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Why Shouldn't the Sophists Charge Fees?

James Fredal

Why is it that discussion of the sophists and sophistic activity routinely mentions the fees they charged, but never explores why the sophists might have charged fees and why this rather mundane detail would warrant such regular reiteration? I argue that the sophists charged fees to demystify the ways in which gift-exchange made it possible to naturalize culturally established values and misrecognize power relations as relations of generosity and friendship. By charging fees, the sophists showed that trade in skillful political discourse was always tied to the pursuit of advantage and power. This critical practice was rejected by Socrates, so that when his students needed a way to highlight the distinctions between their master and other teachers and schools (since in the popular mind all alike were sophists), they fixated upon the fees the sophists charged as a distinguishing trait. As a result, it took on the form of a stigma, and has been remained a defining charge against the sophists ever since.

Attitudes toward the sophists have shifted significantly over the past several decades. In response to a body of scholarship and a tradition of instruction that “rediscovered” the older sophists and placed them at the origin of rhetoric (thus identifying them as a group with the field), contrary viewpoints have arisen more recently that challenge this view.¹ Historians and classicists alike have begun to rethink what the sophists may have held in common (if anything) (Schiappa 1990), whether “persuasion” was their primary goal (Gagarin), whether they were concerned with rhetoric primarily or exclusively (Ford), or whether they could, in fact, be understood to have conceived of rhetoric at all (Schiappa 2003, Cole).

¹Kennedy remains the standard work on the rhetoric of the sophists. See more recently Poulakos, Murphy and Katula (21–57), Bizzell and Herzberg (19–25), Nelson, Leff.

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This body of work has argued that “the sophists” demonstrated a wide range of interests, including but not limited to interests in the arts of political discourse in prose, that these interests varied widely from one individual sophist to the next, and that, although in several important respects they anticipated what would later become rhetorical theory, none of the sophists should be seen as being concerned with “rhetoric” *per se* (the term being most likely a Platonic innovation) or having as their primary goal that key term of rhetorical theory, “persuasion.”

As the sophists' identity and goals have been reexamined, so has the meaning of term and its evolution. Since Grote's *History of Ancient Greece*, the view has been alternatively posited, qualified, and reaffirmed, but never completely rejected, that “sophist” underwent a significant alteration between the late fifth and early fourth century, largely due to Plato. According to this view, “sophist” had originally been used to describe cunning and skill generally (in a wide range of trades) and political skill specifically (as applied, for example, to the seven sages), albeit occasionally applied ironically or pejoratively to suggest excessive cunning or subtlety.² By the time of Plato, however, another more specific meaning had been grafted onto the term: it was used to refer to (and denounce) a new class of intellectuals in Athens who taught *aretē* (excellence) or *sophia* (wisdom) for a fee.

In what follows, I argue first that the practice of charging fees for instruction should be seen as an important element of this development, a factor that their detractors focused on to define and denounce “the sophists” as a group. This attribution should be recognized not as a neutral descriptor of sophistic practice, but as a tendential definition and a status claim with which Socrates's defenders (especially Xenophon and Plato) sought to identify, delegitimize, and marginalize competing teachers and schools. They gave salience to this aspect of teaching method in order to differentiate this larger class of intellectuals and teachers from true “philosophers” and thus defend the reputation of Socrates and Plato's Academy.³

Second, fee-based instruction arose not in opposition to the “free” dispensation of wisdom by philosophers, but rather as an alternative to an exclusionary, elite gift-culture that included *logon technai*. Political, legal, and ceremonial speeches as well as persuasive speaking and writing ability and instruction in speaking all circulated in ancient Greece within a larger context of gift exchange. By charging fees, the sophists were intervening in this gift-economy in discourse for reasons consistent with their general political,

²See Kerferd (24–41), Guthrie (27–54), Freeman (341–342).

³This term was likely an invention of Plato as an alternative for “sophist.” See Havelock (1983 57).

pedagogical, and philosophical program of demystifying and demythologizing social knowledge and cultural value.

The Meaning of “Sophist”

The shift in usage of the term “sophist” occurred for several reasons. First, the rise of Pericles and his patronage of artists and intellectuals, coupled with the wealth, prestige, and congenial atmosphere of Athens generally, led to a convergence of teachers and mentors in Athens, and thus to the possibility of their being referred to collectively as a group.⁴ Their outsider status, their novel ideas and methods, and their association with a polarizing political figure made it likely that their presence would arouse strong reactions and that the term itself would be highly politicized and strongly contested. Denunciation of this group would also have been an indirect way to attack Pericles and the cultural innovations associated with his leadership (Kerferd 18–22).

Second, Protagoras’s decision to “admit to being a Sophist and an educator” (Plato *Protagoras*) likely encouraged the adoption of this term by his followers and pupils and, by extension, its use among opponents who used it ironically or derisively. Protagoras as much as admits that the term, as well as the vocation, carried its dangers, and that his conscious acceptance of it was a strategic choice. Kerferd suggests that it was Pericles’s friendship and protection that made this admission possible (22).

Finally, the attacks against Socrates, both in comedy and then in court, coupled with the popular image of him as a sophist, led his followers to defend him by writing imagined or literary *apologia* (like those of Antisthenes, Xenophon, and Plato), and led his detractors (including sophists like Polycrates) to further attacks through the publication of imaginary prosecution speeches or *katēgoria*.⁵ Bitter infighting and rivalries between Socrates’s followers (“philosophers” and others) and his detractors ensured that the term “sophist” would become a highly divisive term of abuse.

Plato’s *Apology*, perhaps the dialogue most faithful to Socrates’s own views and practices, hears Socrates praise those sophists who know about the heavens and the earth, who can make the weaker argument appear the stronger, and who can earn money teaching these things to others, even as he denies being able to do any of these things. The irony in the praise is barely detectable, and the denial retains the air of a boast, “I would certainly plume

⁴Athens adopted a welcoming and liberal policy toward resident foreigners or *metics*. Damon, Zeno, Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Aspasia are frequently mentioned as associates of Pericles. Of these, only Protagoras is routinely listed as a sophist.

⁵The fullest study of this rivalry remains Chroust; see also Dodds (28f).

myself. . . if I understood these things, but in fact, gentlemen, I do not" (20b), but the difference between the unknowing Socrates and those sophists who charge fees for morally questionable forms of teaching is clearly established for later elaboration.

It is for this reason that Grote first, and a number of scholars after him, saw Plato as the central figure responsible for giving the term its more specific negative association.⁶ Guthrie objects that the term was used pejoratively before Plato, but Shiappa (2003) rightly notes that this does not diminish the importance of Plato's role in shaping its meaning (5). The term was used to disparage the new class of intellectuals in Athens independent of Plato, but it was Socrates's death and the subsequent infighting between his followers (primarily Plato) and their rivals that led to the more specific and damning development of the term. Payment would be an important aspect of this definitional shift.

Pay for Teaching

Fifth century references to sophists *are* sometimes pejorative, but they do not emphasize pay as especially objectionable or particularly relevant to "the sophist problem." Aristophanes's *Clouds* (performed in 423 and revised later) reveals the sophist's fees to be an already established practice. The character Strepsiades promises to pay Socrates "whatever fee you may charge," clearly assuming that a sophist like Socrates would charge a potentially high fee (245). Significantly, though, Socrates refuses the offer, one of few aspects of Socratic teaching that Aristophanes apparently got right.⁷ In other respects, of course, Socrates is treated as simply another sophist to be lampooned for investigating into the heavens and below the earth, for making the worse argument seem the better, and for encouraging and enabling immoral behavior—and the play in general makes little of the issue of fees. The comedian Eupolis (ca 429–411) similarly mocks the sophists for being effeminate, lazy "parasites," (fr. 159) but not for their fees (Edmonds).

A few years later (411), Antiphon will respond to his accusers' claim that he "profited" from his speechwriting in his self-defense speech "On the Revolution" (frag. 1. 91). Antiphon does not attempt to rebut the claim, but to recuperate it, arguing from probability that his fees reveal his democratic

⁶See Grote (4, 106 and 7, 52); Jowett (3, 325); Popper (1, 263 n. 52); Havelock (1957 158–159); Guthrie (33–35); Schiappa (2003 4–5).

⁷This detail may have recommended itself to Plato as a popularly understood feature with which to distinguish Socrates from others. On the neutrality of Aristophanes and Socrates toward sophistic fees, see Gagarin (1968 181–187), although he makes less of Plato's repeated references to fees than I do here.

leanings: “under an oligarchy I would not be able to do this, whereas under a democracy I have long been the one with power” (frag 1.92). Antiphon’s *conciliatio*⁸ suggests that Athenians could see the practice as pro-democratic. If this is the same as Antiphon the sophist, it is interesting that he is accused not of teaching but of speechwriting for fees.⁹

Other fifth century sources seem unconcerned with the problem of sophists and their fees: pseudo-Xenophon’s *Athenian Constitution* makes no mention of either sophists or pay for teaching, despite the Old Oligarch’s clear interest in the problems with democratic rule and Athenian legal procedure, and the corrupting influence of money upon both. In Herodotus, the “wise adviser” is a common figure and “sophist” often a term of approbation, but it is not particularly associated with payment (Lattimore). On the other hand, Euripides has Hecuba bemoan the fact that men in that age did *not* pay to acquire skill at persuasion, “so that any man could convince his fellows as he pleased” (*Hecuba* 816).

These early sources suggest that the commonplace and exclusive liaison between fees, greed, and immorality on the one hand, and the sophist type on the other, simply did not apply to fifth century Athens. Fees for instruction were not seen as a central or well-defined problem with which “the sophists” should be associated. Not all those ridiculed charged fees, nor would all those who charged fees be branded as “sophists” in the restricted sense of the term. Both Pindar and Simonides were known to accept payment for their poetry, while the “philosophers” Zeno, Aristippus, and Speusippus all charged fees for instruction.¹⁰ Even when “sophists” did charge fees, the fact could easily be seen as a benefit to democracy.

In fact, it is not until the writings of Socrates’s pupils, Xenophon and Plato, that the issue of sophistic fees is raised in any sustained and serious way, and this treatment always helps to differentiate rival schools and teachers from “philosophy” (and Socrates) by denigrating the former as a corrupt form of the latter.¹¹

In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, for example, making money is consistently associated with the loss of liberty (for those who “sell their souls into bondage”). Antiphon chastises Socrates for declining to take money for his society—making

⁸Lausberg (346) (similar to *antistrephon* or *antistrophon*): a figure that uses the argument of the opposing party and turns it to the speaker’s own benefit.

⁹The one Antiphon view has been ably reargued by Gagarin (2002, ch. 2) and is perhaps now the majority view.

¹⁰Sources include, for Pindar (Isthmian 2, Isocrates *Antidosis* 15. 166); Simonides (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1405b23); Zeno (Plato *Alcibiades* 1.119a1–6); Aristippus (Diogenes Laertius 2.74); and Speusippus (Diogenes Laertius 4.2).

¹¹Important sources on the sophist’s fees include Forbes, Harrison, Blank, Guthrie, and, more recently, Corey.

his wisdom literally “not worth anything”—when he would not even part with his cloak or house for less than its value. Socrates in response defines the sophists as “those who offer wisdom to all comers for money,” like prostitutes, and differentiates them from those who “become friendly with a lover who is known to be a man of honor” (1.6.13), emphasizing that sophists, like prostitutes, must place themselves at the service of any who can pay, rather than offering their wisdom as a gentleman would, discriminately to worthy friends and lovers.¹²

But it is Plato who most consistently mentions fees to characterize the group that he will refer to as sophists. Harrison comments that the man is “almost incapable of using the term sophist without at the same time making some explicit reference to this professionalism” (191). Plato suggests not only that the sophist enslaves himself (to “whoever wishes” to be taught), but that he actively flatters and pursues or “hunts man privately for hire, taking money in exchange” (*Soph* 223b. See also 224d–e, 226a). The protean sophist wins the confidence of young men of wealth and rank, and “leads a man to neglect his affairs” (225d), defrauding him of (or “eating up”) his patrimony through high-priced instruction, and so gaining the kind of “advantage” or profit that Antiphon is charged with.

Here the contrast is not really between fifth century sophists and Socrates, but between those fourth century figures who charged fees (and were therefore to be known as “sophists”) and Plato’s Academy. The Academy (probably modeled after Pythagoras’s school in Sicily) was established as a quasi-religious association (or *thiasos*), a “brotherhood dedicated to the muses” and characterized by reciprocity, equality, and friendship (Marrou 67–68; see also *Republic* 547a–b). The Pythagorean brotherhood formalized and turned toward political, religious, and educational goals the social relations that, ideally, held between elite men who were, by virtue of their high birth, characterized by mutual equality, friendship, and concord (political like-mindedness or *homonoia*: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1167b, *Eudemian Ethics* 1241a).¹³ Plato, having adopted this exclusive pedagogical model, would persistently recall in his dialogues Socrates’s contempt for money (and the sophists’ fees) in order

¹²Plato significantly here places sophistic teaching in the context of the ritualized courtship between the adult lover and the youthful (male) beloved. The affair and courtship was marked by specific patterns of reciprocal favors and gift-giving.

¹³Pythagorean communities, centered mostly in southern Italy, were formed in the pattern of a religious cult with sacrifices and ritual observances. They required of initiates the surrender of all property and complete secrecy concerning esoteric teachings. In return, they gained access to the *acousma* or *symbola*, the teachings of Pythagoras. They also set a high value on friendship and shared all things equally among community members (hence the saying “*koina ta philon*: friends have all things in common.” *Laws* 5.739c). Pythagorean communal life, at once philosophic and political, served as a model for Plato’s school. See Cicero *De Republica* (1.10); Kahn (8–10); Morrison (211).

to advertise the fidelity of the Academy to Socratic practice and to condemn sophistic greed.

Thus, although suspicion against sophists—and a narrower use of the term—antedates Plato, the consistency with which sophistry is denounced through a reference to charging fees after Plato can almost certainly be attributed to his influence (Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* 165a21, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1164a30; Aeschines 1.117, 170–175). By the mid-fourth century, the term is regularly associated with the practice of teaching false wisdom, of teaching to whoever wishes, and of taking advantage of and corrupting youth, and thus with charging fees. Whereas Plato's Academy emphasized friendship and equality, sophists both enslaved themselves to and took advantage of their paying students.

I want to highlight here how Plato uses repetition, dissociation, and definition to create a liaison between the sophist's fees on the one hand and moral laxity and corruption on the other. This attributional hiccup, relentlessly reiterated throughout the dialogues, functioned as a status claim—not a neutral observation or rational argument but a rhetorical strategy—employed to valorize philosophy and distinguish it as a practice by delineating and marginalizing rival teachers and schools under the rubric of sophistry. For Plato, Xenophon, and others, the “sophist question”—the terms according to which Socrates and schools of “philosophy” would be distinguished from and elevated above other teachers and schools of the time—was an important one, given popular confusion over the methods and aims of various teachers.¹⁴ The distinction was made not primarily in terms of any particular body of knowledge (doctrines varied from school to school and would be difficult to explain in written dialogues) or even method (because most teachers used a similar set of methods) but with reference to their mercenary and therefore shameful practices of pedagogical prostitution and predation.¹⁵

The claim worked through the strategies of repetition, definition, and dissociation.¹⁶ Perelman notes how the definition of a word is “bound up

¹⁴Aristophanes likely spoke for popular opinion when he characterized Socrates as a sophist in *The Clouds*. The charges against Socrates also mirrored accusations leveled against other pedagogical innovators, including Antiphon and Protagoras. It was likely Aristophanes's (from Plato's perspective) overgeneralization of the term to include Socrates that led Plato to specify its meaning more narrowly in a way that would explicitly and clearly separate Socrates from those other teachers with which he was confused.

¹⁵I refer here to Hariman's observation that arguments about how genres (or, here, practices and economies) of discourse include fundamentally rhetorical attributions of status, and how these attributions generate power by establishing positions of centrality and marginality along an axis of hierarchy that typically remains implicit.

¹⁶In what follows, I refer to Perelman's *Realm of Rhetoric* (60–62, 90–91, 126–130). See also Schiappa (2002 5–7).

in the language with . . . value judgments which give it, in advance, an affective positive or negative coloration" (61). Through association, sophists are equated with fees and thereby with greed and immorality. In addition, the introduction of "philosophy" as a counter term allowed Plato to dissociate a wide range of positive elements of teaching in wise discourse (as "philosophy") from those negative attributes that he wanted to avoid. "By giving the terms 'sophist' and 'philosopher' more precise technical meanings and portraying his characters as more or less attractive," argues Shiappa (2003), "Plato provided a favorable emotive and technical meaning for 'philosophers' and a negative emotive and technical meaning for 'sophists' (6).

As a result, the "charge" that an opponent collected fees from students became a commonplace not only of philosophical discourse, but of forensic oratory, where it was used to suggest that teachers (i.e., sophists) were operating in the service of monetary gain and therefore not in the interests of the state (Aeschines 1.170–175).¹⁷ The phrase "teaching for pay" became shorthand for both the appellative, "sophist" and therefore also the qualifier, "corrupt." The claim was, in both venues (in the philosophical dialogue and forensic speech), a political act: taking fees meant taking "advantage" (*kerdainos*) of wealthy young men, which was at once equivalent to moral laxity, to sowing discord, and opposing the interests of the state. The denunciation became possible, I suggest, because of the contested status and meaning of monetary exchange and the process of commoditization in ancient Greece, particularly concerning the restricted circulation of sumptuary goods, including discourse in wisdom and virtue.

In sum, the "fact" that some teachers collected fees was used at once to denigrate them as "sophists," to distinguish this manner of teaching from philosophy, and thus to marginalize what would come to be called "sophistic" teaching as morally suspect. When historians repeat this "fact" as a defining feature of the sophists, stripped of the context in which they worked, they thereby unwittingly adopt the derogatory perspective that produced it. Repeating as a "matter of fact" the status claim that the acolytes of Socrates employed to shame sophistry cannot fail to give it the form of a stigma.¹⁸

¹⁷The use of sophistry as a derogatory term to highlight the nobility of philosophy continues into the Roman era. See Stanton (352–353).

¹⁸Erving Goffman defines a "stigma" as an attribute that deviates from normative expectations and is thus potentially discrediting. It is not the attribute itself, but the set of expectations attending its possessor and his or her social role that is of importance. Charging fees or making a profit can be pointed out as discrediting in reference to one social role (instruction in wisdom) but not in reference to another (2–5).

What is it, then, about the charging of fees (or the gaining of profit) in the context of verbal instruction that makes it so worthy of condemnation (to Plato)? Why should the sophists not profit from their teaching? The explanation of Kerferd (25) that “to teach for money was still an ungentlemanly occupation” simply begs the question, *why* was it still thought so? (see also Dodds 365). Certainly the use of coinage and a money economy were neither new nor widely disparaged in fifth century Greek culture, much less into the fourth century, particularly in Athens. Nor were “the sophists” unique in taking fees for their discourse or their instruction. In addition to poets like Pindar and Simonides, Aristotle mentions a school in Sicily that taught household duties to slaves for a fee (*Politics* 1255b25).

Indeed, Seaford emphasizes the rapidity with which the process of monetization (and commoditization) overtook all aspects of Greek social life. By the fifth century, elite goods, weapons, agricultural products, military skill, land, and a wide variety of skills and services could be bought and sold for money.¹⁹ The average Greek citizen would likely have found the notion of charging fees for instruction completely unremarkable at worst. Elites, however, and politically oligarchic elites especially (and philosophically zealous, oligarchic elites in particular) would have held a different view.

What would the alternative have been? We can image two possibilities: either the sophists should have provided their teachings “for free,” or they were expected to receive compensation in some other way, through some alternative form of payment. In the remainder of this article, I will explore the role of gift exchange and a gift economy in ancient Greek rhetoric as an alternative to sophistic fees after briefly rejecting the possibility that the sophists would have been expected to offer their services “for free.”

The “free” gift of teaching is hinted at by Xenophon himself, who contrasts Antiphon’s fees with Socrates’s civic beneficence. By having Antiphon reject Socrates’s alleged wisdom as “worthless” (*Memorabilia* 1.6.12) and recommend, by contrast, his own practice of charging fees (as evidence of the value of his society and instruction), Xenophon can allow Socrates to respond that it is the duty of a good citizen and gentleman to teach to his friends all the good he can, a comment which, in the context of Antiphon’s praise of money, seems to recommend the “free” exchange of ideas and knowledge. Xenophon finds this view sufficiently salutary that he interrupts his narrative to praise Socrates for “putting his hearers in the way of being gentlemen” (*kalokagathian*, a term to suggest elites). But this comment, and

¹⁹In discussing money as a universal aim, Seaford (162) repeats the view that “virtue is the only thing that cannot be acquired by money,” ignoring the sophists who were paid to do just that.

the whole question of “exchanging wisdom for silver” (13) merits closer examination for, in fact, Socrates’s teaching was not free either.

“The whole idea of a free gift” argues Mary Douglas, “is based on a misunderstanding” which betrays “the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient” (vii). That refusal “puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties” by refusing the recipient the opportunity to reciprocate, thus putting them in a position of perpetual subordination. But, Douglas argues, it is in the nature of the gift to establish a bond of *mutual* obligation and friendship, such that, “the gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (vii). Indeed, argues Douglas, “free” gifts cannot help but incur debts of obligation and the signs (if not the reality) of gratitude upon the recipient.²⁰ By rejecting payment, Socrates does not mean to offer his wisdom “for free,” but rather to make grateful friends who—as gentlemen—would appreciate his society and either subordinate themselves to him (as followers) or return his favors with gifts and services when the need arose.²¹

Bourdieu’s study of the Kabyle clarified the social advantages of gifting by showing how even apparently “free” or unrequited gifts were, over time, reciprocated by way of homage, gratitude, respect, deference, or loyalty, resulting in a store of what he referred to as symbolic or cultural capital (112 ff; 125–126). Temporal delays and value transformations in gift exchange (from labor, products, or services to intangible forms of political or cultural capital) allow for exchange to be misperceived not as an assertion of power and advantage, but rather as just that beneficence, largesse, or kindness proper for a ruling elite. Gifts can then *seem* “free” when repayment is delayed and/or transformed into loyalty or service or “banked” as cultural or political capital. Van Wees summarizes the role of gift exchange in political mystification: “All forms of reciprocity in political life share one key feature: they deny, in effect, that a relation of power exists” (47).

In general then, whatever other functions gift exchange serves, it also disavows the relations of power that it helps to establish. Plato was careful in this regard to distinguish those (friends) who expressed gratitude to Socrates for his teaching, and those who did not.²² In this context, the sophistic

²⁰Parry (1989) and Laidlaw (2000) point to unrequited gifts (*dana*) given to Brahman priests and Jainist ascetics in northern India as an exception (perhaps one that proves the rule), although both emphasize that these gifts also in effect transfer sin and moral peril from the giver to the recipient, thus effecting a form of reciprocation within the gift itself.

²¹On Greek friendship and politics generally see Herman, Konstan, Mitchell, Hutter.

²²Socrates often expressed his reluctance to associate with someone as being due to the warning of his *daimon*, a deity that performs this function of mystification with admirable simplicity.

innovation stripped “trade in wisdom” from its elite mystification, revealing what it had always been: a concealed pursuit for “advantage” (as in Antiphon) through the patronage of clever speakers and the winning of loyal supporters among the privileged elite. That is, those who charged fees were stigmatized for failing to conceal (to honorably mystify in terms of generosity or friendship) the advantage (the *kerdos* or profit) that they sought to gain through trade in political wisdom, not unlike feminists who claim that while gender and marital relations are always power relations, at least prostitutes are paid up front for their services.

If the sophists could not be expected to offer their teachings and writings “for free,” then their expectation of monetary payment must have contradicted some alternative model of exchange appropriate for “trade in discourse.” That is, Socrates and Xenophon understood “wisdom,” technical ability in speech writing, or speeches themselves to be items available for exchange but under a different economic model or a different pattern of expectations. In this case, then, we should see sophistic fees not in terms of an opposition between the acquisitive sophists who charged for their wisdom and the benevolent philosophers who dispensed it freely, but between two different forms of exchange: one through the weighing of minted silver and the other through the winning of loyal followers. It was never that instruction in excellence and virtue forsook the utility of profit or advantage for the sake of friendship and civic-mindedness, but that this utility was delayed and transformed so that it could be systematically misrecognized as the virtue understood to be characteristic of elite social relations.

The sophists could charge fees only because virtuous, skillful, or authoritative discourse (rendered as *muthos*, *logos*, or a *logon techne*) was already embedded within ancient Greek gift-exchange culture. To merit a fee, rhetoric first had to be valued as a gift. The sophists merely transformed or “diverted” *sophia* as expressed through *logoi* (as speeches, forms of argument, or speaking ability generally) from its status as gift—given and reciprocated within a restricted (elite) gift economy—to a new kind of status, as commodity for sale in an open market economy. In this sense, they were economic innovators, transforming the value of wisdom discourse, expressed but mystified through the delayed gift, into clear and immediately quantifiable (and negotiable) terms.

Gift Exchange, Paths, and Diversions

For Mauss, gift exchange always implied three general obligations: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Beyond this general social requirement, every gift culture further circumscribes this generic set of

interlocking expectations—what Gouldner referred to as a “norm of reciprocity” and Appadurai as a “regime of value”—to establish the categories of persons that exchange, the kinds of objects available for exchange, the social situations within which exchange occurs, and the cultural and political consequences of exchange, producing a repertoire of exchange practices and expectations—a “sphere”—that remains sensitive to local contexts and situations (Gouldner 226–259; Appadurai 15).²³ Together the typical manner in which things are exchanged (or commoditized) can be thought of as the socially regulated “path” of the object. Because exchange is so central to social relations, knowing the paths is crucial to gaining and maintaining social status. Participants can gain recognition, honor, and respect as wise, benevolent, friendly, helpful, “free” (liberal or generous) by virtue of the skill with which they navigate these paths, giving and reciprocating with timing, tact, and grace.

By the same token, argues Appadurai, participants can elect to alter or modify existing paths for exchange, diverting old paths in new directions. New objects can be commoditized (as when experience points or objects within video or computer games are sold on ebay for “real” money), new situations established (as holidays like Sweetest day are invented as a new “tradition” for giving), new exchange partners introduced (as when new tariff laws or business practices open markets in new regions). The sophists, then, can be understood to have initiated just such a diversion, a commoditization of certain types of public discourse along a new social path that introduced not just fees, but a new pedagogical arrangement and context.

The conduct of exchange (along paths and diversion) can be highly consequential because, as Douglas comments, the system of giving *is* the social. Gifts properly given and reciprocated secure relationships (typically as a form of friendship or ritualized contract) between individuals, states, the living and the dead, and even between humans and gods; gifts create bonds of obligation and thus establish a frame for moral and ethical judgments. They facilitate social mobility, channel honor and prestige, redistribute goods and resources, cement alliances, and alter power relations (within and between persons or states) even across generations. There are few facets of the social that are not shaped in some way by exchange, including especially establishing and circulating regimes of value.

Giving thus carries significance far beyond the value of the items exchanged. Exchange practices require social awareness and skillful

²³See, for example, Appadurai and Kopytoff, who describe the commodity not as a type of object but as a phase in the “life history of the object” when it enters into exchange.

execution, and so become a fine indicator of the participant's character and their ability to read and respond appropriately to normative expectations across a range of social situations. Failures to give, accept, or reciprocate goods or services in the proper way and along proper paths (or through diversions that fail) can incur as much hostility and shame as successful exchange can bestow honor and prestige.

Consequently, significant diversions from established paths, like the initiation of a monetary payment for what had hitherto been circulated without recourse to money, could bring with it serious risks (like asking for cash for Christmas) but also benefits in the form of new customers and profits of easily tradable currency, both to the agents and to the cultural value norms that are expressed in the exchange. Little wonder then that Plato and his kin made reference to exchange practices to marginalize and shame their competitors as "sophists." This diversion was but one in a string of economic and social changes wrought by the rise of the *polis* and of coined money. What then was this "path" in the exchange of wise discourse prior to its sophistic diversion?

Rhetoric as Gift

Rhetorical interaction in ancient Greece parallels cultural patterns of gift exchange and norms of reciprocity at a number of levels. At a very basic level, the two share a common terminology. The gift as *pistis* functioned as an assurance or pledge of loyalty, a guarantor of trustworthiness given and received by two parties as a show of good faith. When the Greek army in Xenophon's *Anabasis* was returning home (the expedition's leader Cyrus having been killed), they sought to pass through the land of the Macronians. The Macronians then:

asked whether [the Greeks] would give pledges [that they came not to make war but merely to gain passage to the sea]. [The Greeks] replied that they were ready both to give and to receive pledges. Thereupon the Macronians gave the Greeks a barbarian lance and the Greeks gave them a Greek lance, for the Macronians declared that these were pledges; and both sides called the gods to witness. (Xenophon *Anabasis* 4.8.7)

The phrase "to give and receive pledges" (*pistin dounai kai labei*) or simply "to make pledges" (*pista poieisthai*) became a standard formula to describe the ritual exchange of tokens to prove good faith (Konstan 1996).

At a more strictly economic level, *pistis* also stands as a close approximation of "credit:" the value of funds placed at the disposal of a person for his future use, as well as the trust extended to a buyer or borrower that he will repay the value of funds or goods advanced to him (see, for example,

Demosthenes *For Phormio* 36.57). In this sense, *pistis* refers to how much one is “good for,” the level of trust or confidence that can be invested in them (Millett 1991, 7–8).

Aristotle defines rhetorical artistry in terms that echo the use of “*pistis*” in the realms of ritual-friendship and economics: the *pistis* is a proof and demonstration of the claim that is advanced, “shown” as a demonstration of the validity or trustworthiness of an argument, and given in exchange for the trust of the audience. Each of these kinds of *pisteis* (token, credit, proof) function to secure the validity of a claim (a promise, a loan, or an argument) through being shown or displayed and assessed (*apodeixis*) (Isocrates *Nicocles* 8; Aristotle *On Rhetoric* 1355b.35). Just as friendships and the trust they imply are “embodied” in and strengthened by the tokens or gifts exchanged or the credit extended, so, Aristotle argues, the *pistis* functions as the “body” of rhetorical artistry.

At the level of content as well, rhetorical arguments themselves frequently rely on claims of beneficence and or corruption based on giving (*eisphora* or *leitourgi*), doing favors (*kharis*), and taking bribes (Millett). Just as speakers establish their ethos by reminding the city of liturgies performed, and performed more lavishly and/or more frequently than required (or voluntarily performed in times of need), so opponents are charged with avoiding liturgies and taking bribes against the interests of the city. The prevalence of this gift/bribe *topos* indicates the level of importance played by euergetism in oratory as a form of proof, a sign of creditability, and a token of friendship.

And oratory itself becomes one of the items in these claims of giving and charges of bribery. That is, speakers frequently accuse each other of making speeches not out of true friendship or concern for the city’s best interest, but because they have been bribed or bought or can make a profit from it. Aeschines never misses the opportunity to accuse Demosthenes of saying “whatever his paymasters order” and befriending rich fatherless men who he promises to teach and then defrauds out of their wealth (*Against Timarchus* 170–172; *On the Embassy* 165–166; *Against Ctesiphon* 218–219). This charge should be read as a standard attack, framed and popularized by Plato, against the “sophistic” cluster: charging fees, teaching (false) wisdom, defrauding youths, and harming the city (Millett).

But even more significant than rhetorical terminology and the *topos* of the gift/ bribe are the ways in which rhetorical activity was itself treated as a kind of gift. Wise speech counted as an object of exchange (especially among politically active elites) within the ancient Greek gift economy. This exchange occurs at three levels: speeches themselves (and written letters and inscribed laws as records of speech) are given and received as gifts, speaking ability is

offered and repaid as a gift (a service), and speaking instruction is similarly treated as a gift that merits repayment.

The simplest examples of rhetorical exchange are instances in which individual speeches are treated as items of exchange to be reciprocated with gifts, services, or honors. The earliest instance in which we can see speeches exchanged for other goods or honors occurs in the description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*. In the description of the city at peace, we see a dispute over blood price settled by a judgment:

Elders were seated on benches of polished stone in a sacred circle and took hold in their hands scepters from the heralds who lift their voices. And with these they sprang up, taking turns, and rendered their judgments, and in their midst lay on the ground two weights of gold, to be given to the one among them who pronounced a judgment most correctly. (18.503–508)

In this case, the weights of gold might best be understood not as a form of money *per se* but as a gift of unwrought precious metal befitting nobles and judges. Neither the competitive, quasi-judicial nature of this episode nor the “prize” quality of the gold offering ought to deter our seeing this as fundamentally a form of gift-exchange. In fact, games and contests and the prizes that were awarded to the winner (like the booty won and taken by the victorious in battles and raids) can be similarly understood as a form of competitive, ritualized reciprocity as redistribution determined by merit. Note that the text refers not simply to the judgment itself (*dikēn*), but the words (*eipoi*) as meriting the gold prize.

Some five hundred years later, Demosthenes imagines that a speech of great service to a community would be worth a great deal of money (although it must not even appear to have been compensated in monetary terms):

You would give a lot of money (*chrēmata*), I expect, men of Athens, if it could become clear to you what will prove our best policy in the matters now under discussion. (1.1)

Of course, Demosthenes means for his own speech to be just that piece of policy advice, and thus worthy of ample return in some way, through various forms of honors and awards. Plato similarly refers (ironically) to the speakers whose proposals have been accepted as being honored (in exchange) with inscriptions bearing their names (*Phaedrus* 258a–b). But it is Isocrates, perhaps, who is most explicit about the value of his oratory understood within the context of the gift:

When men make it a habit, Nicocles, to bring to you who are rulers of kingdoms articles of dress or of bronze or of wrought gold, or other such

valuables of which they themselves have need and you have plenty, it seems to me all too evident that they are not engaged in giving but in bargaining, and that they are much more skillful in disposing of their wares than those who are professedly in trade. For my part, I should think that this would be the finest and the most serviceable present and the most suitable for me to give and for you to receive—I could prescribe what pursuits you should aspire to and from what you should abstain in order to govern to the best advantage your state and kingdom. (*To Nicocles* 2.1)

Isocrates makes it clear not only that his advice speech (in the form of a letter) functions in the same way as more conventional gifts (cloaks or wrought gold), but that it exceeds in value these other forms of giving not only because the King already possesses “plenty” of these more tangible kinds of gifts, but also because the advice gift is more useful to a ruler such as Nicocles than the bargainer’s “wares.” And the king apparently understood this value as well, having given Isocrates “great presents” for his advice on governing.²⁴

If the delivery of a speech can be seen as a form of gift to the individual or communal recipient whose interests it serves, then so can the ability to produce speeches when necessary. In *Memorabilia*, Xenophon presents to us just such a case in the relationship between Criton, a wealthy citizen harassed by sycophants, and Archdemus, a poor but honest “man of affairs” and an excellent speaker. The passage so nicely illustrates the place of rhetorical ability in gift exchange and friendship that it is worth quoting at length:

I remember that [Socrates] once heard Criton say that life at Athens was difficult for a man who wanted to mind his own business. “At this moment,” Criton added, “actions are pending against me not because I have done the plaintiffs an injury, but because they think that I would sooner pay than have trouble.”

“Tell me, Criton,” said Socrates, “do you keep dogs to fend the wolves from your sheep?”

“Certainly,” replied Criton, “because it pays me better to keep them.”

“Then why not keep a man who may be able and willing to fend off the attempts to injure you?”

“I would gladly do so were I not afraid that he might turn on me.”

“What? Don’t you see that it is much pleasanter to profit by humoring a man like you than by quarrelling with him? I assure you there are men in this city who would take pride in your friendship.”

²⁴In this passage, Isocrates disputes the charge that he has been given presents (or bribes) by Nicocles not by saying that he has not received these presents, but by arguing that they were not for judicial speeches he wrote (since a King would not need to defend himself in court) but for his deliberative advice.

Thereupon they sought out Archedemus, an excellent speaker and man of affairs, but poor. For he was not one of those who make money unscrupulously, but an honest man, and he would say that it was easy to take forfeit from false accusers. So whenever Criton was storing corn, oil, wine, wool or other farm produce, he would make a present of a portion to Archedemus, and when he sacrificed, he invited him, and in fact lost no similar opportunity of showing courtesy. Archedemus came to regard Criton's house as a haven of refuge and constantly paid his respects to him. He soon found out that Criton's false accusers had much to answer for and many enemies. He brought one of them to trial on a charge involving damages or imprisonment. The defendant, conscious that he was guilty on many counts, did all he could to get quit of Archedemus. But Archedemus refused to let him off until he withdrew the action against Criton and compensated him. Archedemus carried through several other enterprises of a similar kind; and now many of Criton's friends begged him to make Archedemus their protector. (2.9.3–7)

The passage demonstrates how speaking ability itself could figure in gift exchange for other goods and honors (farm products and courtesy) and in the formation of “friendships” that also bear some similarity to the Roman client/patron relationship: in this case Archedemus can be seen as the patron or protector of his client Criton, despite the former's poverty and the latter's wealth. We can see, however, the potential for the skilled speaker or logographer to become quite well-known and wealthy as a result of his friendship with wealthy elites. Unlike the earlier example, this text shows not just speeches, but speaking skill (*logon technē*) itself as a socially and politically valuable ability, able to be called upon when needed, and comparable to other skills, services, or resources available for exchange (for corn, oil, wine, etc). It can thus be read to refer to the practitioners of an unwritten *logon technē* in the fifth century as well as Plato's later coining of the narrower term *rhetorikē*.

Finally, speaking ability can be seen as a type of euergetism in the form of *instruction* in speaking (and, more generally, in the wide range of cultural wisdom which was tied to proper speech and with which the sophists were associated). Here, we can return to the scene referred to in the beginning of this article in which Socrates offers his view of instruction in virtue as a gift befitting friends:

Antiphon, it is common opinion among us in regard to beauty and wisdom that there is an honorable and a shameful way of bestowing them. For to offer ones' beauty for money to all comers is called prostitution; but we think it virtuous to become friendly with a lover who is known to be a man of honor. So is it with wisdom. Those who offer it to all comers for money are known as sophists, prostitutes of wisdom, but

we think that he who makes a friend of one whom he knows to be gifted by nature, and teaches him all the good he can, fulfills the duty of a citizen and a gentleman. (1.6.13–14)

We might compare this attitude with that of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, where Socrates emphasizes the value of moral instruction over that of physical prowess, and he proposes that his punishment for his crimes (disbelieving in the gods, making the weaker case defeat the stronger, and teaching youth to do so as well) be dinners in the Prytanium (the city hall and state dining room) at the city's expense, a privilege reserved for winning athletes, sitting councilmen, visiting dignitaries, and other public benefactors (36b–39a). Although a tone of irony can be read into this response, Socrates nevertheless saw himself as doing a favor to the city more important than that bestowed by winning athletes, who were "repaid" for the fame they brought the city with just these forms of honor: dinners in the Prytaneum as well as wreaths, statues, and other honors.

Socrates, Plato, and teachers of virtue and wisdom generally are not unlike the sophists in finding their teaching worthy of remuneration; the philosophers simply conceal the economic nature of the exchanges in discourse that they engage in, preferring to disguise them as the winning of a loyal friend's affection rather than the gaining of an advantage measurable in minted silver. Underneath the variability in the forms that the exchange takes lays a common estimation of the value of discourse and its ability to confer advantage or profit.

Conclusion

I would like to end with the admission of Protagoras. Concerning his own teaching, Protagoras remarks that his profession is an old one that dates back to Homer, and includes musicians, prophets, singers, poets, and lawgivers. These predecessors, however, "adopted a disguise and worked under cover," fearing the odium associated with sophistry (*Protagoras* 316d). But I, says Protagoras, "admit to being a sophist and an educator, and consider this a better precaution—admission rather than denial" (317b).

Given the ways in which patterns of elite giving can disguise assertions of power as benevolence and servitude as friendship, the sophist's decision to charge fees for instruction in wisdom can be seen as consistent with this preference for "admission rather than denial." In this sense, the sophists are those who admit that teaching wisdom in discourse is valuable to a city and merits a measurable return rather than denying the advantages (*kerdeia*) conferred by socially useful abilities and the "friends" they can buy. Just as

he prefers to admit teaching wisdom, Protagoras prefers to measure and claim for himself the value of his wisdom rather than misrecognizing it under the cloak of gentlemanly kindness and friendship achieved through gift giving. What's more, the sophist's preference for market exchange signals a commitment to uncovering the conventional and social bases for apparently natural or divinely instituted values and norms (rendered as virtue or wisdom), particularly the value of discourse in political wisdom and virtue.

That is, the sophistic desire to render transparent the fiduciary basis of trade in authoritative discourse (i.e., to charge fees for teaching) is supported by a more general interest in making explicit the conventional, social, and human (rather than natural or divine) bases of valuation and judgment generally. Those teachers committed to exploring the limits of *nomos* and *phusis* in human life might be expected to show a related interest in the conventional and symbolic value of *nomismata* (currency) vis à vis the traditional or essential value of the gift. Unlike gifts, whose value seems to be an essential quality of the thing itself (its uniqueness, its beauty or workmanship, the technical virtuosity it displays, its elite provenance and history, its use-value, or its "spirit"),²⁵ the value of coinage was (and was recognized by Greeks to be) conventional and fiduciary: it depended on the trust and acceptance of the people.²⁶ Unlike those who saw wisdom as "essentially" valuable based on inherent qualities (like truthfulness), Protagoras set the value of his teaching at "what the market would bear" (offering, for example, to allow students to deposit what they thought his teaching was worth as an offering at a temple if they felt his fees to be too steep).

Little wonder then that Protagoras's most famous aphorism concerns the conventional and human basis for the valuation of goods. Seaford notes that translators and commentators consistently misinterpret Protagoras's "man is the measure" dicta (Man is the measure of all things: those that are, that they are, and those that are not, that they are not)—following "Plato's polemical interpretation," (285)—to obscure its economic significance, taking "*metron*" for "criterion," "judgment," or "master" rather than the more common usage of "quantitative limit or measure" (285) and "*chrēmata*" for the more inclusive "things" or "experiences" rather than the more typical "goods or money" (287).

²⁵The notion of an inherent value or power within the gift object was expressed most strongly by Mauss himself, who posited that, for gift cultures, the gift embodied the "spirit" of the giver (the *hau* of the gift) which obliged the recipient to reciprocate the gift.

²⁶Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (1133a b), and expressed in the adage that, locked in a room of gold and figs, it soon becomes clear how much more valuable are the figs.

Seaford's goal in pointing this out is to note the role of money as a principle of quantitative limit or measure in contributing to the intellectual revolution that Protagoras and other sophists achieved. Money as a conventionally established, abstract, and universal measure of value, argues Seaford, contributed to sophistic awareness of the social basis of apparently "natural" values and norms generally. Whereas Plato sought to essentialize monetary value (and the process of valuation generally) by giving it a divine origin in the soul (*Republic* 416e–417a), Protagoras sought to demythologize the apparently objective realm of value, revealing its purely conventional and subjective source in collective agreement and cultural perception. By charging fees for their services, they could demonstrate and perform the culturally established value of their wisdom, and of "wisdom" generally in a way that could not be achieved through the assertion of doctrine alone. Restored to its proper context, fees for teaching can be seen as the natural outgrowth of the larger political program of those economic innovators whom Plato despised as "sophists."

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