

The Return of the Sophist

Roger Scruton

The ancient Athenians, who roved far and wide in the Mediterranean, saw the variety and absurdity of man's religions. After centuries of successful trading, the local gods and festivals could no longer satisfy their religious need. Their spiritual hunger was exacerbated by the stress of city life, by the constant threat of destruction, and by the grim vision of totalitarian Sparta: the vision of Greeks living without light or grace or humour, as though the gods had withdrawn from their world.

Into the crowded space of Periclean Athens came the wandering teachers, selling their wisdom to the bewildered populace. Any charlatan could make a killing, if enough people believed in him. Men like Gorgias and Protagoras, who wandered from house to house demanding fees for their instruction, preyed on the gullibility of a people made anxious by war. To the young Plato, who observed their antics with outrage, these "sophists" were a threat to the very soul of Athens. One alone among them seemed worthy of attention, and that one, the great Socrates whom Plato immortalised in his dialogues, was not a sophist, but a true philosopher.

The philosopher, in Plato's characterisation, awakens the spirit of inquiry. He helps his listeners to discover the truth, and it is they who bring forth, under his catalysing influence, the answer to life's riddles. The philosopher is the midwife, and his duty is to help us to be what we are—free and rational beings, who lack nothing that is required to understand our condition. The sophist, by contrast, misleads us with cunning fallacies, takes advantage of our weakness, and offers himself as the solution to problems of which he himself is the cause.

There are many signs of the sophist, but principal among them are these: mumbo-jumbo, condescension and the taking of fees. The philosopher uses plain language, does not talk down to his audience, and never asks for payment. Such was Socrates, and in proposing him as an ideal, Plato defined the social status of the philosopher for centuries to come.

No one should doubt that sophistry is alive and well. Many of today's gurus are sophists: Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Lyotard, Rorty, to name but five. But those that are alive make their profits through the university system, giving lectures that pretend to be educational. The pre-Socratic practice, of offering private guidance to the bewildered and curing their troubles by squeezing their purse (a practice which creates a powerful motive to leave bewilderment behind), has been the monopoly until recently of the psychoanalysts.

But we have entered the post-modern era—the era when beliefs and faiths are available off the shelf. More and more people are turning to philosophy, a kind of *Which?* report on available options. And what is the use of guidance if it cannot be packaged for the consumer, as the personal ointment to his personal wound? Louis Marinoff, Professor of Philosophy at New York's City College, has been first off the mark in exploiting the new cultural climate. If philosophy is to be marketed successfully, then people must pay for it. For people value goods according to the price required to obtain them, and in a consumer culture only what is costly can console.

Professor Marinoff compares his goods favourably with those of the psychotherapist. Discussing a recent case in which he treated a woman haunted by her dead brother's spirit, he said: "Psychotherapists would say she is recreating the guilt triggered by her brother's death. But it may be possible, according to some belief systems, that there was something there. I am there to help the client understand her belief system."

The remarks were reported in the *New York Observer*, and may not be verbatim. But they tell us much about the professor's vision of his trade. No longer does the philosopher guide us towards the truth, through awakening our inherent reasoning powers. He parades before us a catalogue of "belief systems", helps us to identify our own among them, up-to-date. And no doubt in order to persuade the client that her money has been well invested, the favoured "belief system" will be dressed up in suitable mumbo-jumbo, and priced at a rate that will make it psychologically necessary for the client to persuade herself that she is being cured.

Small wonder, then, that Professor Marinoff's wheeze is catching on, and New York's psychotherapists are hurriedly lowering their fees in response to the only competition they have had since the collapse of the old religions.

The sophists are back with a vengeance, and are all the more to be feared, in that they come disguised as philosophers. For, in this time of helpless relativism and subjectivity, philosophy alone has stood against the tide, reminding us that those crucial distinctions on which life depends - between true and false, good and evil, right and wrong—are objective and binding. Philosophy has until now spoken with the accents of the academy and not with the voice of the fortune teller.

When Plato founded the first academy, and placed philosophy at the heart of it, he did so in order to protect the precious store of knowledge from the assaults of charlatans, to create a kind of temple to truth in the midst of falsehood, and to marginalise the sophists who preyed on human confusion. Little did he suspect, however, that he was providing the sophist with his ultimate disguise.

Originally published as

Scruton, R. (1997). The Return of the Sophist. *The Times* (London), 11 August. Reprinted in *Practical Philosophy*, 1.1, June 1998.