

THE SOPHISTS

An Introduction

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Euthydemus and Dionysodorus

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Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are said to have been brothers from Chios. This island in the Aegean across from ancient Smyrna (modern Izmir) was home to the poet Simonides and reputed to be the birthplace of Homer. Like the sons of Cephalus, namely Polemarchus, Euthydemus and Lysias, who appear in Plato's *Republic*, and the historian Herodotus, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were involved in the founding of a new Athenian colony at Thurii in Southern Italy in the 440s BC. This colonisation was led by the sophist Protagoras at the request of Pericles. After the Sicilian expedition (Athens' attempt to take Sicily in the Peloponnesian War) ended in disaster for Athens in 413, those with Athenian sympathies were exiled from Thurii, and this group of exiles included our two sophists. They are said by Plato in *Euthydemus* to have been in and around Athens for several years; they are rather old, and Socrates himself is old, which places the dialogue in the range of the last decade of the fifth century, at which time Socrates was in his sixties and these men perhaps a little older.

Most of our information about the two sophists comes from Plato's dialogue *Euthydemus*. In the nineteenth century Schliermacher assumed the dialogue to be directed at Plato's contemporary Antisthenes, a one-time pupil of the sophist Gorgias, but later a follower of Socrates and founder of the cynic sect. Indeed in *Euthydemus* (285dff.) we see Dionysodorus employing an argument of Antisthenes' about speaking falsely, which is said to be impossible, given that it is not possible to speak of what is not. Despite the fact that Socrates says that he has heard it on many occasions, and seen the idea employed by Protagoras and his followers, and in spite of the fact that Parmenides claims in his poem *On Nature* that 'you cannot speak of what is not', scholars ascribe the argument to Antisthenes. On the assumption that the dialogue is directed at Antisthenes, and that the two sophists here depicted are fictional, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were omitted from Diels' collection of fragments of the sophists; they re-appear in Sprague's *The Older Sophists*, and more recent works on the sophists have followed suit, including recent books edited by Waterfield (2000) and Dillon and Gergel (2003).

That the two men were in fact real, and not merely an invention of Plato employed as an attack against Antisthenes, is evidenced by the fact that Xenophon discusses Dionysodorus in his *Memoirs of Socrates* (*Memora-*

bilia I.1.1), and Aristotle twice refers to an argument of Euthydemus, once in *Rhetoric* (1401a27) and once in *Sophistical Refutations* (177b12), an argument that does not come from Plato's dialogue. According to Xenophon, Socrates' assessment of Dionysodorus' skill at teaching generalship was rather inadequate and suspect. According to Aristotle, Euthydemus was known to have offered a rather silly argument to the effect that one knows there is a trireme in the Piraeus because one knows what a trireme is, what the Piraeus is and what 'is in' means. Plato also refers to Euthydemus outside the dialogue that bears his name, in a passage in *Cratylus* where Euthydemus is said to have maintained that everything always has every attribute simultaneously (386d). The evidence, scant as it is from sources other than Plato's *Euthydemus*, seems to suggest that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were real people.

Having said that, the information we have about the two sophists outside Plato's *Euthydemus* amounts to little more than a few lines, and as such we are dependent on Plato for our knowledge of them, much as we are dependent on Plato for our knowledge of Socrates. Thus Sprague, in reintroducing Euthydemus and Dionysodorus into her canon of early sophists, must admit that it may be preferable to call the 'fragments', the bulk of which are from *Euthydemus*, 'Euthydemian' rather than attributing the ideas and arguments that Plato depicts them as employing as authentic *testimonia* of their work. Knowledge of the specific arguments of the two men is further hampered by the fact that Plato's treatment of them in the dialogue is highly farcical, ironic and directed at the nature of degenerate sophistry in general, and hence likely to be a *mélange* of sophistic approaches rather than a record of the specific arguments employed by the two men. It has already been remarked above that the argument about speaking falsely has been employed by others. The overlap between another argument in *Euthydemus* about whether the wise or the ignorant learn and the famous paradox in *Meno* (*Euthydemus* 275dff.; *Meno* 80e) also suggests that we are being treated to a display of stock sophistic arguments in *Euthydemus* rather than a collection of authentic thoughts of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Given the manner in which Plato chooses to depict the performance of the two men in his dialogue, this is not surprising. They emerge as hacks that rely on memorised set arguments, presented in such a way as to show their real skill to be that of choreography as opposed to education. We can say something about the approach of the two men, bearing in mind that we must interpret this approach through Plato, whose intention is clearly highly critical and uncomplimentary. As this chapter is meant to be an assessment of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, it may seem odd to spend so much time discussing Plato; given our scant sources this is inevitable, and it does allow us to see how Plato regarded the two men, and what he saw as wrong with their approach, thus allowing us to build up a reasonable, if biased, picture of their activities. For while Plato does seem to have accorded

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sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias some modicum of respect, the same cannot be said for his treatment of Dionysodorus and Euthydemus. I will dispense with any discussion of the literary structure of *Euthydemus*, famous for its frame of Socrates' report to Crito about his meeting with the two sophists the previous day, and instead focus on what Plato has Socrates actually report.

In the opening of *Euthydemus*, we find Dionysodorus and Euthydemus giving a display of their skills in the Lyceum, a gymnasium on the outskirts of Athens. The Lyceum was a favourite haunt of Socrates, and later became the site of Aristotle's school. Now while it is true that from a historical point of view the Lyceum would have been a likely place for itinerant sophists to give exhibitions of their skills in the hope of attracting new students, from a literary and inter-textual point of view it must have been hard for Plato to resist the connotations of the Lyceum for the pastiche of the two sophists that he is about to mount. This is worth remarking on as a reply to scholars such as Schliermacher who questioned the dialogue's authenticity on the grounds that it was a childish farce unworthy of Plato. In the first instance, one may recall the opening lines of Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Euthyphro asks Socrates why he is on the steps of the court of the King Archon, instead of his usual haunt, the Lyceum (*Euthyphro* 2a). The overture suggests that while Socrates may fare well in a place of open and fair competition, he may not fare so well in the land of forensic oratory. We shall soon see in *Euthydemus* that the display put on by the two brothers from Chios is anything but fair and open. It is, rather, sport, or play, as Socrates himself puts it – the two sophists, being asked to give a display of what they profess to teach, proceed to beguile the youth Cleinias (a relative of the notorious Athenian general Alcibiades) with verbal trickery, until Socrates wades into the argument to put a stop to it.

One of the interesting points that emerge from Socrates' introduction of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus to Cleinias in the opening scene is that Socrates has seen the two men before, but under a different guise. Socrates knows them as martial arts instructors, and also as forensic speechwriters, and introduces them as such to Cleinias, an introduction that is met with mild dismay by the two sophists, who now, it seems, have taken on a new profession, the teaching of virtue:

So I greeted the two brothers, as not having seen them for some time; after that I said to Cleinias: 'My dear Cleinias, these two men, you know, are skilled not in little things, but in great. For they understand all about war, that is, as much as is needful for him who is to be a good general; both the tactics and the strategy of armies, and all the teaching of troops under arms; and they can also enable one to get redress in the law courts for a wrong that one may have suffered.'

When I had said this, I saw they despised me for it, and they both laughed,

looking at each other; then Euthydemus said: 'No, no, Socrates, we do not make those matters our business now; we deal with them as diversions.'

At this I wondered and said: 'Your business must be a fine one, if such great matters are indeed diversions to you; so I beseech you, tell me what this fine business is.'

'Virtue, Socrates', he replied, 'is what we deem ourselves able to purvey in a pre-eminently excellent and speedy manner' (*Euthydemus* 273c-d).

Presumably the two brothers would have preferred to be introduced as professors of virtue, as it would be in their business interests for their reputation as such to have preceded them. The fact that this is an art that they have just recently 'perfected' and the fact that they claim to be able to impart virtue quickly and easily to all and sundry for a fee is bound to raise eyebrows, and indeed the whole jack-of-all-tradesmanship of these characters indicates what Plato would have us make of these men. They are charlatans, hustlers out to cash in on whatever seems most profitable. Socrates, ironically or not, praises the men's skill at martial arts to Cleinias. Given the circumstance, one suspects that Socrates is being ironic in this praise, an assumption which is strengthened somewhat when one considers that the report of Dionysodorus' skill in teaching generalship in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is directed at the shallowness of the instruction given:

'...tell us the first lesson [Dionysodorus] gave you in generalship.'

'The first was like the last,' he replied; 'he taught me tactics – nothing else.'

'But then that is only a small part of generalship. ... Well and good, provided that he taught you also to distinguish the good and the bad men. If not, what have you gained by your lessons ...'

'I assure you he didn't; so we should have to judge for ourselves which are the good men and which are the bad.'

'But,' said Socrates, 'did he teach you only the disposition of an army, or did he include where and how to use each formation?'

'Not at all.'

'And yet there are many situations that call for a modification of tactics and strategy.'

'I assure you he didn't explain that.'

'Then pray go back and ask him. If he knows and has a conscience, he will be ashamed to send you home ill-taught, after taking your money' (*Memorabilia* III.1.5-11).

On the surface, the way in which Socrates describes the sophists' treatment of Cleinias in *Euthydemus* shows that the two are disputatious and show little regard for the truth. They make a spectacle of the boy, employing set arguments grounded in double meanings and verbal ambiguities designed to confound and confuse an interlocutor, all to the cheers and laughter of a band of admirers. Plato conveys the sense of the spectacle of a doomed gladiator falling again and again to the cheers of a bloodthirsty

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audience. The vivid description of the carnival-like atmosphere generated by the showmanship of the two brothers can be seen in the following passage, wherein Cleinias' initial claim, that it is the foolish and not the wise who learn, is contradicted by stock sophistical argumentation:

When he had thus spoken, all those followers of Dionysodorus and Euthydemus raised a cheer and a laugh, like a chorus at the signal of their director; and before the boy could fairly and fully recover his breath Dionysodorus took up the cudgels and said: 'Well now, Cleinias, whenever your writing-master dictated from memory, which of the boys learnt the piece recited, the wise or the foolish?'

'The wise,' said Cleinias.

'So it is the wise who learn, and not the foolish: hence the answer you gave just now to Euthydemus was a bad one.'

Thereupon arose a great deal of laughter and loud applause from the pair's adorers, in admiration of their cleverness; while we on our side were dismayed and held our peace. Then Euthydemus, observing our dismay, and seeking to astonish us still further, would not let the boy go, but went on questioning him and, like a skilful dancer, gave a twofold twist to his questions on the same point: 'Now, do the learners learn what they know, he asked, or what they do not?'

Then Dionysodorus whispered to me again softly: 'Here comes a second one, Socrates, just like the first.'

'Heavens!' I replied: 'Surely the first question served you well enough.'

'All our questions, Socrates,' he said, 'are like that; they leave no escape' (*Euthydemus* 276b-e).

As Euthydemus is questioning Cleinias, his brother Dionysodorus keeps a running side-commentary on how the arguments are destined to defeat Cleinias, that he has no escape, whispering his remarks to Socrates, who is less than impressed. The two brothers are depicted as working in tandem, picking up each other's cues and playing with Cleinias as if tossing a ball to and fro in a highly choreographed display of confounding verbal eristic.

Some scholars have approached *Euthydemus* as Plato's attempt to list, systematically or unsystematically, sophistical arguments, arguments that were to be rendered more systematically by Aristotle in his *Sophistical Refutations*. However, as Thomas Chance has argued quite convincingly, we gain more insight into the dialogue if we focus on the role that protreptic or exhortation to virtue plays in it, examining the dialogue on its own terms, independently of the question of the specifics of the sophistical argumentation that places the focus of Plato's intention on the nature of philosophical protreptic (Chance 1992, *passim*).

Protreptic in Plato is often ignored, which is a shame insofar as a better understanding of it yields a better understanding of Plato's philosophy in general, and grants deeper insight into why it is that Plato gave the name 'sophist' the negative connotation it presently has. In addition to the idea

that the sophist is a *banautos*, someone who ‘sells himself’, the kind of ‘education’ offered up by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus is mere showmanship that should not be taken seriously. But if they are not to be taken seriously, we are left with a deeper philosophical question as to why Plato took the time to address them. This seems to be the force of Crito’s remarks in *Euthydemus* itself, which suggest that the readiness to engage in discussion with such people before a large company is worthy of reproach (*Euthydemus* 305b). Read a certain way, *Euthydemus* delves into a deeper danger of sophistry, one that Plato goes to great lengths to distinguish from philosophy. For on the surface there is much similarity between the methodology of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus and that of Socrates. Both sides employ eristic arguments, both quibble with words, both use a question-and-answer method that points up contradictions in their interlocutors’ beliefs. The difference between the sophistic employment of these tools and the way that Socrates employs them is the direction to which the result points. That is, in the case of our two sophists in *Euthydemus*, once the show is over, we are left wondering what the next step is. What is the point of merely confounding an opponent once the applause and cheers have died? Plato is striving, it seems, to show that there is no point. That this is the point to which Clitophon is brought at the end of the curious dialogue that bears his name (*Clitophon* 408e), and that *Clitophon* is one of few Platonic works that mentions protreptic explicitly will be of significance for the deeper target of Plato’s assessment of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

For Socrates has asked the two sophists to give a demonstration of how to exhort a student to take up the study of virtue, and to take it up with them. That is, Socrates has asked the two sophists to show how they would convince someone who was unaware of the need to seek instruction in virtue that it is indeed necessary. Socrates even offers what he says is a rudimentary and amateurish protreptic discourse, in order to elicit from the men what he expects will be a more professionally polished and convincing version of the same. This of course is not forthcoming, and the sophists lapse into more and more absurd and untenable ‘sophisms’, evoking the ire of Cleinias’ lover Ctesippus and making them appear more and more ridiculous, amateur and shallow in contrast to the sincere if rudimentary goals of Socrates’ philosophical protreptic.

Since Demetrius of Phaleron (born c. 350 BC), it has generally been thought that Platonic protreptic is implicit, the intended result of Socratic elenchus (questioning or cross-examination) and *aporia* (the confusion resulting from elenchus) procedures that is not explicitly spoken. That the Socratic method, in its fundamental outlook and aim, is explicitly or implicitly the exhortation to the care of the soul is borne out by Socrates’ own assessment of his Apollonian mission in the *Apology*, by Alcibiades’ drunken encomium on Socrates in *Symposium*, and by Clitophon’s complaints in *Clitophon*. Even in *Meno*, a dialogue which has resonances with

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Euthydemus, as has already been observed, Socrates explicitly suggests that the goal of *aporia* and indeed of the theory of recollection offered to Meno are protreptic in intention and meant to offer an alternative to the arguments of eristic debaters.

In short, what *Euthydemus* points out is that in the degenerate sophistry represented by the two brothers from Chios, there is no profit to be had in terms of wisdom, and as Socrates himself puts the point in the course of the dialogue, no profit can come from any skill that does not employ wisdom. But wisdom, in the final analysis, is commensurate with the care of the soul, and it is precisely this that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, professed experts in virtue, fail to grasp. Education, as Socrates tells us explicitly in his *Republic*, is not imparting knowledge by pouring sight into blind eyes – as many professional educators think that it is (*Republic* 518b-c). This seems to be intended as a reproach to the irate candour of Thrasymachus, who earlier offers to pour his argument into Socrates' soul in order to make him understand – Socrates emphatically refuses (*Republic* 345b). This difference in approaches, grounded as it is in the assumption made explicit in *Euthydemus*, that protreptic is an integral prerequisite to instruction in virtue, and that education is not merely the imparting of a skill, is a point that is suggested at many places in the Platonic corpus. Socrates in *Symposium*, on touching Agathon's cloak, laments that knowledge cannot be imparted by physical contact (*Symposium* 175d). Meno, the pupil of Gorgias, is someone who wants knowledge to be handed over to him on a plate, and Clitophon suffers from the same ailment in his demand that Socrates tell him what justice is. In short the limitation of Euthydemian sophistry is such that it fails to grasp the true nature of education, the true value of philosophy, the importance of protreptic, and the patience and time needed to master virtue.

That Plato would go to great pains to point this out, whether as a response to Isocrates, as many have suggested about the unnamed critic at the end of *Euthydemus*, or as a general statement of the Platonic approach to education, or perhaps more plausibly as a defence of Socrates against charges of sophism in the court of Athens or the court of public opinion, casts Dionysodorus and Euthydemus in sharp relief.

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