by Gorgias, and at *Hippias Minor* 364d by Hippias. The existence of a teachable technique presupposes some sort of index of available material upon which to draw in responding, or perhaps even a series of set pieces. It should be pointed out that Plato never stipulates whether the person demonstrating the ability to answer any question will give a brief or a lengthy reply. *Protagoras* 329a–b seems to suggest that either type of answer is allowable and will suffice in the appropriate circumstances.

new and titillating way, but not fundamentally innovative, nor profoundly revealing.¹⁸ Indeed, Hippias' answers, according to Plato, amount to nothing more than sarcastic ridicule of the enquirer—not dissimilar, it would seem, to the quips used by a comedian in a night club to silence a heckler.¹⁹ A "successful" answer, for Hippias, say, was meant to achieve nothing more than the building up of the sophist's prestige in the eyes of his audience.²⁰

Conversely, Socrates' questions are not meant to be mere excuses for display; they are actually intended to push beyond the preparedness of his

¹⁸Hippias confesses that an answer need not be true, it need only be "good enough" to get by the questioner (*Hippias Major* 298b). Socrates responds as we would expect by admitting he would be ashamed to "pretend to be saying something when he says nothing"—προσποιούμενος τι λέγειν μηδὲν λέγων, 298b8–9.

¹⁹Woodruff (124) writes: "From his performance as Plato presents it we may suppose that his intention in answering questions was mainly to silence the questioner His goal in answering appears to be to shame the questioner by making him seem ridiculous to the audience." See Hippias' comments at *Hippias Major* 288b, 288d, 290a, and 291e–292a. Aristotle attributes the same sort of tactic—destroying the seriousness of opposing speakers with laughter—to Gorgias (*Rhetoric* 3.18, 1419b3).

²⁰If reputation is the end in view, the description of Hippias' activities offered by Woodruff (124) must, I submit, be incorrect in part. He writes: "The questions he [sc. Hippias] was used to answering must have been directly related to a speech he had just made. Answering them was apparently part of his trade as a public speaker (286b5)." The parallel is drawn with Gorgias, and the *Hippias Minor* is said to represent just such a post-oratorical question period (38, n. 15). Woodruff's analysis of the *Hippias Major* is shaped by his understanding of the sort of questions invited, since he seems to argue as follows: 1) Hippias claims to be able to answer any question asked him (and he has a reputation for doing so); 2) Hippias gets angry at Socrates because he does poorly in answering Socrates' questions; therefore 3) the questions that Hippias "was used to answering must have been directly related to a speech he had just made" (124). In short, Socrates asked the wrong question.

Now it is not at all clear that ability to answer "any question" was meant by Plato to be understood as "any question of the sort directly related to difficulties or ingenuities found in a preceding speech." First, it would rob the elenctic encounters with sophists in the early dialogues of much of their dramatic force, were we to interpret Plato as setting out to demonstrate that Hippias, say, cannot do something he never professed to be able to do. Second, it would tarnish the sophistic reputation, since a speaker's claim to be able to give a credible response to questions about the subject upon which he has just delivered a thoroughly researched speech does not seem calculated to evoke the admiration of the masses. After all, Hippias' claims to be a polymath are well known (Xenophon *Symposium* 4.62; Plato *Protagoras* 315c, 318e; *Hippias Major* 285c–e; Philostratus *Lives of the Sophists* 1.11,1–8). Third, citation of *Gorgias* 447c5–8 as a parallel is a problem for Woodruff's position in that Callicles encourages Socrates to ask Gorgias a question even though former had not been in attendance for Gorgias' display. Fourth, in the *Hippias Minor* (363a1–5, 364b5–7) the scene follows a display to be sure, but the opening lines of the dialogue mark a move away from display, and Hippias specifically says that, in light of the fact that only the philosophically inclined remain, he can now offer an explanation which he could not in his display. In short, there is no reason to think that the questions invited by Hippias were meant to be restricted to reactions to a prepared speech.

interlocutor.²¹ In fact, if questions are not challenging or even a little befuddling they seem of little value in the eyes of Socrates. When he explains the development of Meno's slave-boy in *Meno* 84, he explicitly says that whereas before the interrogation the slave thought he knew the answer, and so did not seek any new information, after Socrates had questioned him this same slave at least knew that he did not know. Even such development as this, in Socrates' opinion, may well be accepted as a definite improvement. And thus the questions of Socrates, which numb like a sting-ray,²² represent precisely the sort of question that the sophist (as portrayed by Plato) would want to avoid, for they challenge the mind and cause the respondent to "sweat mentally."

Socrates' questions are also shaped by his own demands on the respondent. Recent commentators have underlined the importance of the oft-repeated demand that the interlocutor give honest answers within the Socratic elenchus, answers to which the interlocutor is himself committed—what Vlastos called the "say what you believe" requirement of elenchus (e.g., *Crito* 49c-d; *Gorgias* 495a, 506b; *Protagoras* 331c; *Republic* 346a).²³ Indeed this requirement for honesty in the elenchus has been taken as a key distinction between it and questions and answers among the sophists.²⁴ In granting this, however, commentators tend to place the distinction at the level of dialectic intent (the Socratic goal), and thus to recognize no discernible difference between the practical outworking of the two operations.²⁵ On such an account, Socrates still looks on the outside very much like a sophist. In the words of de Romilly (65),

... il [sc. Socrates] avait des points communs avec ces sophistes, auxquels il se mêlait volontiers. En ces temps où l'homme prenait de plus en plus d'importance, il discutait, lui aussi, des problèmes humains et des notions morales. Comme eux,

²¹Vlastos ("Socratic Elenchus" 30–32) emphasizes the elenchus as "search." Plato portrays Socrates as searching for truth: *Gorgias* 458a, 505e; *Charmides* 166c-d.

²²So Meno describes his feelings after encountering the therapeutic methods of Socrates (*Meno* 79e–80b). One might compare the feelings described by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* 215d–216c.

²³Vlastos, "Socratic Elenchus" 35–38.

²⁴See, for example, Meyer 281 and Nehamas 19. Aristotle appears to differentiate two sorts of exchange along these same lines in *Topics* 160b19–22.

²⁵Meyer (281) despairs of ever being able "to distinguish objectively between the Socratic procedure and the sophist's" [my emphasis], since he reckons that the honesty which is a result of the "say what you believe" rule is what he calls a "subjective characteristic." Kahn (317) describes the Socratic dialectic as "not superficially different from the procedures of some whom we (following Plato) would call Sophists" [my emphasis]. Nehamas (19) finds that the sophistic eristic (of Euthydemus) and the Socratic elenchus demonstrate an "apparent similarity" which belies a "stark contrast" as a result of the elenctic requirement of honesty.

il aimait argumenter, définir, dérouter. Adversaire des sophistes en ce qui concerne les buts, il leur ressemblait par les moyens et les méthodes [my emphasis].

There may be, however, justification for seeing in this honesty requirement the basis of an observable, formal difference between the Socratic method and the sophistic epideixis. While the requirement applies directly to the respondent, the questioner is equally influenced by its demands, if only indirectly. Whereas the sophist's display invites any and every question, the conduct of the interrogator within the elenchus is limited to questions assuming premises to which the interlocutor agrees. At any point where Socrates' interlocutor refuses to recognize a specific proposition, Socrates must either abandon it altogether, or, beginning with some other premise which is accepted, work to deduce the position previously rejected. Thus, in so far as the questions proposed for Socratic investigation must fall within certain and specific parameters, to this extent the Socratic method, according to its very definition, is practically dissimilar to the sophistic exercise which invites all questions without exception or restriction.

Along more analytical lines, one is confronted with the issue of whether the questions invited by Hippias and Gorgias were simple, single questions or parts of a continuous, complex barrage.²⁶ Is there any indication in Hippias' claim (translated above, 117) that he was looking for more than a solitary question to which one answer was to be given, or at most a series of independent questions, each with its own response? The answer would seem to be no, if C. C. W. Taylor is correct in suggesting that the fulfilment of Hippias' boast to answer any question is reflected in the portrayal of Hippias in *Protagoras* 315c, where Hippias is pictured seated and answering all inquiries *ex cathedra*, or, in Taylor's interpretative paraphrase, "handing down authoritative pronouncements like a judge in court" (διέκρινεν, 315c7).²⁷ In the narration of events at Callias' house, Plato's words offer no hint that the sophist is engaged in a Socratic question-and-answer

²⁶T. Irwin (*Plato: Gorgias* [Oxford 1979] 111–112) suggests that a Socratic cross-examination was the furthest thing from Callicles' mind when he invited Socrates to "ask Gorgias himself." Irwin writes: "Callicles thinks of a single question put to the orator from the audience, which he can then answer at length. He does not think of the repeated cross-questioning of the Socratic method which is about to be applied to Gorgias." I agree that Callicles does not envision the implementation of the elenchus, but whether Gorgias is restricted to a lengthy answer seems questionable given his outspoken claim to a peerless terseness. Either form could well be appropriate in a setting established for the purpose of enhancing Gorgias' reputation.

²⁷See Taylor 69. On *Hippias Minor* 363c7–d4 (translated above, 117), Taylor writes: "Hippias describes how he goes regularly to the Olympic Games to take part in contests . . . of question and answer" (135). Hippias actually says that he advertises his willingness to answer any and all questions put to him. The jump from "answering any question" to Socratic method is not made in the text, nor is even the lesser one from "answering any

exchange—a series of questions each arising from response to the previous one. He is simply answering individual and unrelated questions on any number of topics, as those questions are posed by members of his audience. His exercise is fundamentally different from the work of Socrates in the early dialogues.²⁸ Socrates asks many questions after he has posed the central difficulty; indeed, many of his interlocutors find this aspect of his missionary zeal its most annoying feature.²⁹

Beyond this, however, anyone claiming that Hippias' boast suggests his application of a Socratic-like question-and-answer routine must argue for more than mere *multiple* questions and answers. The multiple questions and answers must proceed to a goal through a series of logical relationships, for Socrates' questions arise continuously and systematically out of the answers of the respondent. He pushes along with the series until the interlocutor sees his answers reduced to absurdity, or refuses to continue, or concedes his ignorance.³⁰ This serial nature of the Socratic elenchus must be read into the claims made by the older sophists in Plato's dialogues, for it simply does not appear in the text; indeed, it seems antithetical to the whole sophistic project as I have outlined it.

The difference between the questions invited by Hippias' claim and those asked by Socrates seems patent. The former were meant to "set up" the statement to follow; they were not nearly so important as the answer delivered by the sophist.³¹ One might say that the question was just an excuse for delivering an answer. Socrates, on the other hand, turns us back time

question" to "contests of question and answer," which is Taylor's suggested translation of the phrase ἀποκρινόμενον τῷ βουλευμένῳ ὅτι ἂν τις ἐρωτᾷ (*Hippias Minor* 363d3–4).

²⁸As far as de Romilly (65) is concerned, the average Athenian would not have been able to tell Socrates' methods from those of any sophist; in her own words, "sans doute les Athéniens d'alors étaient-ils bien incapables de le faire." Her assessment of the untrained citizen aside, she seems to hold to the familiar line that it is only in the final end sought that Socrates' questioning differs from an otherwise formally identical method found among the fifth-century sophistic teachers. I am suggesting here that the elenchus is different not only in its goal, but also in its form, in Plato's mind, from the questions (and answers) claimed by the older sophists.

²⁹It is just this aspect of his method which Callicles finds so annoying at *Gorgias* 497b. He describes Socrates' supplementary questions as μικρά καὶ ὀλίγου ἄξια ("petty and worthless," 497b7) and μικρά τε καὶ σενά ("petty and trifling," 497c1).

³⁰See Havelock 209–210, where it is maintained that the questioner in the Socratic method is firmly in control. I doubt very much whether remarks on the limitation of answers to "yes," "no," or "please explain" can be supported, but I think that he has correctly identified one aspect of the Platonic structure of Socrates' dialectic. In some measure, Plato imagines the Socratic encounter not merely as a "meeting of minds," but also as a rigorous interrogation of the interlocutor by the unceasingly persistent Socrates.

³¹Meyer (281) observes tersely that "For the sophist, questioning serves only as a pretext for giving his own opinion as an answer." (Also compare his comments on pages 282–283.) Compare the distinction found in the opening lines of Philostratus' *Lives of*

and time again to the central issue with which he is dealing, dragging his respondent back to the primary issue, embodied in his first question. Posing the question is fundamental to the earlier Platonic dialogues; specific answers provided by interlocutors pale by comparison. Socrates' questions are "leading" or "manipulative" questions, while the questions sought by the sophists are seen to be "following" or "innocent."³² That is to say, in Plato's account, the former are meant to make progress in a discussion; the latter are at the mercy of the response received. The two sorts of questions are very different. The Socratic question guides the discussion and is in control throughout the exchange.³³ The sophistic question is led by the answer to wherever the answerer wants to take the discussion. Initiative is everywhere evident in Socrates' questions, but not so in the sophistic questions; the two exercises are very different.³⁴

That there were exchanges between the sophists and their students in which questions and answers were used seems so commonsensical a notion that it should not need to be argued. In any given pedagogical meeting there will be one who makes comment and another who listens: a teacher and a learner. As there is an exchange of information, there will be verbal checks (questions) employed by the speaker to ascertain whether or not the individual listening has heard correctly, or by the listener to gain further information. But to say that this teacher or this student uses, or must

the Sophists 1 (480–481): the philosopher seeks knowledge by questions; the sophist assumes a knowledge. Hence any sophist who offers to answer must never make the mistake of simply putting himself at the disposal of the questioner, and thereby running the risk of falling short in the demonstration of his talent—a talent which is, of course, for sale. Therefore, for the sophist, the answer must never become the slave of the question. For, as Protagoras protests (*Protagoras* 335a–b), there is real danger in giving over direction of the exchange to another—the danger of not winning and so lessening the attraction of one's name on the educational market.

³²Havelock's account (210) contrasts an autocratic and deceptive Socratic method with the open and balanced discussion encouraged by Protagoras. For Havelock, the Socratic "dialogue" is a closed interrogation perpetrated by a superior mind which leads a lesser one to a conclusion which is the target of the leader all along. All of this happens in spite of any protestations on the part of the lesser mind. For all its harshness, there is a certain truth in Havelock's analysis of Plato's portrayal of Socrates at work.

³³Plato openly points to this aspect of Socrates' method when he has Socrates' interlocutors complain about it (such as Thrasymachus in *Republic* 337a). Socratic εἰρωνεία has resulted in some uneasiness among sympathetic commentators, since under such conditions—i.e., when Socrates seems to know where the discussion must go, and takes it there—the well known Socratic claim to know nothing seems an outright lie. Perhaps no one among modern commentators has expended more energy on this problem, nor come up with more ingenious solutions to it than G. Vlastos. See especially the opening chapter of his *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*.

³⁴Woodruff (125) reminds us that Socratic questions are meant to expand and extend the dialogue, while the whole point of the sophistic response is to end the discussion by silencing (satisfying?) the inquirer.

use, questions in the way that Socrates did just because there are questions being asked seems like a shot in the dark. Plato portrays the sophists as interested in questions only as prompt-messages introducing statements from the teacher; they are not a fundamental element of the approach employed by the teacher himself. And so, though questions are a part of several different styles of instruction, these questions need not be the questions of the "Socratic method."³⁵ In short, the epideictic character of the sophistic boast to answer any enquiry produces a kind of question unlike Socrates' questions and the character of the sophistic exercise overall lacks features necessary in the elenchus.

"SPEAKING AS BRIEFLY AS POSSIBLE"

The notion of *βραχυλογία* appears in at least three different arguments made to support the case for Protagoras as the originator of the Socratic method. First, the logic of Socrates' request that Protagoras and Gorgias use *βραχυλογία* (in the Platonic dialogues which bear their names) assumes a pre-Socratic Socratic method. Second, the character of the sophists, as we understand it from Plato, disallows any use of "brief speaking" except the sort of question-and-answer used in the Socratic method. And, third, the Platonic acknowledgment of the importance of *ἀντιλογική* in both fifth-century sophistic and Socratic elenchus indicates that the latter comes out of the former. The following pages address each of these arguments in turn and suggest an alternative understanding of Plato's portrayal of the sophistic *βραχυλογία*.

When, at *Gorgias* 449d1–4, the sophist from Leontini responds to Socrates' questions twice in succession with the single word "Ναί," Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates a viciously sarcastic comment: *Νῆ τὴν Ἥραν, ὦ Γοργία, ἀγαμαί γε τὰς ἀποκρίσεις, ὅτι ἀποκρίνη ὡς οἶόν τε διὰ βραχυτάτων*—"By Hera, Gorgias, I do think your answers are as brief as you could possibly make them."³⁶ Is Gorgias really to be taken as giving a scintillating demonstration of his brief answering, as Plato so cruelly suggests? Are we meant to take the answers of Protagoras or Thrasymachus or Calicles as illustrative of the sophists' vaunted ability? Not, it would seem, if we take seriously their respective reactions to the experience of being the Socratic interlocutor, an apparently unhappy situation for anyone. Protagoras worries about his reputation and is unwilling to continue as answerer when the

³⁵Enquiries by students may well spring naturally from the ongoing didactic exercise, but they are not intended to shape it or to give it direction, as are the questions in the Socratic Method. To guide the conversation the Socratic question must take a shape significantly different from those innocent enquiries from students.

³⁶Unless we are to take this whole exchange as one big joke to which Gorgias is a party, the line that Plato next gives to Gorgias (*Πάνυ γάρ, οἶμαι, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐπεικῶς τοῦτο ποιεῖν*, *Gorgias* 449d7) is probably the most vicious line in Plato concerning Gorgias.

Socratic demand for short answers pushes him into an uncomfortable corner (*Protagoras* 335a9–b2); Thrasymachus substitutes plain abuse for his responses when the elenchus drives him into self-contradiction (*Republic* 343a1–4) and just gives up when Socrates presses along with his argument (*Republic* 350d9–e4); and Callicles whines about Socrates' use of niggling questions when Gorgias asks him to carry on (*Gorgias* 497b6–7 and c1–2), requests that Socrates find someone else to put his questions to (*Gorgias* 505c1–2), and finally agrees to continue not for the sake of the argument but out of respect for Gorgias (*Gorgias* 505c5–6). It appears that the sophists find no opportunity to demonstrate their "art" as Socrates' interlocutors. This is, I submit, a result of the distinct nature of the elenctic method, a method in which they had no practice.³⁷

Throughout the early dialogues, the sophistic interlocutors recognize a clear distinction between the method to which they are accustomed and the technique of Socrates. For example, Thrasymachus, in *Republic* 1, sees the difference between what Socrates and Polemarchos are doing and the sort of question-and-answer method he himself envisages (*Republic* 336b–d). His accusation that Socrates and Polemarchos are "giving into each other" as they converse sets off their dialogue from what he thinks should be taking place. His comments would seem to draw a distinction between the Socratic method here displayed and the sort of spirit and goal with which we have come to associate the confrontational and competitive *λογῶν ἄγων* of the sophists.³⁸ Protagoras draws the same distinction when he criticizes Socrates' request to argue by brief answers: he says he would never have won any contests if he had done what his opponent had asked (*Protagoras* 335a). There is no co-operation for the sophist, and Plato portrays both sophists as perceiving a distinction between the question-and-answer of Socratic elenchus and the usual technique employed among the sophists.

³⁷T. H. Irwin, "Plato: The Intellectual Background," in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge 1992) 51–89, at 66, allows that Protagoras was "unfamiliar with Socratic conversation," though he was "familiar with techniques of destructive argument." Vlastos (*Socrates: Ironist* 115–116) is led to describe Hippias as a dialectical illiterate. In general, Plato does not try to build the image of Socrates as a disputant who defeats the sophists at their own game; when Socrates dialogues with a sophist, the sophist swaggers onto a field where the game is essentially different from the one he knows. Thus we hear the complaints from his interlocutors concerning Socrates' unfairness in defining the structure of the dialogue. Critics who blame Plato for trapping the sophists in the web of the Socratic method maintain that it is very different from the sophistic and yet is portrayed as the same. For example, Havelock (210) reckons that Plato "follows the device of pretending that the same method is understood and practised by Protagoras" simply in order to force Protagoras to participate in the conversation.

³⁸Later in the conversation (*Republic* 341a–b), Thrasymachus implies that stealth and force are the two key elements in winning sophistic debate, when he warns Socrates that he will be on the lookout for these sorts of pressures.

Thrasymachus thinks he has pinpointed the difference between what Socrates does and what the sophist expects in the *ἄγων* when he quips that Socrates has discovered that it is easier to ask than to answer—*ἐγνώκως τοῦτο, ὅτι ῥᾶον ἐρωτᾶν ἢ ἀποκρίνεσθαι*, *Republic* 336c4–5. When he had pressed for a response from Socrates, the latter had indeed refused to answer, claiming to be ignorant (*Republic* 336c–e). Such behaviour is marked by Thrasymachus as peculiar enough to be distinct from the characteristic sophistic practice, and yet commonly enough seen in Socrates to be recognized as typical of him (*Republic* 337a, 337e and 338a).³⁹ Whether or not Socrates' method is ludicrous, as Thrasymachus opines, the point remains that it is recognized as distinct from sophistic. It is not that the sophists have failed in their own art, but that they have been lured into another method, which utilizes short answers, but in a very different way than that to which they are accustomed.

The middle and later dialogues recognize the distinction in familiar terms. At *Theaetetus* 167d–168c, a protest on behalf of the deceased Protagoras introduces two sorts of questioning exercises: combative debate or co-operative conversation. The former is nothing more than play; the latter is in earnest. The former focuses on tripping up one's opponent; in the latter each participant gives assistance to the other. In the former the only limitation on technique is the ability of the participants; in the latter, one is meant to correct the deficiencies of the other person's reasoning or earlier education (i.e., work to improve one's fellow researcher, not to defeat him or her).⁴⁰ The second sort of interrogation mirrors the elenchus from the earlier dialogues, and the pair of them restate the sophistic/Socratic dichotomy.

In the differentiation of elenchus from sophistic *βραχυλογία* we find, too, a solution to the dilemma posed by G. B. Kerferd when he maintains that *βραχυλογία* cannot have meant anything other than continuous question and

³⁹Xenophon clearly displays the annoyance of Socrates' interlocutors who are upset by a Socrates who, they say, only asks and never answers, even when he knows the answers (e.g., *Memorabilia* 1.2.36 and 4.4.9). Thrasymachus' belief that it is easier to ask than to answer reflects the sophistic thinking which found in a speaker's ability "to be able to answer any question" and to answer by "speaking briefly" a means of gaining prestige. Thus when Plato portrays Socrates as the eternal questioner, he has deliberately set him apart from the sophists, for no sophist, as far as I am aware, boasted in an ability to ask questions.

⁴⁰Disputation undertaken as a sort of insignificant pastime is described at *Republic* 537d–539d, where Socrates contrasts the person who wishes to participate in conversation to look for the truth (τὸν δὲ διαλέγεσθαι ἐθέλοντα καὶ σκοπεῖν τάληθές, 539c6–7) with the person who engages in disputation as a game of mere contradiction (τὸν παιδιᾶς χάριν παίζοντα καὶ ἀντιλέγοντα, 539c7–8). Similarly, consider Socrates' criticism of the devotees of ἀντιλογική in *Phaedo* 90b–c who argue both sides of an issue and reckon that they are wiser than anyone else.

answer since the sophists "would be least likely of all men to wish to speak briefly, and then be silent in argument."⁴¹ For while it might be true that no sophist, as we understand the sophistic temperament, would willingly listen in silence to someone trying to refute him, we are not obliged to concede that the resulting argument and counter-argument would necessarily be comparable to the controlled pedagogical environment determined by Socrates' questions. Not the Socratic elenchus, but the type of (formal or informal) contest imagined by Protagoras (*Protagoras* 335a4–8, cf. Diogenes Laertius 9.52) would be the consequence of a sophistic disinclination to be silent (as Kerferd sees it), if this disinclination forces upon us any such consequence at all.⁴²

It should also be added that in proffered descriptions of *βραχυλογία* there is no suggestion that one is obliged to understand "brief answering" as, by its very nature, part of an extended and logically related series of questions.⁴³ On the contrary, it is not improbable that *βραχυλογία* might be demonstrated, by Gorgias, say, as he answers X's question with extreme brevity, before turning to a brief remark on a subject proposed by Y, and then answering Z tersely, etc. This seems to be exactly the picture we have of Hippias at *Protagoras* 315c. It is difficult, then, to share Kerferd's feeling of confidence when he labels as "implausible" the suggestion

⁴¹Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement* 32–33. He states (32) that "the method of speaking briefly was quite clearly related . . . to the method of question and answer" and cites *Protagoras* 329b3–5, 334d4–7, and 335a6, b1–2.

⁴²The options suggested by Kerferd's (*Sophistic Movement* 32–33) comment—either speaking briefly and then remaining silent as an opponent discredits one's position, or speaking briefly with the opportunity to defend one's position with additional statements—beg the question concerning our understanding of the context of sophistic "brief speaking" by not including all the possible situations for the display of brief speaking. Certainly a sophist pressed by an opponent would wish to exercise the second option, but is one obliged to assume that a sophist "speaking briefly" will be confronted by an opponent pressing a continuous cross-examination? Why could the situation not parallel that of Hippias, who answers questions from his admirers in the house of Callias (*Protagoras* 315c)? Far from requiring an interpretation which points to the Socratic elenchus, the existence of *βραχυλογία* does not even presuppose a sustained question-and-answer exercise.

⁴³Should a sophist answer briefly a question which is not followed by a *connected* series of supplementary questions he would not be required to remain "silent in argument." Nor would he be using the Socratic method. And so Kerferd's connection between brief speaking and a question and answer of the Socratic type is not persuasive, since there is a method of discourse familiar to the sophists but perceived as different from the work of Socrates. The call for "short answers" tells us nothing about the questions, and yet it is the questions which direct the exercise in the Socratic elenchus. To invite these questions is to put oneself at their disposal and to be directed by them. The real genius of the "short answers" for the sophists lies just in the fact that the sophist seems to be putting himself under the direction of another (the interrogator), while in fact he does not do so, since the answers turn back any such possibility.

of E. R. Dodds⁴⁴ that brevity in speech meant, for Gorgias and Protagoras, a "laconic style"⁴⁵ as opposed to a thoroughgoing technique of investigation and/or instruction. Dodds's suggestion (an eminently plausible one to my mind) does not preclude the possibility that brevity in speaking might be used *within* some overarching method of enquiry or teaching, but it avoids the probable excess of Kerferd's claim that would present *βραχυλογία* as a definition *in toto* of a sophistic method of argument or instruction, if not investigation.⁴⁶ In short, Plato portrays the sophistic speciality "brief answering" as one feature of a larger form of discourse, and a feature which is situated within the confrontational verbal exchanges which characters in the dialogues distinguish from the method of Socrates.

That *βραχυλογία* should not be taken in and of itself as a definition of a technique of investigation or instruction, but rather as a stylistic element of a larger methodology, seems plainly evident when we consider the ground rules for the discourse found in the *Gorgias* or in the *Protagoras*. In each dialogue, the first step in getting the conversation started is agreement among participants to carry on a dialogue. It is within this general dialectical context that Socrates is required to remind each of them that he should be using brief answers. The implication seems to be that while the structure of the exchange was to a degree defined, the specific details within the larger setting were not. Among the details not stipulated was the appropriate length of responses: Protagoras and Gorgias reckoned they were allowed to use lengthy statements; Socrates required brief ones.⁴⁷ In the disagreement which ensued in the *Protagoras* the leverage used by Socrates to force Protagoras to use brief answers is not the argument concerning the character of dialogue, but Protagoras' own claim to be able to speak briefly. Hence the brief speaking is one feature, a technical feature, within a larger framework of discourse where other options are also available.⁴⁸

The attempt to find in the relationship between *βραχυλογία* and *ἀντιλογική* proof that short answering indicates a pre-Socratic Socratic method is no more persuasive. Kerferd's useful analysis of eristic, antilogic, and dialectic,

⁴⁴Cf. Kerferd (*Sophistic Movement* 33, n. 6) for the comment on the implausibility of Dodds's suggestion, which itself is found in Plato: *Gorgias* (Oxford 1959) 195.

⁴⁵The term is so used by Plato at *Protagoras* 343b5.

⁴⁶Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement* 33.

⁴⁷Remember that the sophists' claim to be able to "answer any question" left open the possibility of lengthy or brief answers.

⁴⁸One could well argue that Socrates' use of the verb *διαλέγεσθαι* in these two dialogues, rather than defining an approach to discourse, is meant more to mark the contrast with the overstructured and confining contests that were familiar to the sophists in eristic disputation. Thus when he says that he wishes to have a dialogue, he is not laying down rules of the game except in a negative way, that is, ruling out the agonistic conflicts that typified eristic and prevented a co-operative effort. "Brief speaking," then, is one of the secondary features to be determined within an established framework.

briefly outlined in chapter six of *The Sophistic Movement*, rightly points out Plato's ambivalent attitude toward ἀντιλογική, and defines it as a "technique" for argument of which Plato approves in elenchus, but disapproves in its sophistic uses.⁴⁹ Since the name of Protagoras is early associated with the rise of ἀντιλογική, and since the Socratic elenchus is essentially antilogical in character, Kerferd finds here reason to attribute the Socratic method to Protagoras.

The essence of ἀντιλογική, according to Kerferd, is the confrontation of conflicting ideas. It is essentially the same whether it is sophistic or Socratic. So much seems plain enough, but it does not take us to the practical level, and says nothing about what form the ἀντιλογική will take. The existence of ἀντιλογική may be found in many different forms of discourse: extended eloquence, question-and-answer, mythoi, courtroom speeches, etc. In fact, it is the discussion of rhetoric, not the elenchus, at *Phaedrus* 267b which contains some of the most important statements about ἀντιλογική in Plato's writings. Contrasted λόγοι need not evidence themselves in question and answer; they may as easily occur in a speech. And so the fact that "antilogic" is found among the sophists and also in Socratic method argues neither for nor against the similarity of the two exercises. The *Dissoi Logoi* are thoroughly antilogical, but they are not Socrates' elenchus. We may, then, admit ἀντιλογική to the fifth century sophists (as Plato himself did) without, by doing so, finding the origin of the Socratic Method.

The appearance of eristic disputation in Plato's dialogues offers no support to the contention that the "twin claims" of the sophists demonstrate the existence of a Socratic method before Socrates. For the brevity of answers in the eristic context has nothing whatever to do with the display of βραχυλογία. If the interrogator asked questions to which the respondent was regularly restricted to a "yes" or "no" answer, participation by such "brief" answers seems the very opposite of virtuosity.⁵⁰ A one-syllable answer is as brief as any answer could be, and yet there is no great talent illustrated in its conciseness. Anyone with a moderate amount of intelligence can say "yes" or "no" when presented with the two alternatives. The answer need not even be the 'right' one; even in error they are still participating. Hence the short answers demanded in the ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι are a far cry from the βραχυλογία advertised by the older, fifth-century sophists portrayed in Plato's dialogues. This whole procedure of eristic dispute runs counter to the motivation which underlies the sophists' claims to be able to speak more briefly than anyone else on an issue. What Gorgias and Protagoras are

⁴⁹Kerferd, *Sophistic Movement* 63–64.

⁵⁰The restriction to a one-word answer is mentioned in *Euthydemus* 295a–296d. I take it that when Gorgias gives one-word answers to Socrates in *Gorgias* 449c–d, and is congratulated for it, we are meant to read the passage as a parody of Gorgias' brief style and not a true example of it.

claiming in the earlier dialogues, I would suggest, is the cleverness which allows them to respond with something more than “yes” or “no”—that is, with a response which contains some substance, but which is expressed as tersely as possible. At issue for the earlier sophists is the ability to make every word count. One must conclude, then, that the claim of Gorgias and of Protagoras to *πραχολογία* simply does not fit the description of *ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι* in the *Euthydemus* and the later dialogues.⁵¹

⁵¹Gulley (27) is on the right track, it seems to me, when he (apparently) agrees with the historical reconstruction proposed and argued for by Sidgwick ([1872] 298) in the last century. The latter recognized a two-stage development in the sophistic methodology: rhetorical display earlier and eristic disputation later. On the basis of his reading of the *Euthydemus*, Gulley (28) tentatively concludes that “the implication is that the earliest Sophists did not practise the question-and-answer kind of eristic, or at least came to it only late in their career. A further implication is that this kind of eristic was first practised by the Sophists at a time when Socrates himself had been practising his own dialectical method for sometime.” In saying this, he follows Sidgwick’s ([1872] 298) suggestion that the eristic displayed in the *Euthydemus* and the sophistic method described in the *Sophist* (e.g., in 224e–232e) are developments out of, or perversions of, the Socratic dialectic. This may be the force of Crito’s reference to Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus as “another new kind of sophist,” if R. K. Sprague (“Appendix: Euthydemus of Chios,” *The Older Sophists* [Columbia, S.C. 1972] 295) is right in her translation of the words *καίνοι τινες αὐ οὔτοι, ὡς ἔσκε, σοφισταί* (*Euthydemus* 271b9–c1).

Not completely satisfied with this approach to the problem, however, Gulley (32) cannot bring himself to attribute the question-and-answer method totally to the originality of Socrates. And so he adds a second and earlier question-and-answer method to be distinguished from that in the *Euthydemus* and the *Sophist*; it is a certain kind of Protagorean question-and-answer method which he describes in the following way: 1) “introduced as an almost incidental element, its purpose being to lend an appearance of added plausibility to the arguments in favour of a particular thesis”; 2) “put . . . in the form of rhetorical questions inviting a string of admissions”; and 3) having “dramatic rather than philosophical significance.” Such a technique, Gulley suggests (32), was “taken up” by Socrates “to serve the aims of his own method.” Thus the line of descent would run from Protagoras’ question-and-answer approach (is this the sort of exchange expected by Protagoras and Gorgias when they are in fact enlisted as participants in the Socratic *elenchus*?) to Socrates’ dialectic *elenchus*, and finally to the eristic disputation of the later sophists.

To my mind there seems really no challenge to Socratic originality here, for one or the other of two scenarios seems likely to explain the “Protagorean conversation,” depending on just how developed one reckons his practice to be. The first explanation would take the Protagorean method alleged by Gulley as little more than a widely used and little thought about feature of common daily speech. Questions—rhetorical, leading, or otherwise—were (and indeed are) a part of popular conversation. And according to Plato (*Sophist* 225b–c), the *ἀντιλογική*, for which Protagoras was famous, can be divided into two types: one without art (*εἰκὴ δὲ καὶ ἀτέχνως*, 225c1) and the other with it (*ἐντεχνον*, 225c7)—the opposition of arguments occurs both in technical contexts and in everyday speech. For, Plato reminds us again, at *Phaedrus* 261d–e, we find *ἀντιλογική* wherever individuals argue. Thus Protagoras’ “method” becomes everyone’s activity, and

Now that Plato recognized a sophistic exercise comprising questions and answers seems plain enough (e.g., *Sophist* 225b–c), but whether we can justify taking such recognition as tantamount to the identification of such a sophistic “question-and-answer” technique with the Socratic method is not at all clear. Plato is consistent in his portrayal of the Socratic exercise as something distinct and above the wrangling over “mere verbal quibbles,”⁵¹ which, he consistently maintains, consumed the attention and effort of a Protagoras or a Gorgias or a Euthydemus.⁵² This latter sophist’s crude attempt to manipulate his respondent (Socrates) is a world apart from the basic requirements of the elenchus. Far from demanding honesty in responses, he insists that Socrates provide answers which the latter is himself dissatisfied with and yet not allowed to modify. All this in order to cover over important issues the discussion of which might cause Euthydemus to “lose” the argument (*Euthydemus* 295e–296d). Socrates, on the other hand, lays out the two contrasting exercises in *Meno* 75d. In eristic confrontation a respondent sets forth his case and then challenges his opponent to refute it; in elenctic dialectic the respondent is obliged to give an answer strictly qualified in two ways: 1) it must be an honest reply, and 2) it must employ terms and premisses with which the questioner is familiar. Such restric-

any claims to status as something which Socrates might have “taken up” seem quite empty.

The second explanation would allow that Protagoras did utilize a recognizable method embodying technical features which set it apart from common conversation. In light of the portrayal of sophists in the early dialogues of Plato, and the conflict over method between Socrates and such sophistic (perhaps not sophists themselves) persons as Calicles and Thrasymachus, such a method would most probably be identified, as I have detailed earlier (above, 126–128), with the sort of exchange which Socrates takes pains to set aside in favour of his elenchus. The explanation of just how Socrates would have utilized this method then seems problematic at best.

⁵¹Plato’s words are: ‘Αντιλογικῶς εἰκάμεν πρὸς τὰς τῶν ὀνομάτων ὁμολογίας ἀνομολογησάμενοι, *Theaetetus* 164c6–7. Cf. *Republic* 454a7–9: κατ’ αὐτὸ τὸ ὄνομα διώκειν τοῦ λεχθέντος τὴν ἐναντίωσιν, ἐρίδι, οὐ διαλέκτῳ πρὸς ἀλλήλους χρώμενοι.

⁵²The fact that Socrates’ opponents in the dialogues (e.g., at *Gorgias* 482d, 489b–c, *Republic* 338d) and Plato’s critics in Athens (e.g., *Isocrates Against the Sophists* 8; *Antidosis* 258, 261; *Panathenaicus* 26) confuse the elenchus with eristic does not prove that they are one and the same. For Plato, the distinction between eristic/rhetoric and dialectic, as formulated at *Republic* 499a, remains a constant theme. What is significant is not the possibility of confusion on the part of persons who could not distinguish between them, but Plato’s willingness to record it, and thereby to risk the very charge of similarity by so writing. His preparedness is evidence of the strength of his conviction that the two were not similar and could be seen as distinct by the knowledgeable observer. And when Plato himself describes the Socratic method among a list meant to offer an analysis of sophistic, we have come full circle. For at *Sophist* 226a–231b Plato uses the confusion of his opponents to underline the very difference which they do not see.

tions will give a shape to the elenchus which is quite distinct from that of eristic.

In sum, even when he seems to connect eristic and elenchus, as at *Sophist* 226a–231b (calling Socratic dialectic ἡ γένει γενναία σοφιστική, 231b7–8), the end result of his words is to distinguish between them.⁵³

CONCLUSION

In these pages I have attempted to argue that it is a mistake to find in the Platonic portrayal of the sophistic boast concerning “skill in response” and “brevity in speaking” evidence for a pre-Socratic Socratic method. And while admittedly there is a great deal more to say concerning the sophists’ use of questions and answers in general, I submit that Plato’s words do not require us to maintain, and indeed give us good reason to reject, any notion that these particular sophistic techniques were the birthplace of the Socratic elenchus. Thus Socrates’ place as the originator of the Socratic method is in no immediate danger from the boasts of Protagoras and company.⁵⁴

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⁵³ Compare Guthrie’s comments (*HGR* 5.129) on this passage in the *Sophist*.

⁵⁴ I should like to acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions from this journal’s anonymous referees.