

Mornington Crescent

Very drafty

Abstract

The neglected Platonic dialogue *Euthydemus* is peculiar in many ways. It is, apparently, an extensive catalogue of bad arguments by disgraceful sophists; but its complex composition suggests that this focusses attention on the shape and nature of argument -- attention that some think Plato is incapable of giving. He uses the idiom of games, and of seriousness and play, to provoke reflection on logical and syntactic structure and their normative features; but to see how he does so we need to consider the complex background of the fiction of a Platonic dialogue, and its use of surprise and humour. Comparison with the game 'Mornington Crescent' may illuminate the point: well exemplified here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjOsOB4erZI>

1. Common or garden sophists?

Many are the villains of Plato's piece. The sophists may be among the worst: Protagoras, Prodicus, Critias, Gorgias, Hippias. They parade¹ as a rogues' gallery of how not to think, an array of targets for Socrates' attacks, couched often in effusive declarations of friendly admiration.² They are vividly portrayed: consider the moral opportunist Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, desperate to join the conversation, indignant at what he claims is Socrates' nonsense, sarcastic, and impatient with any other point of view. He is presented with extreme physicality, lowering over the early stages of the conversation but sweating and reddening when he faces up to a counterargument.³ These characters also had a life outside the dialogues: they are well-attested historical figures.⁴ So, within the dialogues

¹ Literally, at *Protagoras* 315-6, where the parade is full of comic overtones, then followed up by an inconclusive discussion of method at 347-8.

² For example, Socrates' oleaginous remarks to Calicles about the virtues of 'frankness' in the *Gorgias*, e.g. at 487 ff.

³ *Republic* 336b-354b. Thrasymachus is a moral opportunist, in my view, because he falls short of Calicles' full-blown immoralism, in favour of grabbing whatever opportunities we can, rather than any obligation to promote injustice.

⁴ See Nails' invaluable (2002) here; Thrasymachus, for example, seems to have had a life as a notable rhetorician.

their historicity is heavily played on and overturned – recall Socrates’ trope about the dead Protagoras, who sticks his head out of the ground and then runs away without a defence of his Truth.⁵ And they make a lot of money within some (culturally) familiar/fixed rules, both those associated with the lawcourts or the assembly, and the set-pieces of argumentative display.⁶

These sophists have a culture in common, then, apart from their interest in making money. Their methodology often fits the model of the *Dissoi logoi*, the ‘double sayings’, dilemmatic sequences to an absurd conclusion.⁷ But this methodology is relentlessly oppositional: they occupy a reductive stance, challenging any position that seeks to claim more than their amorality, or relativism, or scepticism.⁸ Correspondingly Plato’s refutations are often dialectical too – to show that the sophistic approach makes argument itself impossible.⁹ So these sophists observe common rules and practices of argument – it is not unreasonable to think that around them at the time there were to be found a set of established and recognised methodical moves.¹⁰

However, the brother sophists of the *Euthydemus* don’t quite fit. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are poorly attested by independent evidence; they seem to be Platonic fictions.¹¹ They first appear

⁵ *Theaetetus* 171d.

⁶ Consider the set-pieces by particular sophists: for example the *Dissoi logoi* (translated with some notes in Gagarin and Woodruff (2012) 296-308); Gorgias’ *Defence of Helen*; the epistemic pretensions of Protagorean relativism as they are illustrated in the *Theaetetus* 152-172; the elaborate linguistics espoused by Prodicus (e.g. at *Cratylus* 384 or *Protagoras* 341); or the ethical challenge of Thrasymachus (*Republic* bk 1).

⁷ This argumentative strategy seems to be deployed in the *Euthydemus*.

⁸ Why this reductionist approach? It has dialectical strength; and fits many argumentative patterns among the pre-Socratics (Parmenides and Zeno are obvious examples).

⁹ Compare the refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, 152-171.

¹⁰ Compare here the discussion of methodology represented in the *Protagoras*, 335-8, and Aristotle’s reflections on this tradition in both the *Topics* and the *Sophistici Elenchi*. On the sophists in general see Rachel Barney’s recent work; e.g. (2006).

¹¹ See Nails (2002) ad loc. Euthydemus is mentioned in the *Cratylus*, 386d, as believing that everything is the same and different at the same time; irrespective of the order of composition of the dialogues this does not, of course, grant him independent existence. Dionysodorus seems to be a character in Xenophon, *Mem* 3.1; but this character may simply provide Plato with a biography to play with here. I should not that my argument does not,

indistinguishable: counting them is tricky, and they are repeatedly described by the odd Greek dual pronoun, 'two of them'.¹² They only become distinct individuals when their arguments seem to get into trouble. Their origins are described in terms of the states which they have left behind; they are given an elaborate biography, which describes the multitude of their skills but oddly, not their genealogy.¹³ Their skills are acquired successively and superseded successively (271c-272b).¹⁴ Describing them is tricky, too. They are 'new-fangled sophists' (271b), ready to take on all comers with *logoi*, 'sayings', whether they are true or false.¹⁵

Their (partly-eponymous) dialogue is oddly structured, framed by a recollection from the following day, and divided into five separate argumentative episodes. There are three sophistic episodes, interleaved with two Socratic episodes, in each of which Socrates repeats his demand for a serious protreptic to philosophy or to wisdom.¹⁶ The body of the dialogue then appears to be structured thus:

- In the **first sophistic episode** (275d2-278d1¹⁷) the sophists trap the unwary Cleinias into admitting that it is both the wise and the ignorant who learn.
- In the **first Socratic episode** (278d1-282e6) Socrates takes over the discussion and offers a complex discussion of happiness and wisdom.
- In the **second sophistic episode** (283a1-288d4) the sophists claim that there is no such thing as falsehood, and no such thing as contradiction.

in fact, depend on this historical claim; these two characters are heavily fictionalised as rather bizarre persons.

¹² On this see Grewal (2022).

¹³ Compare and contrast even within this dialogue the (delayed) elaborate genealogy to introduce Cleinias to the sophists 275a-b.

¹⁴ The skills they have acquired before no longer interest them, 273d; they are incidental.

¹⁵ 'Fighting talk'? The combative motif here brings out both a central term for the dialogue, *logos*, but also anticipates the argument in the second sophistic episode that in fact there are no false *logoi* at all. Since, as I propose, the dialogue is interested in understanding just what a *logos* is, and just what it is to produce one, *legein*, I have preferred, here and elsewhere, to mark this by using a single expression, 'saying' to express for the noun (*logoi*, 'sayings') and the verb ('saying'). For a more extensive defence of this see McCabe (2019).

¹⁶ I describe the episodes as 'sophistic' and 'Socratic' respectively, emphasising the principal actors in each. I eschew the current fashion for describing the Socratic episodes (and not the sophistic ones) as 'protreptic', because this seems to me to prejudge the content and the tone of the sophistic passages. But on this see e.g. Chance (1992).

¹⁷ Each episode, despite its apparently being self-contained, contains passages that blur the breaks between episodes, as a result of the highly complex framing of the work as a whole.

- In the **second Socratic episode** (288d5-293a7) Socrates' account of wisdom and the good now runs into serious difficulties. Here the frame dialogue (viewing what happened from the following day) interrupts.
- In the **third sophistic episode** (293a8-304c5) the sophists offer a series of arguments through which the thematic unity of the dialogue seems to degenerate towards their final triumphant silencing of Socrates.
- There follows an **epilogue** set in the frame, describing Crito's encounter with an anonymous critic

Why does any of this matter? Why might the elaborate fictionality of the sophists in this complex arrangement have anything to do with the philosophical interpretation of what they say? They seem to promise a comprehensive education of some kind: Socrates offers his friend Crito's sons as bait to get them to talk to him, despite his own age.¹⁸ They are willing to 'hand over' virtue: as if this could be done as a complete transaction.¹⁹ That completeness echoes not only their own transformations, but both the form of their arguments and their content: in each of the three sophistic phases of the dialogue the arguments, and then the utterances on which they depend, are understood as finished, perfected and complete just when they are done.²⁰ The Socratic episodes, by contrast, explicitly run on from each other, and end in a comprehensive impasse, Socrates and his interlocutors drowning and in despair. So what?

2. Fallacy and other animals

¹⁸ Socrates is shockingly cavalier here (272d); he is no moral hero, we might think. Crito is more concerned for the welfare of his sons (306d ff.). There is an echo here of the *Protagoras*' frame; and indeed that echo may be a regular feature of this dialogue.

¹⁹ There is a play in the dialogue between handing virtue over and being turned towards virtue: the former underplays the agency of the learner, where the latter emphasises it – hardly surprising that this is what goes into the tradition as *protreptic*. Compare 273d (handing over); 275a, 278d (turning towards); *protreptic sayings*, *logoi*, 282d; and *protreptic wisdom*, 278c.

²⁰ Consider the closing applause, where the arguments have left not only Socrates and his friends defeated and wordless, the audience too can only yell and shout, and the surrounding building echo, 303b.

Much of the focus of this dialogue (unlike other dialogues dealing with other sophists) is on the arguments as such. Some²¹ argue that these sophists have, in fact a determinate position about argument here: that the qualifications we usually think appropriate in modifying contradiction are in fact illegitimate, just because in fact the world is built in an unqualified way – in particular, as a monistic system such as that apparently advanced by some late Eleatics (Megarians, perhaps). Others²² argue that these are just bad arguments (albeit sometimes bad in clever ways), direct violations of the rules by which we all abide, even without acknowledging them. They are fallacies because they have apparently true premisses and false conclusions. We can see that they are fallacies, and learn to diagnose them, just by being shown their uncomfortable consequences. Indeed (on this view), unlike Aristotle's *Sophistici Elenchi* (taken on this interpretation to be a work with a similar encyclopaedic purpose), the point here is showing, rather than diagnosing, the sophistry (only one of the arguments is given any kind of diagnosis here). Unlike (more interesting) paradoxes, fallacies are non-serious, on this account; the sophists treat as play something they should take seriously. The complaint against them is about their poor purposes or intentions, and their stance towards the exchanges they have with others. To suppose that there can be counterarguments to a fallacy is simply to mistake the universality of the logical system which they abuse and treat as unimportant.²³

The theme of playfulness is associated with a language of games.²⁴ Consider, for example, the framing of the first sophistic episode. The sophists announce that Cleinias' genealogy makes no difference, just so long as he answers the question (275c1); and indeed whatever he answers, he will be refuted (275e5).²⁵ He answers hesitantly, full of anxious bashfulness at public engagement (275d5). The sophists, on the contrary, appear to be working to a pattern (276b; 277b). The audience stands around and shouts in admiration (276b, d): this is a spectator-sport. What sport the spectators enjoy, however, is not explicit—is it a dance

²¹ E.g. Sprague (1965); and compare Bailey (2012).

²² E.g. Denyer (1991).

²³ Denyer (2021). I have discussed this issue in different ways elsewhere, most recently in McCabe (2021).

²⁴ Wittgenstein's discussion of games in the *Philosophical Investigations* has a thought similar to the point about seeing fallacy: PI § 66 'Don't think. But look!'

²⁵ Dionysodorus' side remark to Socrates here is deeply creepy.

(276b), or a ball-game (277b), or a wrestling match (277d) or something to do with swimming (277d)? Or is it something determined by the fixed moves of ritual (277d)? If so, what on earth are the rules of the game? And can a game be taken seriously?

Of course it can, would respond any professional game-player. There is a world of difference between playing a game, and refusing to take things seriously; conversely, playfulness may not mark the presence of a game at all. But to cast the encounter with the sophists in terms of play and seriousness may still invite the question about whether this (any of this) is a game.²⁶ And it might invite us to wonder just how many games are happening here.

3. Mornington Crescent

Some games are practices with explicit rules.²⁷ Cluedo, for example, is interesting (if it is) just because the rules are highly complex and explicit; and as such it engages only the players – this is not at all a spectator sport.²⁸ By contrast in football, the rules and their application are both a matter for the players and a part of the audience’s enjoyment (‘She was offside!’ ‘Oh no, she wasn’t, it was a goal...’ and so forth). In both cases, the rules are laid down in advance, subject to interpretation, due application and procedure, but explicitly in place before the game begins (here the rules of a game bear some similarity with the explicitness demanded of laws). And in some games, the rules are determined by an algorithm.²⁹

Or games might work with (some) rules or practices that are inexplicit or flexible, rather in the way that strategy in Chess or Go is developed by playing, even if there are some basic

²⁶ There is a lurking pun throughout (as elsewhere in Plato) on the connections between children (*paides*), jokes and games (*paidia*), the attitudes of playfulness (*paizein*) and education (*paideia*). I am grateful here, as elsewhere, to Verity Harte.

²⁷ On games more generally and extensively, see Wittgenstein, *PI*; and the joyous Suits (2014) in response. I shall not attempt any critique here of either.

²⁸ Indeed, playing Cluedo without understanding the elaborate rules is well-nigh impossible (try playing it with recalcitrant children).

²⁹ Nguyen (2020).

rules at the start.³⁰ If language is – or is somehow like -- a game,³¹ it has hugely complex but inexplicit rules and practices, discovered by playing rather than outlined at the start, and developing and changing as we go along. The child who learns to speak does not learn rules first and speak afterwards, but learns by speaking, and from failing to communicate where the speech falls short.³² This child may only eventually come to formulate any rules, or understand them, if at all (we do not need to know that language is rule-bound for it to be so). That the rules are discovered by practice does not mean, of course, that there are no rules; but it does mean that the explicit formulation of the rules may happen after the event, or as we go along. And the rules, once understood, may be broken without breaking the game, or change as speech and culture and context may change.³³

In the game of Mornington Crescent³⁴ its players name London tube stations in turn; the game is won when one player is finally able to say ‘Mornington Crescent’. The game appears to have highly elaborate rules and strategies unknown to the audience but alluded to by the players and the adjudicator, and its outcome is definitive.³⁵ It is played as if there are rules, understood all round and (mostly) obeyed (there are moments when the adjudicator calls out a failure). The joke is that there may be no rules at all, despite the elaborate appearance. But the appearance itself relies on the audience: for there to be an apparent game, there needs to be someone to whom it is apparent. The audience laughs just because they know that: this is a game in form, but it may not be a game in fact, only a script constructed to have that appearance. In this context, if there is a game, it lies in the knowing connivance of the audience in the fact that there is no game at all.³⁶

³⁰ Wittgenstein (1953) § 1.31, 1. 83.

³¹ Wittgenstein (1953) §1.23 and passim.

³² This, no matter what account one gives of innate grammar or ideas or whatever. The point about failure is one to which I return.

³³ Consider, for example, cultural rule-breaking -- e.e.cummings, perhaps; and rule-change under pressure of other considerations, e.g. the rectifications of hermeneutic injustice, see Fricker (2007).

³⁴ A staple game in the long-running BBC radio programme, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*.

³⁵ One participant declares, with an air of satisfaction, ‘Mornington Crescent’. The other players make various admiring and protesting noises.

³⁶ For example, some games of Mornington Crescent are better than others: more recent iterations have none of the delicious complexity of earlier versions (especially with the incomparable Willie Rushton). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjOsOB4erZI>

These contrasts are a matter, in part, of the working of rules. Rules, of course, are not only for games (the rules of the road are not game-like at all; but they do matter). But the *Euthydemus*' association of seriousness and play with the talk of games invites such a restriction; and thinking about games here may help us to understand the shape of the dialogue. Mornington Crescent looks like a game played by players with explicit rules in advance, but it may just look that way. It may also (from the audience's point of view) look like a game whose rules are yet to be discovered, but it may just look that way too. Rules, thus, may be clear and obvious; or unclear but still binding; or subject to change as we go along; or only apparent. The game may be determined by the rules in advance; or it may expose and even generate rules (and practices like strategy); or the appearance of rules may generate the image of a game, that in fact is no game at all – like Mornington Crescent. So do the sophists play a game with rules, or not?

Perhaps they don't take even the playing of a game seriously. They play – on this account – without rules, or in contempt of them: so that the pretence of rules is all the game is.³⁷ On such an account they deploy 'mere sophistry': a kind of phoney argumentation that mimics the real kind but isn't: so they provide fallacies, not sound arguments or even paradoxes. Mornington Crescent.

Or perhaps there is a genuine game here, familiar in the historical setting: a game played in various ways in ancient public arenas, even in the Academy. Plato's exposé of these arguments, on this view, would be immediately obvious to his ancient audience; and the point of his doing so, in part, is to show how they have little claim to our serious attention. This may be because the game is wrongly played; or because it is the wrong game (another game is the right one); or because serious talk is not a game at all. Plato is not, on this view, playing Mornington Crescent.

³⁷ This might be manifested in their smarmy smugness, not to mention creepitude, e.g. at 275e.

It is an open question whether the gaming is limited to the sophistic episodes; or whether there are games elsewhere too. If there are rules, are there games? Is Plato's suggestion that there are rules all over the place (and so a game all over the place in that limited sense) but that the sophists cheat? Or are there several games in town, only one of which is sophistic? Or is his suggestion that these are games (language games or logic games) but that elsewhere in the dialogue language and logic are not a game, even if they have rules: there can be rules without games.

Perhaps this is just our problem, an historical inadequacy; perhaps it would have been entirely obvious to Plato's contemporary audience that there is a determinate and familiar game being played here, whose victim is Cleinias (hardly surprising that he barely escapes extinction on several occasions). Or perhaps what is happening here is more akin to a discovery: to a process that slowly uncovers the rules of whatever game is at hand (of which there may be more than one)? Or does the framing of the first sophistic episode in terms of several different games and the explicit description of the rule, 'just let him answer', leave open whether any or all of the games may turn out to be a mere appearance, just like Mornington Crescent? What, then, of the dialogue as a whole: how does it figure in there being rules of the game?

4. Thinking about fiction: reading Plato.

Mornington Crescent works, if it works, because we, the audience, are not playing but listening. We look at this (appearance of a) game from the outside and find it absurd. The absurdity relies, indeed, on our being able to look at it from the outside (not from playing Mornington Crescent ourselves), and thence on its elaborate appearance of fiction. Something similar happens with a Platonic dialogue. We read it from the outside (in the case of this dialogue, elaborately framed, at two removes); and however we may go about interpreting it, questions of its verisimilitude arise. Does the strangeness of this work reflect an alien culture; or just the appearance of something peculiar, deliberately created?

Socrates, here, is strange too:³⁸ in at least three different respects. First of all, he leads the conversation himself, advancing some fairly radical theses, both about the nature of knowledge and the value of wisdom.³⁹ Second, his role is blurred by some switches of interlocutor, and switches of emphasis. Notably, at a crucial point in the second Socratic episode, the naïve fall-guy of the sophists, Cleinias, suddenly advances a sophisticated and determined objection to what Socrates says. The significance of the objection is underlined by the interruption of the frame dialogue:

Cr: What are you saying, Socrates: did that youth utter those words?

Soc.: Do you think he didn't, Crito?

Cr: No, I certainly do not. For I think that if he did, he would not need educating at the hands of Euthydemus or of anyone else.

Soc. Well, by Zeus, perhaps it was Ctesippus who said this, and I have forgotten?

Cr: What sort of Ctesippus?⁴⁰

Soc.: Well I know for sure that it was not Euthydemus nor Dionysodorus who said that.

But, my good Crito, maybe it was one of the superior beings who was present and uttered these words? For I know very well that I heard them.

Cr: Yes, by Zeus, Socrates --it seems to me that it was one of the superior beings, and very much so. And did you find what you were looking for, or not? (290e-291a)

And now the conversation, about the conversation between Socrates and Cleinias, continues at a remove, between Socrates and Crito, within the fiction of the dialogue, on the next day. This is a long-drawn-out argument, elaborately framed; and it is notably inconclusive, ending as Socrates and Cleinias seem to start drowning in a morass of circularity (293a). So – from the point of view of the reader – there is an elaborate

³⁸ Perhaps he always is, one way or another: consider, for example, the Socrates of the *Charmides* who seeks to attract Charmides by promising him a cure for his headache – a cure that he does not possess; or the Socrates of the *Parmenides* who is young and trepid.

³⁹ The claims of the first Socratic episode about the role of the intrinsic good are indeed radical, as the *Republic* would show; it is a pity that they get their proponents drowned in the second episode.

⁴⁰ It is a standard explanation for this that this is an idiom, 'equivalent to an emphatic denial' (Gifford 1905 ad loc). Compare e.g. 304e or *Gorgias* 490e and LSJ.s.v. However, the idiom is well chosen here: the discussion has turned on the connected questions of identification (as in the opening frame) and qualification (as in Killing Cleinias) and raised the question about the relation between the two.

distancing of our point of view; and an elaborate puzzle about the verisimilitude of what we view. For Socrates, as well as for the sophists, the question about the games in play, and their appearances, is an urgent one.

But this comes on the back of the elaborate fictionality of the dialogue, and its peculiarity. As we read, we are both distanced from the action (at two removes) but also at times incredulous of it, as its verisimilitude seems to recede even as the arguments (of the third sophistic episode) get more and more outrageous. This has, I think, some of the character of *Mornington Crescent*: the discomfort of figuring out the arguments mirrors the laughter of something that has only the appearance of an elaborate game. And that discomfort, in turn, presses us to ask about it, to wonder at a remove what we should say about the games these people play, and how, if at all, we might explain them. The question, however, may run up the orders: if there is a game about argument here, how do our own arguments fare?

5. Rules and lumps

The brother sophists do, however, have some claim to a real game: for their strategies are closely allied to the strategies of Plato's other sophists. They practise a particular and strict dialectical format, especially focussed on the avoidance of contradiction. And they press hard on a reductive demand of their interlocutors: 'show me that you can justify a more extravagant account'.⁴¹

So, the first sophistic episode – a discussion with Cleinias about knowledge and learning -- is previewed by Dionysodorus' whispered aside that whatever Cleinias says in answer to their questions, he will be refuted. And so indeed it turns out: the arguments are dilemmatic (is it the wise who learn, or the non-wise?) and each of Cleinias' responses is shown to imply its negation. Once the arguments are complete, Cleinias appears to be committed to a contradiction. And then there seems to be no more to be done, apart from starting another argument, again dilemmatic, and again to a contradictory conclusion.

⁴¹ I have argued elsewhere that the sophists may not have a philosophical position of their own at all, but just seek to embroil others in having them. This may be orthogonal to the question of games.

The second sophistic episode induces Cleinias' friend Ctesippus to concede that there is no such thing as saying what is false; so no such thing as denying what someone else says, no disagreement or countersaying,⁴² since whatever they said, if they said it, it must be true. Set aside for the moment the independent interest of these arguments. Notice, rather, that the account of saying the truth, on which they turn, is complete, in the sense that the saying is done, as and when it is done, perfected, finished and then incontrovertible (no matter what other perfected sayings might be done otherwise). Truths, on this account, are lumpish, 'just' true (and there is no such thing as falsehood).

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

'Saying it,' he said.

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

'So what?' said Ctesippus.

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

'Certainly.'

'So he who says it says what is?'

'Yes.'

'But he who says what is and the things that are says the truth? So that Dionysodorus, if indeed he says what is, says the truth and in no way gives the lie to anything about you.'

'Yes,' Ctesippus said, 'but the person who says these things does not say the things that are.'

And Euthydemus said, 'The things that are not, surely they are not?'

'They are not.'

'So the things that are not, aren't they things that are nowhere?'

'Nowhere.'

'So is it possible for anyone whosoever to do anything at all in respect of these things that are not, so as to make them be those and to be nowhere?'

⁴² The Greek expression is *antilegein*. I have argued that there is significance to the common root of *legein*, so that it should be translated in ways that bring out the connection with saying, hence 'countersaying'. McCabe (2021).

'I don't think so,' said Ctesippus.

'Well, then: When orators say [speak] before the people, do they do nothing?'

'No, they do something.'

'And if they do something, they make something?' 'Yes.'

'So saying is doing and making?'

He agreed.

'Therefore no-one says what is not, for that would be already to make something and you have decisively agreed that no-one can make what is not. So according to your saying, no-one says falsehoods, but if indeed Dionysodorus says, he says truths and what is.' (283e-284d)⁴³

The third sophistic episode takes a similar lumpish position on saying. Once Socrates has agreed to some determinate claim (for example, that he is wise), that claim is taken to be complete, perfected as it stands. When Socrates seeks to add qualifications, he is ruled out of order.

Well, then, answer me, he said. Is there something you know?

Yes, indeed, I said, many things, but small ones.⁴⁴

That'll do, he said. So now do you think it is possible for any of the things that are not to be that very thing which it happens to be?⁴⁵

No, by Zeus, I don't.

And you know something? he said.

I do.

Then if you know, you are knowing?

Certainly, of that very thing.

It makes no difference; but surely, if you are knowing, you must know everything?

Zeus, no, I said. For there are many other things which I do not know.

⁴³ For the purposes of this paper, I eschew further discussion of this argument; but see McCabe (2021).

⁴⁴ To those expecting a Socratic disavowal this may come as a surprise.

⁴⁵ The verb 'to be' here is notoriously vexed: is it a copula with a predicate (so 'is thus-and-so', with the predicate term, 'thus-and-so' expressed by 'the thing it happens to be') or an identity sign (so for something to be 'the very thing it is' is a claim about its identity: so Erler, *ad loc.*). On this see, Brown (1999), Burnyeat (2002) and more below.

But then if there is something you do not know, you are not knowing.

Of that, my friend, I said.

Will you be any less not knowing? Yet just now you said that you were knowing. And so you turn out to be yourself this very same person who⁴⁶ you are, and again you are not, in the same respects at the same time.⁴⁷ (293b-d)

So, when he seems to have arrived at a contradiction – like Cleinias in the first episode, committed to apparently contradictory claims, that he both is wise and is not wise – his attempt to argue that both claims are true, under different qualifications, is blocked. A great deal of this lengthy episode of the dialogue is preoccupied with similar logical shapes: each of the sophists' victims finds himself both asserting and denying some proposition and is trounced by a contradiction.⁴⁸ (Note that the sophists themselves merely ask the questions: they are, apart from at a single moment of dissolution, not committed to anything).

6. Perfection and imperfection

This character of the sophistic episodes (focussed on a dialectic that relies on repeated contradictions, and reductive in character with a lumpish conception of truth) contrasts with the Socratic ones. For Socrates, the same argument keeps going; for the sophists any argument comes to a definitive stop once the contradiction is reached. This contrast fits with the single moment of diagnosis offered by Socrates of the sophistic arguments. For the arguments of the first episode, carefully structured to terminate in a pair of contradictions, turn on what Socrates takes to be an unclarity about their central term: 'learning'. They treat the pair of epistemic properties, knowing and ignorant, as perfected or complete, and corresponding to unqualified predicates: knowing (without qualification) and ignorant (without qualification). Learning is likewise perfective: you are either learned or unlearned. Consequently, these arguments produce the elaborate contradiction that that both the wise

⁴⁶ The elaborate expression here repeats the move on which the Killing Cleinias argument turns (283c-e); more on this below, and see above n.40.

⁴⁷ Here, I think, is the only time that the sophists concede a qualification: but even here the qualification is universal, and so produces the contradiction that differential qualification could prevent. I have benefited from discussion with Nick Denyer here.

⁴⁸ So the 'my dog my father' argument, invoking a contradiction at 298a, and theorised at 298c; the seeing and saying argument at 300a-d; and Dionysodorus' ox at 300c-301c.

and the ignorant learn, and neither the wise nor the ignorant learn. Socrates objects that this is a mistake:

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

Socrates’ response to the sophistic arguments turns on a particular complexity in the verb ‘learn’:⁴⁹ it may be imperfective, to describe the process of learning; or perfective, to describe the state of having learned. The arguments of the sophists (so he suggests) occlude the processive, imperfective aspect, and attend solely to what is perfective or complete.

This distinction, however, between perfect and imperfect verbs and the corresponding states or processes, runs all the way through the dialogue, especially in the contrasts between the sophistic episodes and the Socratic ones. For both the project of the dialogue, and its working parts, focus on two connected activities: the activity of learning; and the activity of saying. The first sophistic episode treats learning as perfective (we are learned or unlearned), while Socrates insists that learning is progressive, and such as to be worth any sacrifice at all (282a-c). The central sophistic episode, which argues that all saying is either true or else it fails to say anything at all (the argument that underpins both the denial of falsehood and the denial of countersaying), treats the business of saying as producing a definite particular and complete saying: or, as producing a *logos* (otherwise no saying

⁴⁹ I have argued for this interpretation in detail at McCabe (2019).

occurs).⁵⁰ This conception of a *logos*, a 'saying', supposes that if we say, we either succeed and produce a complete *logos*; or we fail altogether, and have done no saying at all. Like learning, saying is just (on this conception) perfective. To put the point a different way: what it is to say is to produce, successfully and completely, a saying (a bit like an egg): no egg, no saying is done at all. The sophists take all saying to be the production of these lumpy items. If we say, we produce them; if we fail to produce them, no saying was done at all.

How might we think of saying differently? Saying may be a process that starts and fails; or a process that goes on indefinitely; or a process that comes to an end in ways that may be exploratory or tentative or subject to revision. Saying could produce a speech, or an exclamation; a proof or a story; an inquiry or an objection; or even a conversation or a disagreement (the countersaying that the sophists' account of truth precludes). It may continue to an end or be abruptly cut short; or somehow or other stop and restart. If, contrary to the position the sophists force on Ctesippus, saying can produce a falsehood, without ceasing to say, then saying can fail to be true, without our mouths being sewn up altogether.⁵¹

7. Contexts and qualifications

The sophists, I suggested, deploy a reductive strategy with their interlocutors; and a part of that is the suggestion that the lumpish view is enough (after all, it gives us truth, and why should we care about falsehood?). That lumpism treats saying as complete or perfective. And this is made vivid in the argument to show that Socrates is omniscient, where the rule against qualifications is repeatedly invoked to show (by repeating the strategy) that Socrates (if he knows) always knows everything, and knew it even before time and the creation of the world.

This strategy has considerable formal power, not least because it explicitly and repeatedly invokes something like a law of non-contradiction. Suppose that we invoke LNC as a general

⁵⁰ Recall that this is the sophists' weapon of choice at 272a, 'fighting talk'.

⁵¹ Socrates' final self-refutation argument takes this consequence as the 'kindly' consequence of the sophists' arguments, 303b-304c.

rule (here: unqualified): what – with some principle like this – might justify the qualifications that Socrates seeks to impose? Aristotle is not much help, in this context:

It is impossible that the same thing should belong and not belong to the same thing, at the same time and in the same respects (we should assume to be added all those additions which are needed for the logical difficulties. (*Metaphysics* 1005b19-22)

He simply takes for granted that Socrates' qualifications will handle 'the logical difficulties': including what the sophists say. But if the qualifications are to modify LNC, how are they themselves modified or regulated? What is it to have a rule like this, without a full specification of the items that give the exceptions? Hand-waving ('we should assume to be added') won't do the trick.

The challenge Socrates sets for the sophists, and for himself, is to show how virtue can be transmitted; and he argues, too, that wisdom is the virtue on which all value depends. But his dealings with argument, and with saying, suggest that wisdom is acquired, not by the decisive means offered by the sophists (means which include dying in the meantime)⁵² but slowly and piecemeal, gradually and with repeated failure interspersed with success.⁵³ This repeated, laborious process is still going on in the Socratic portions of the dialogue; and it represents not just the ways on which argument may progress, but the ways it may regress, too.

Consider how this approach might deal with the qualifications on contradiction offered by the sophists. It is no resolution of the sophistic arguments to say that any qualification will do; and it is no resolution to hand-wave either, in Aristotle's way. For in practice the qualification of a contradiction is a matter of understanding the detail of particular situations: which are the qualifications that are salient in a particular case, which qualifications are irrelevant. This kind of practical understanding is difficult and slow to acquire (like learning how to cook). And it is acquired as much by where it goes wrong as by where it succeeds, just so long as we see where the failures lie. What makes us notice failure? Sometimes it takes a disgusting meal; but sometimes it takes a strange fiction to do

⁵² This is the argument to kill Cleinias, at 283c-e, more below.

⁵³ This seems right, after all: I don't learn to be a great cook without making some disgusting mistakes along the way, reflecting on which (and tasting them) I get better.

it (like this dialogue) or a joke: Mornington Crescent makes us notice the failure of the rules of the game.

8. Oh Sir Jasper

But context is not quite all. You may recall the rather grubby childhood song, 'Oh Sir Jasper do not touch me', where each iteration of the initial line drops the last word, and radically alters the meaning of the sentence as it progresses (if you don't know it, you can work it out for yourselves). The last sophistic argument of all has something of this character, an extreme example of where the qualifications on a contradiction get dropped. (303a4-9).

Socrates has been rendered speechless. Ctesippus tries to come to his aid, and exclaims: 'Bravo,⁵⁴ Heracles, what a fine argument!'. Dionysodorus responds immediately: is Heracles a bravo or the bravo a Heracles? Dionysodorus stops even this complexity, forcing Ctesippus to explain the grammatical relation between the two expressions. Unable to do so, Ctesippus is reduced to the mere assertion of just one, and then silenced at last.

The defeat is cast in terms of *logoi*, sayings, generally construed as 'arguments'. But suppose the talk of 'saying' is more pragmatic? The sophists inspect logical relations between distinct sayings along with a blanket embargo on the qualification of a contradiction. This closing moment (subsequently analysed by Socrates as 'sewing up the mouths of their opponents') eliminates the qualification of contradiction even in an exclamatory remark by reducing it to a single word (that too, of course, is a saying). But unlike the omniscience argument, here the reduction is done by a modification of the syntax, to a single word.

This strategy is not new. In the middle of the dialogue, preceding the arguments to show that falsehood and countersaying are impossible, comes an exchange between Socrates and

⁵⁴ *puppax* seems to mean something like 'bravo', but it is not well attested, and is perhaps, instead, something rather more like a noise than a word. Compare *Ar. Equ.* 680, where 'puppaxing' is something that an audience does: so the expression may anticipate the closing noises of the episode, to come. Of course, the question here arises all over again about 'is'; are we to think that this word or noise appears as a noun in 'Bravo is Heracles', or as a predicate term? Is the 'is' giving us a claim about identity, or one about predication?

Dionysodorus. Cleinias is not yet wise (nor does he claim to be⁵⁵). But Socrates wishes Cleinias to be wise, and not to be unlearned (ignorant).⁵⁶ So, the sophist asks: ‘who he is not, you wish him to be (have become), and who he is now, no longer to be.’ Socrates is uneasy; and the sophist presses the point. For if Socrates wishes him no longer to be who he is now, surely he wants Cleinias dead? This is a fine friendship....

It is commonly thought that this argument (Killing Cleinias) is both unsound and trivial. Some argue that it relies on an equivocation on the verb ‘to be’, notably in its use to mark the connection between subject and predicate (the so-called predicative use, as in ‘Cleinias is not stupid’) and its use to mark out existence (the so-called existential use, ‘Cleinias is not’). Others suggest that the dodgy bit is a shift between what Cleinias is (‘Cleinias will not be what he is now’) and who Cleinias is (‘Cleinias will not be who he is now’), where the latter formula, but not the former, might support the conclusion that Socrates and co. want Cleinias not to exist, to be dead.⁵⁷ But there may be something different going on here, more in the matter of the syntax of the sentences than the univocality of their terms.

Suppose saying is perfective. When is it then done? Perhaps (pursuant on the later arguments of the second sophistic episode) exactly when a saying can be truth-evaluable; the production of truth is what it is to say. But then if saying is perfective, it may be complete as soon as there is a truth. Then the sophists’ interlocutors may be obliged – as in several arguments here – to abide by the first thing they say: as they produce a saying,

⁵⁵ 283c8: he is not boastful. The question of character returns and is prominent.

⁵⁶ I try to preserve the continuity of the translation of this expression.

⁵⁷ It is common, in discussions of this argument, to gloss *hos*, ‘who’, as ‘what’ (often, as a matter of ‘Greek’: see e.g. Erler *ad loc.*); so that *hos* is taken as equivalent to *hoios*. LSJ argues for a ‘peculiar idiom’ here as at Soph. *Aj.*1259, E. *Alc.* 640 (in this pair of examples from tragedy, however, this claim is specious: in the *Ajax*, some part of Agamemnon’s insult to Teucer is about who Teucer is, and how he, Agamemnon will no longer recognise him; in the *Alcestis* the situation is similar, about recognising someone in the sense of acknowledging their claims to be heard and identified as themselves). That gloss is, furthermore, based on an assumption about how properties are possessed by objects and how they change, without which it is not obvious that ‘not-wise’ is not who Cleinias is. This assumption is prior, here, I suggest, to any concerns about what we mean by ‘is’ (does it mark, for example, identity or predication? Erler, *ad loc.* again). Erler properly recalls Burnyeat’s assimilation of this sequence to the *Phaedo* arguments about practising dying (2002 62.ff). The point is taken up by Socrates at 285c.

when once a truth-apt statement turns up, not only are qualifications ruled out, but so is any expansion or elaboration of what is said. Once there is a saying, that just is what is said, and anything that the sayer seeks to add is another saying altogether. Once Socrates is pushed to say 'I wish Cleinias not to be {what he is now}' he is already committed to something meaningful when he gets to 'I wish Cleinias not to be'. And that admission shows that he wishes Cleinias dead.

This is not about equivocation (whether on 'is' or on 'who') but about syntax: once the syntax produces something meaningful, then that is truth-evaluable, right away. As in the arguments about truth and knowledge, this supposes that *logoi*, sayings, are both lumpish and minimalist, complete as soon as they are truth-evaluable. Such a constraint (such a rule of the game, perhaps), commits Socrates to agreeing that he wants Cleinias dead. What grounds might there be for this syntactic principle?

The arguments about qualifications on contradiction may provide some support. Suppose I say 'knowers learn', and in saying it I have a tacit qualification in mind (knowers learn who have the basic understanding on which to learn more, for example). That qualification does not render my saying ('knowers learn') false and does not absolve me from responsibility for it.⁵⁸ If I say 'I am learning', that may be true for several different reasons (I may be learning Spanish or Sanskrit); but whether it is grounded on my lessons in Spanish or my lessons in Sanskrit, it remains true without any specification. Conversely, I may say 'I am learning Sanskrit', and in reverse it follows that I am learning (although nothing follows about my grip on Spanish). There are expressions, that is to say, which may be completable, but which are truth-evaluable without the completion. (This, on a common-sense view, is the opposite situation from the qualification of a contradiction).

'Is', as Lesley Brown has argued, has this kind of completable character, without that importing radical equivocation to the word.⁵⁹ But the sophistic enterprise might allow us to see the situation in terms, not of the semantics of 'is', but rather in terms of the syntax of

⁵⁸ I have learned a great deal here from Lesley Brown on this: see her (1994) and elsewhere.

⁵⁹ Brown expresses this in terms of a 'spectrum', (1994).

individual sayings. 'I am learning' is true if I am learning Sanskrit or if I am learning Spanish. My learning Spanish does not imply that I am learning Sanskrit, any more than the other way about; but they do both imply that I am learning. What is more, if I add 'Spanish' to 'I am learning', I am not changing the subject, or offering a quite different truth; nor am I qualifying in the same way as Socrates suggests for his knowing 'what he knows'. This kind of open-ended syntax is not directly about the nature of qualifications on a predicate term, but rather it is controlled by how the syntax develops.⁶⁰ So, in this kind of case, the verb 'learning' can have a generic completeness; but it can also stand in for a further completion as the sentence continues. The essential feature of grammar like this is that it is progressive, dynamic, open to development in all sorts of different ways without falsifying what has gone before. The exploration of the verbs that are particularly susceptible to this kind of dynamic is central to the two central terms of art of this dialogue: 'learning' and 'saying'. The sophists' overall challenge is to show that if I learn, I learn anything in particular (rather than just becoming a knower). Within the detail of the argument, their challenge is to show that saying can progress, expand, and even change course, just because saying, rather than being lumpish, is imperfective, not over until it is done: sayings that start out truth-evaluable, if you like, have to hold off until they are complete.

Think again, however, about the syntax of 'Oh Sir Jasper': like 'Bravo Heracles', it reduces what is said to a single 'Oh' (itself quite different in meaning from the original sentence; hence the joke). If the verbs of saying (like learning) can be imperfective, they articulate and elaborate meaning as they progress. This takes us beyond a qualification of context, to a view of saying-with-meaning that is progressive and progressively truth-evaluable as it goes on (it is true that I am learning; true that I am learning Spanish; false that I am learning Sanskrit). This may help us to understand the different ways in which the sophistic arguments challenge how we speak: there is a difference, on this account, between an argument that ignores context (an argument, for example, that if I know one thing, then I am a knower, and then that I know everything) and arguments that rely on the ways in which the creation of meaning is a processive matter (an argument that wishes Cleinias to

⁶⁰ I am very grateful here to discussions I have had over the years with Ruth Kempson. See for example her (2015). I hope here not to traduce the extreme subtlety of the account to be found in Gabbay, Kempson and Meyer-Viol (2000).

change while still persisting). These cases, unlike the qualifications for contradiction, arise exactly because of the role of the processive verb. They operate, if you like, on a reverse Sir Jasper: creating meaning as the process of saying proceeds and modifying what is said as it goes along. The meaning (on such an account) is a matter for the decision of the speaker, not a point dictated by a lumpish view of what is said.

9. It takes two to tango

It is a marked feature of the sophistic episodes of the *Euthydemus* that the sophists ask questions, rather than giving answers: and this feature of their exchanges with Cleinias, Ctesippus and Socrates is marked by the single occasion when it fails. Towards the end of the discussion of Socrates' omniscience, Socrates seeks to apply the same argument to the sophists themselves, by asking whether (or not) they know that good men are unjust (296d-297a). Euthydemus says that he knows that good men are not unjust. Socrates repeats the question: does he know that good men are unjust (since he knows everything)?

Dionysodorus comes in, and denies it; and Euthydemus intervenes, insisting that this response is destroying the *logos* – the saying, or the argument or the talk: the fighting talk with which they began. Dionysodorus blushes in embarrassment. It is, thus, central to the sophists' approach that they do not take up determinate positions, but leave it to their interlocutors to be refuted, whatever they say. We might ask, once again, about Mornington Crescent: is this a game they play, or one they stand outside? Or is this just an appearance of a game, a piece of charletanery practised on its victims?

In the Socratic episodes of the dialogue, by contrast, Socrates and his interlocutors share the talk, and the responsibility for it. At the close of the second episode both Socrates and Cleinias are at risk of drowning; while Socrates and Crito, reflecting on the exchange from the outside, equally participate in the commentary together. And the second episode is explicitly connected to the first, pursuing the same ideas first tried in the first; the entire sequence remains incomplete. But this process on which the two are engaged is one where they are both participants: so at 280b they agree on what they have agreed (which has

happened by means of various advances and retreats), and on what they have not yet decided (playing, again, on the perfective/imperfective contrast).⁶¹

And so we agreed in the end, I don't know how, that in sum things stand thus: when wisdom is present, to whomsoever it is present they do not need good fortune in addition.

This collaborative aspect of the discussion is remarked on when the frame conversation interrupts in the second Socratic episode and Crito interrupts to ask just who it was who made that clever point. Here both Socrates and Cleinias found themselves facing a complex difficulty: they are going round in circles; or they are trapped in a regress; or they are merely repeating themselves; and in the frame the same kind of difficulty occurs.⁶² In all of this, the problem is the process. But the process is itself under threat, as is the interaction of two distinct persons with two distinct points of view, if the sophistic argument against countersaying prevails (285d-287b).

For suppose that I say something, and (since what I say, if I succeed in saying, is true) you seek to disagree. You may say the same thing (in which case we don't disagree); we may both say two quite other and distinct things (in which case we don't disagree); you may say something different (in which case we don't disagree); or you may end up saying nothing at all (in which case, again, we don't disagree). This approach to saying has the perfective form which is notably different from the processive versions of saying to be found in the Socratic episodes. But it also precludes any kind of dialogue other than cases where there is complete agreement. The perfective view, that is, rules out the idea that we may be engaged on a process together, unless we are merely doing exactly the same thing. If it is a game at all, it is solitaire. If the Socratic practice is a game, on the contrary, it is essential to it that there is the possibility of disagreement, of collaboration and of the joint development of an argument. There must be more players than one.

10. Mornington Crescent?

⁶¹ See too e.g. 279c

⁶² REFS and epplan.

Go back, then, to the question of Mornington Crescent, and what we may discover by reading the *Euthydemus* with the same kinds of comic possibilities in mind. It may be, of course, that these sophists are indeed playing a game whose rules and procedures were familiar from Academic practice. Or we may be supposed to notice that any such game would be phoney. That we don't know quite how to respond shows how this fiction surprises us; and surprises us precisely in the question about games.⁶³ Should we think there is here one appearance of a game (the sophistic one) and one real game (the Socratic one), the former, in its sheer absurdity, illuminating the latter? If we think that, we may have to concede that the sophistic practices have some logical assets to hand, notably a radical commitment (on the part at least of their victims) to the law of non-contradiction; so perhaps this is not an appearance at all. So should we think that there are two genuine games in play here, the sophistic one (which produces a contradiction and silence in its victims by its perfective pragmatics) and the Socratic one, which is incomplete and puzzling, but still works with rules, complex and far-reaching, that do not undermine the game itself? The contrast would then rest, not at all on the thought that the sophistic practises are phoney or ersatz, but that they are inadequate compared to the complex richness of the Socratic view.

Or perhaps the plot is thicker. It may tell us more about the attitudes and commitments of those engaged in the different practices. There is no reason (as I suggested at the outset) that games should be merely playful; nor is any play necessarily a game. But The contrast between seriousness and play marks off the Socratic practices in a different way: in terms of their normative cast. The discussions between Socrates and his interlocutors are indefinite in their outcome precisely because they track the slow to and fro of how we speak, and how we learn, and how we might do that together. Suppose, then, that arguments half recalled, misunderstood and revised, rejected and hopelessly awry, are themselves the way in which we make progress in saying and learning, not least because of where they go wrong, or even where they provoke hilarity. When we learn how to be good, or wise, or even just competent, it is a process that stutters and hesitates, goes wrong and suddenly right,

⁶³ Witters PI§§66 ff, and the question about whether we can come up with a definition of a game.

making crabwise progress or regress in ways that are long-drawn out and incomplete. Should we think that this is a game, with rules and practices and ways to win or succeed? Should we think this when Socrates at the very start rejected a view of how best to live in terms of success and the accumulation of goods, in favour of becoming wise, for the sake of which, he says, we should sacrifice everything? Or is this the appearance of a game, a Mornington Crescent whose joke is on us: this process of saying may not be playing a game at all, but just living a life?⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ As always, anything worth saying here I have found by talking to others, especial thanks here to Dom Bailey, Rachel Barney, Charles Brittain, Tim Clarke, Nick Denyer, Verity Harte, Fiona Leigh, Raphael Woolf.

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