



ISSN: 3085-6434

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71263/fc0qgj88>

*Submitted 12/2025*

*Approves 01/2026*

## PLATO'S SOPHIST THEORY OF THE "GORGIAS" AND THE SOCRATIC DIALECTIC OR THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES

*Eduardo Portanova Barros<sup>1</sup>*

*Sebastião Francisco de Almeida Filho<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Collaborating Professor of the Graduate Program in Philosophy at (PROF-FILO) IF Sertão-PE, researcher at the Philosophical Sertão Research Group, GEIPaT (Study Group of Imaginary, Landscape and Transculturality - UFG/CNPq) and CEAQ (Center d'Études sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien Université de Paris V-Sorbonne). E-mail: [eduardoportanova@hotmail.com](mailto:eduardoportanova@hotmail.com). ORCID:0001-5832-5711.

<sup>2</sup> Permanent Professor of the Professional Master's Degree in Philosophy (PROF-FILO) at IF SertãoPE. Orcid: [0000-0002-6222-3790](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6222-3790)

**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks to overcome the dichotomy between the philosophy of relativistic bias professed by the Sophists and the Socratic maieutics of a dialectical nature through the analysis of one of the books of the phase of "maturity" or transition, by Plato, which is "Gorgias". The theme is justified by the fact that, in this work, Plato stimulates the debate between Gorgias himself and the "wisest of men", according to the oracle of Delphi, who was Socrates. Despite two dichotomous views, namely, the Rhetoric and the Episteme, that is, the Socratic "elenkos", which is the exposure of the ignorance of their interlocutors, we consider both dependent on each other, which, if we also followed a philosophical bias, would come close to what Heraclitus of Ephesus had called the "unity of opposites".

**KEYWORDS:** Gorgias, Plato, Socrates, Sophists, Greek philosophy.

## INTRODUCTION

We start from an analysis, here, of the relationship between the Sophist philosophy, of a circular nature, and the Socratic ascetic ideal of searching for Truth through dialectical argumentation. It is a long academic debate about the origins of relativism. If for "Gorgias", in Plato (427-347 B.C.), there is no One, because it is unlikely that it will be

possible to establish what one "is", for Socrates (470-399 B.C.), the refuter of Gorgias, through his maieutic methodology or bringing to light (like his mother who was a midwife by trade), what defines us is, yes, the Truth. For Nietzsche, in fact, Socrates, using this dialectical method, "(...) it takes away the power of the adversary's intellect" (2006, p. 20). From this point of view, it would not be absurd to qualify Nietzsche as a sophist, unlike Socrates, called a "fencer" (idem) by the German philosopher.

The problem is to know what the Truth is about? In this "Gorgias", a dialogue of Plato's "mature" phase, he seeks to present, as his main argument, the "art" of Rhetoric, which is fluid in nature, which would be distinguished from a classical dialectic and the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction<sup>3</sup>. This means that Rhetoric - practiced by Gorgias, in this case - would produce "an adherence to discourse in an opinionated scenario", which would result, and this is a criticism of Socrates to the Sophists, in the fact that, for them, everything can be right and at the same time wrong or consider themselves to be possessed of an art that, for Socrates, it is not rational (derived from Reason). The central point, therefore, of this Socratic refusal to accept Rhetoric as art, in fact, is the distinction, for him,

---

<sup>3</sup> This means that a proposition or sentence could not be true and false at the same time.

Socrates, between *doxa* (opinion) and knowledge (*episteme*).

For an argument, according to Socrates, to be considered valid, acceptable or scientific (we could add here) there would have to be, in the first place, a clear distinction between two poles: V and F. This difference already established, at the outset, between what is Truth (V) and what is False (F), in an argumentative context, is what is called dialectic. That is, A is A and if A is A, that same A cannot be non-A. For the Socratic dialectic, this same dialectic in which he, Socrates, is the Objector (O) in the Platonic dialogues, as in this "Gorgias", could not exist - at the same time - A and non-A, as the Sophists want. The Sophist was not a philosopher, properly speaking, and there is much discussion about whether or not the art of this Sophist rhetoric could be Philosophy (as we understand it today).

A sophist like Gorgias, among others who demanded for his knowledge, would have "to" persuade<sup>4</sup> - we will see other characteristics and distinctions between Rhetoric and Dialectic in the course of this analysis - beyond his limitations, and therefore refuse that there is, for him, a sophist, a difference from the dialectical point of

---

<sup>4</sup> Persuasion, for the Greeks, is the strength of speech. At a certain point in this "Gorgias", Socrates asks him if what he, Gorgias, believed was that two forms of persuasion should be established, the one that instills belief without knowing it, on the one hand, and the one that infuses knowledge, on the other. Gorgias answers in the affirmative: "Absolutely" (2016, p. 198).

view, as Socrates wants, between doxa (opinion) and knowledge (episteme). In theory, the Socratic dialectic needs to have a close link with Truth; that is, there cannot be a valid argument resulting only from an opinionated bias based only on a belief without rational and/or investigative foundation, unlike the sophist, who, in turn, transforms the world into a state of appearances about any and all discourse, since anything seems to serve the sophist discourse. For him, a sophist, it is nothing.

## THE RHETORIC

Another point already mentioned above, but which it seems necessary to address, is that, as we have seen, Rhetoric would be the art of producing opinions through discourses. And producing speeches, for the sophists, is the same as persuading. For Socrates, however, objecting to Gorgias' rhetoric, knowledge is epistemic in nature. Doxa and episteme, according to Socrates, are different things, because episteme seeks - when it comes to knowledge - the revelation of Truth. Rhetoric, on the other hand, could never be a kind of rational foundation for any argumentation, since, in the words of him, Socrates, "lacks Reason". For Nietzsche, however, Socratic reason was contrary to the instinctive nature of Greek art, which was tragic (unavoidable) rather than dramatic (resolutive).

Rhetoric, for Socrates, therefore, would not be capable of producing episteme, in short. Producing episteme or knowledge, through the dialectical bias, is one of Socrates' main justifications for admitting that an argument is considered valid or acceptable. Socrates goes even further, and observes that there are two kinds of persuasion. One, concerning science. Another, based on mere belief (opinion or doxa). The consequence (455c-d) is that the mode of rhetorical persuasion would be based on mere belief. Let us remember, first, that, for Gorgias, the main purpose of rhetoric is persuasion and that he, Gorgias, presents himself as an expert in this "art" of Rhetoric. For Socrates, however, Rhetoric is not art, because it would be linked only to perceptions, which would be flawed.

But that's not all. He, Gorgias, also believes himself capable of forming orators. But, for Socrates, Rhetoric would not be characterized by being art of any kind. Socrates criticizes Sophistic Rhetoric, also in "Theaetetus" - which deals with the distinction between judgments - for not having a notion of the means to which it resorts or knowing how to explain the cause of all of them. It is in the introduction to the "Theaetetus" (from 149c), therefore, that we can also verify a dialectical way of proceeding with the so-called Socratic maieutics, that is, the art of midwives - as was the "profession" of Socrates' own mother - and hence its analogy - of "bringing to light" knowledge or Reason. Socrates will object that episteme

"maintains an intrinsic link with Truth", while opinion serves for any and all subjects.

The art of maieutic argumentation, in other words, was a way of evaluating the legitimacy of what had been treated, conceived, transforming the dialogue into a moment of investigation. Addendum: the Sophists had the pretension of knowing, so for them, the world is the way in which this same world appears to the being. For the Sophists, in the final analysis, being would have several meanings. Therefore, the sophist must deny the principle of non-contradiction. Rhetoric, therefore, would not be capable of producing episteme, because it would not regulate the capacity of its discourse to reveal being, persuading in mere opinion, according to the dialectical bias. Therefore, according to Socrates, as we also emphasized when we made the distinction between Rhetoric and Dialectics, one could not persuade the one who knows, that is, the one who has the knowledge.

## PERSUASION

From Gorgias' point of view, should he passively accept, say, Socrates' conclusion? In other words, couldn't Gorgias, within his criteria, Gorgias, refuse the Socratic distinctions of a dialectical nature, distinctions already exposed above? Perhaps, but it doesn't. It was enough for him to simply reject the difference or distinction between

episteme versus doxa. However, Rhetoric itself, with its relativistic characteristics that "nothing is" or "anything goes" (as in the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, one of the exponents of scientific relativism as in "Farewell to Reason"), would not be interested, perhaps, even in the "defense" of its "refusals" of the Socratic episteme, let's say, because, being opinionated or even rhetorical, it would not reveal being or Truth, following - and we have seen that only persuading is the object of Rhetoric - in mere opinion.

Gorgias could reject Socrates with the argument, also, that it would be impossible to know being because there would be a mismatch between feeling and thinking, which would make it impossible to say anything about it, that is: even if being "is", it would be unknowable (even incommunicable). For Gorgias, the relativity of perceptual experience would make it impossible to say anything about it. Objectively and hypothetically speaking, Gorgias could even answer, in the dialogue with Socrates, the following: "One can think of being both in what it is and in what it is not, that is, there would be no way to distinguish one from the other, that is, it would not be possible to know being because it can be both true and false." According to Gorgias, if he refused the Socratic distinction, he would say that one cannot stick to the Truth.

And if we cannot stick to the Truth, it is because, according to Gorgias and the relativists, we would only



have opinions about things, so the path would be that of persuasion. Plato, in the passages mentioned (454c-455a), through his Socratic dialogues, deals, therefore, with the "art" of Rhetoric, episteme (V or F) and persuasion in Gorgias, that is, the fact that each "logos" would be, for the Sophists, a subjective pronouncement. In other words, the question would then take place "if", in this case, persuasion were the only parameter to engender a reality (perception), considering the absence in relativism of an epistemic criterion (as Socrates wanted) of the sophistic discursive strategy (a term, by the way, that derives from "sophia", wisdom). The Rhetoric of the courts, but we will not specify here, would therefore be a belief about the just and the unjust. For Heraclitus of Ephesus, dialectics is a whole. That is, a complementary antagonism of their polarities.

Moreover, Rhetoric would not reveal truths or produce knowledge, but rather would be a casual mechanism for the production of belief, without producing Reason. Socrates refutes both in Gorgias and in other dialogues (such as in the introduction to "Theaetetus") the sophist's claim to present himself as possessing a universal science. We can consider, on the other hand, that Gorgias' omission in rejecting Socrates is also explained, here, as a hypothesis, naturally, by a sophistic nature that would not have the pretension of revealing – from refusals – contrary "truths", trying not to reverse the roles and become Socrates'

Objector, being he, Gorgias, relativist. Now, if we were relativists, could we not, as sophists, refuse to refuse? But there would be an equal refusal. And we would be spinning in circles.

## THE WHOLE AND THE PARTS

If appearing and being are the same thing, therefore, for them, sophists, it would not make sense to pretend that Reason exterminates the judgment of the false, since "my judgment" and "my" perception are one and only thing. I ask whether, returning to the question of Gorgias' refusal to object to Socrates, whether it would not be contrary to the very sophistical nature of opinion. For Socrates, however, there would be things that would not be involved by sensation, such as the fact that we perceive, for example, "one sound" and not "two sounds". Another example: tactile is the perception of touch, but not of hearing. Hence, Socrates insists on the fact that Rhetoric would be incompatible with science because it is an instrument of sophist argumentation – therefore limited – of the knowledge of a WHOLE about the parts.

For there to be true knowledge, according to Socrates, this knowledge should show being, and this according to the criteria of material adequacy for any characterization of the nature of knowledge, in "Theaetetus" (Plato). Here, and in Rhetoric, both protagogial doctrines - such as

man being the measure of all things - and Heraclitian - are questioned, as being a flow in permanent change. That is, at each moment of contact, I am several. This would occur according to the circumstances of the subject's judgment. If the pattern changed, I would no longer be willing to say the same. "I cannot bathe twice in the same river" (Heraclitus). Dialectics, therefore, distinguishes V from F, but Rhetoric, on the other hand, intervenes in systems of appearances.

Socrates, in short, makes with the so-called maieutics a kind of "birth of knowledge" and, for him, Socrates, the sophists, like Gorgias, simply ignore what this knowledge is. A true argument, for Socrates, concerns differences and, considered as such, must necessarily be dialectical, as we pointed out earlier. Socrates' conclusion, which Gorgias does not directly reject, but which he could do so if he insisted on the sophistic "refusal" to establish Truth, is that "knowledge is the right opinion allied to the recognition of difference". The difference, therefore, between V and F is what would also later justify the notion of the validity of Logic, that of a Subject (S) and a Predicate (P), but which we do not want to extend here.

What we still need to make clear is the fact that, according to Socrates, a philosopher who essentially focused on human nature, Reason is what determines our actions. That is, what we do without belief are not human actions.

The term belief, in this context, is related to the idea of knowledge, in the sense that wise and sensible men, in Socratic philosophy, are the ones who avoid evil. From this arises a new problem, in the same way that we have already mentioned in relation to the concept of Truth, namely: what is evil? Socrates, according to reports by his disciple who was Plato, believed that he could stimulate the debate towards the Truth by exposing ignorance in his interlocutors and that it is known by the Greek term "elenkos" (from the Greek to refute). It is, therefore, the "Socratic elenkos".

## THE APOLOGY

Socrates proposed a kind of awareness of his interlocutors, some of them more, others less receptive, by engagement, this due to the fact that, for him, it would not be possible to teach excellence or virtue ("aretê"), contrary to what the Sophists thought. But not Socrates. For him, to be wiser is to know that one does not know, which undoubtedly sounds ironic coming from the "wisest of men", according to the oracle of Delphi. Socrates' knowledge may have caused his "ruin," because he had been, before a popular court, condemned to death, accused of corrupting the young, of impiety (injustice), and of introducing new gods or deities into the daily life of Athens. Socrates' trial

appears in "Apology", in which Socrates makes his philosophical defense against the accusations, according to him, old and new.

The difference between the Sophists and Socratic philosophy is clear in the sense that persuasion, in Socrates, had a "eudaimonic" sense, so to speak. Or rather: Socrates intended, through the engagement of his interlocutors towards knowledge and Truth, to improve their souls, that is, to achieve "eudaimonia", to live well, to live happily for a successful life. It is possible to perceive here, in this Plato corroborates, the interest of morality in the good of others or in beliefs about how to act in relation to the nature of each thing ("physis"). This "Apology", that is, the defense of Socrates from the point of view of his philosophical spirit, is one of Plato's dialogues in his so-called "youth" phase. The other two are known as "maturity" ("The Banquet" and "The Republic") and "old age" ("Sophist" and "Laws").

As we pointed out at the beginning, the Sophist thesis (that nothing is) stimulated what is conventionally called "Socratic paradoxes", those in which Socrates prefers to reason on practical and human things and that can guide us, including as a method of academic investigation. It seems salutary, before a summary condemnation of the Sophists, above all, to consider them as relevant as Socrates, because it is from them, Sophists, that the dialectical

philosophy (dialectic that was not known, at least in classical terms) of the pre-Socratic philosophers begins. More than Truth, perhaps we could consider Truths (in the plural). Both the Sophist Truth (which sounds like a contradiction of terms) and a Socratic Truth. Perhaps this is the Heraclitian line, in fact, of the unity of opposites.

Heraclitus of Ephesus (535 B.C.-475 B.C.) made dialectics the meaning of structuring the world through what he called the "logos", according to Kahn (2009). We perceive in the Heraclitian dialectic, therefore, a kind of innate connection between opposites, whatever they may be, which results in the centrality of the notion of this "logos", still complex in the pre-Socratic Greek world. Later, however, with the loss of its semantic richness, the "logos" comes to refer to rationalism, to a single meaning and to Reason. However, if we stick with the notion of "logos" within the complex dialectical Heraclitian reasoning, the "logos" can account for an organizing principle or a complementary antagonism in the discursive relationship between Sophist rhetoric and Socratic episteme.

It is from this relationship that the world is made, and therefore the "logos". Heraclitus, who wrote a series of aphorisms on the notion of "logos" in "On Nature" (490 B.C.), comments in Fragment 51: "They do not understand how [something] that differs agrees with itself: there is a reverse bond, like that of a bow and a lyre." In short, the thesis of the unity of opposites, with which we have tried

to justify in this article a possible relationship between the Sophists and Socratic maieutics, is intrinsically associated with the notion of "metron" or measure. This means that in order for there to be a unity between opposites, it is necessary to maintain that same opposition between the polarities in the context of a precise measure. According to G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield (2010), for him [Heraclitus], the important thing was the complementary idea of measure inherent to change.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We are dealing here, in summary, with a kind of tripod among the Sophists - taking up Plato's "Gorgias" - the Socratic epistemic method and a relationship between these two polarities in the Heraclitian context of the unity of opposites, namely: Sophists, on the one hand, and Socrates, on the other. It is not, at least not the scope of our research, still in a very embryonic phase, to consider Socrates also a sophist, a thesis that perhaps deserves greater attention on the part of us, researchers. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to consider the entire history of Western thought justified by the idea of a dialectic, be it reverse or classical. Some modern authors, such as Edgar Morin, for example, are explicit in praise of Heraclitian dialectical thought, because, according to Morin (2011), it was in Heraclitus that he found, in a dazzling way, in his words, insurmountable and fundamental contradictions of our human way of existence.

Still in relation to this article, we seek to revisit, within a perspective that perhaps considered philosophy as an ethics of interpretation, in the terms of Vattimo (1991), a form of sharing no longer based on an irrefutable Truth, including in the studies of Philosophy. From scientific relativism - whose exponents are already known - it seems, in many fields of study, and not only in Philoso-



phy, but certainly in it, that we are forced to consider philosophers within an academic straitjacket at the risk, if we do not follow the booklet, of being labeled heretics and, later, excommunicated. That is if we are not persecuted by "crusaders" and end up, at the end of the day, in the explicit bonfire of the academic world. They are, at most, complex points of view or, if you like, with some sense of emancipation.

Now, Aristotle himself, in "Rhetorical and Poetic Art", already begins the first chapter dealing with the "Relationship between Rhetoric and Dialectics" and considering the possibility of there being an analogy between both forms of discourse, because, according to Aristotle, they deal, both one and the other, "with the common competence of all men, without belonging to the domain of a specific science" (undated, p. 29). In other words, what Aristotle means is that "everyone is committed, within certain limits, to submit to examination or defend a thesis, to present a defense or an accusation" (idem, p. 29). Finally, Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, would be a part of Dialectics. Perhaps it was not a "part", but rather innate to the Dialectic by the fact that no kind of discourse is made in a vacuum.

Socrates is only justified by the discursive bias of a sophist hue. But not the other way around. The Sophists never intended, at least we see so, to take the initiative in

refuting Socrates. Perhaps we have in this dialectical relationship between the Sophists and the Socratic episteme a chance to broaden, even more, discussions in hermeneutical terms and an argumentative tolerance rather as an exchange than dichotomies maintaining that A cannot be B at the same time, as in the classical Logic excluding a third party in the dialectical relationship between Thesis and Antithesis. The Nietzschean interpretive paradigm has made the correspondence of thought to a stable structure, even and especially in classical terms, fall to the ground. Not to mention the Heideggerian "Dasein" and the Maffesollian "I-Other". Corroborating Vattimo, perhaps relativism today represents the nihilistic character of a hermeneutical ontology. And why not start with Socrates?

## REFERÊNCIAS

ARISTÓTELES. **A ética de Nicômaco**. São Paulo: Athena Editora - Biblioteca Clássica, vol. XXXIII, 1940.

BARBOSA DIAS, J. R. . . O ser no "sofista" de Platão. **Kalagatos**, [S. l.], v. 7, n. 14, p. 57–75, 2021. DOI: 10.23845/kalagatos.v7i14.5979. Disponível em: <https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/kalagatos/article/view/5979>.

Acesso em: 26 jan. 2026.

KAHN, C. **A arte e o pensamento de Heráclito**. São Paulo: Paulus, 2009.

KIRK, G.S *et ali*. **Os filósofos pré-socráticos**. História crítica com *seleção* de textos. 7ª ed. Tradução de Carlos Alberto Louro Fonseca. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010.

MELO ARAUJO, C. .; SANTOS MENESES, T. . **CIDADÃO DE BEM: : CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE A HONRA EM A DEFESA DE PALAMEDES**. **Polymatheia - Revista de Filosofia**, [S. l.], v. 13, n. 23, 2021. Disponível em: <https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revistapolymatheia/article/view/5645>. Acesso em: 26 jan. 2026.

MORIN, E. **Mes philosophes**. Paris: Éditions Germina, 2011.

NIETZSCHE, F. **Crepúsculo dos ídolos**. Tradução e notas: Paulo César de Souza. São Paulo: Cia. Das Letras, 2006.

PLATÃO. **Apologia de Sócrates**. São Paulo. Nova Cultural, 1999.

PLATÃO. **Górgias**. Daniel R. N. Lopes tradução, ensaio introdutório e notas. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 2016.

VATTIMO, G. **Éthique de l'interprétation**. Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1991.