

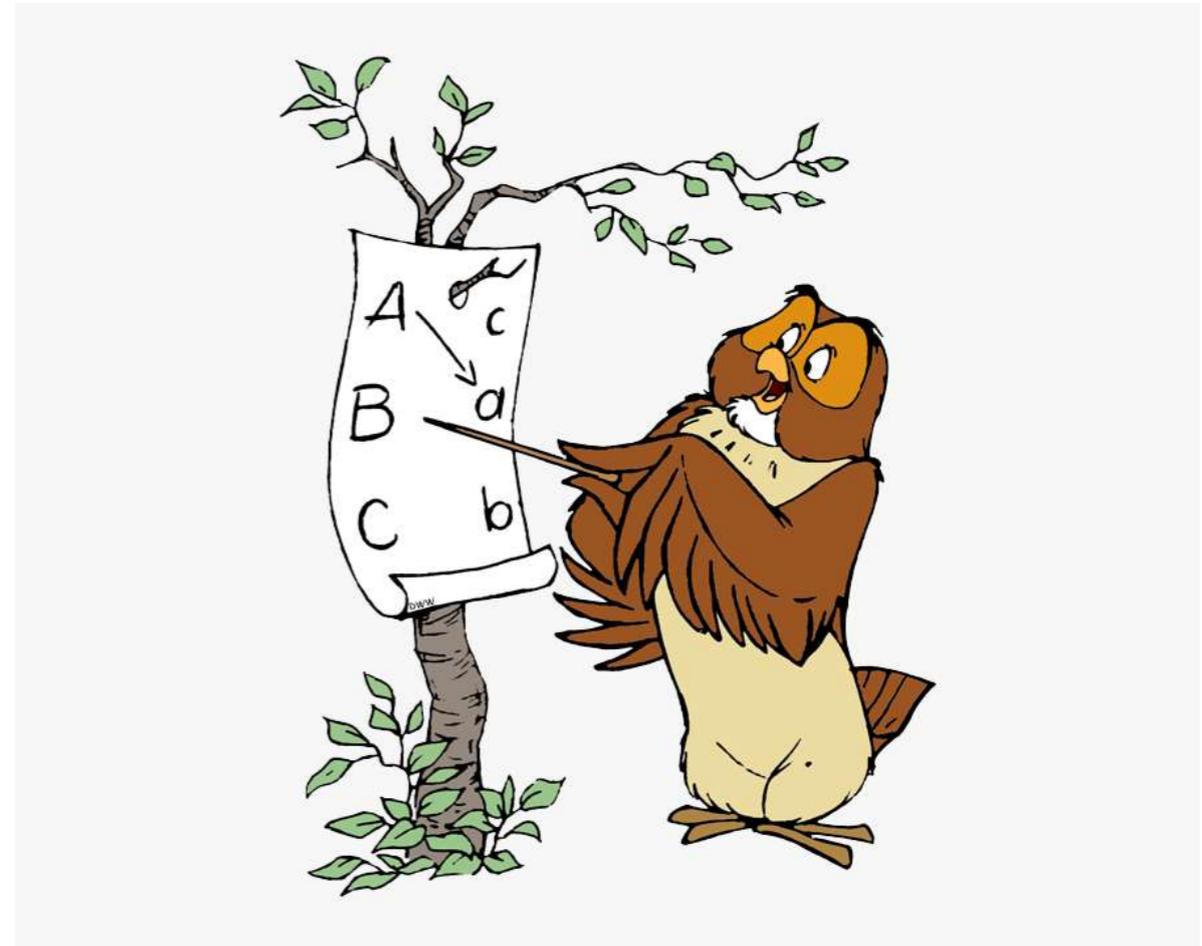
Socrates' Complicated Relationship with the Sophists (and Himself)

By Dylan Skurka

“Sophist:” the Not-So-Nice Word

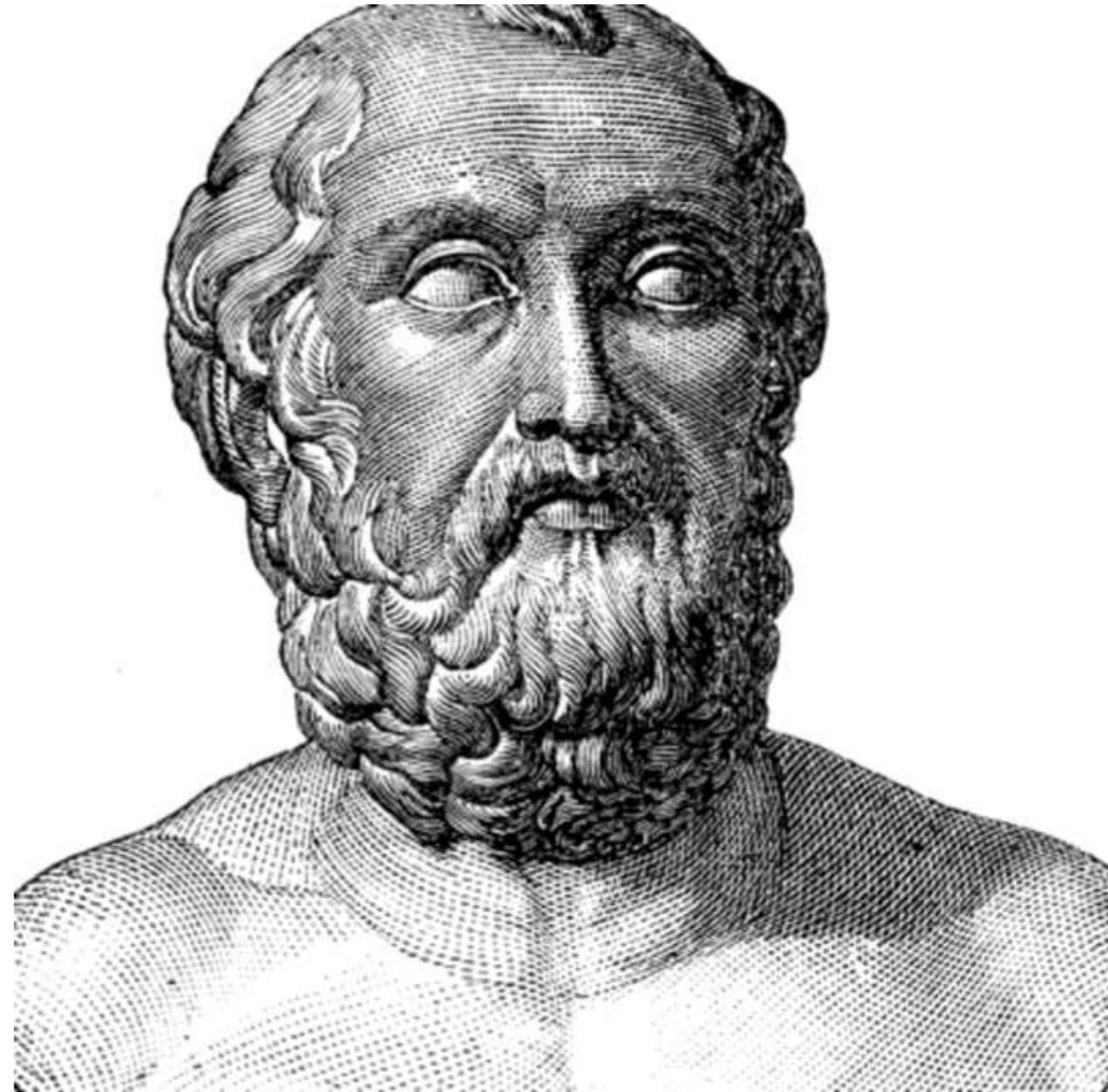
Today, we often think of a “sophist” as someone who is:

- Pretentious
- Deceptive
- Obnoxious
- Cantankerous
- Clever in Speech, Shady in Character
- Style over Substance

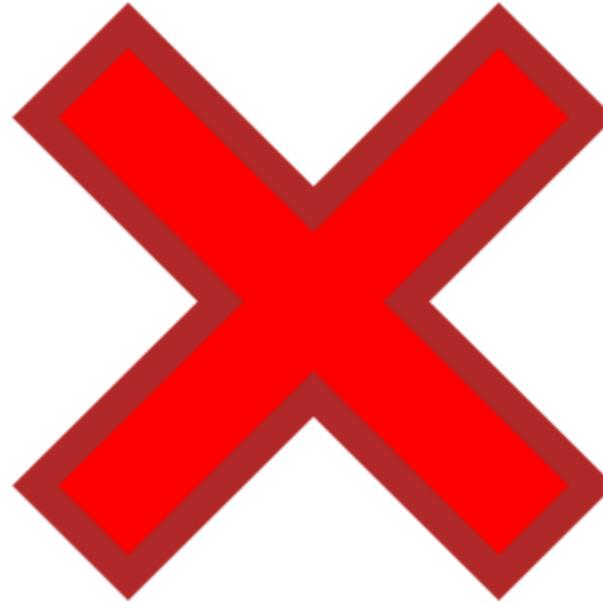


Where it all Begins

- Plato's lampooning of the sophists in his dialogues
- Sophists as unpleasant foils to Socrates, the noble philosopher
- Plato's mission has been successful
- Is Plato's hatred of the sophists justified?



No!



In this presentation I will argue that:

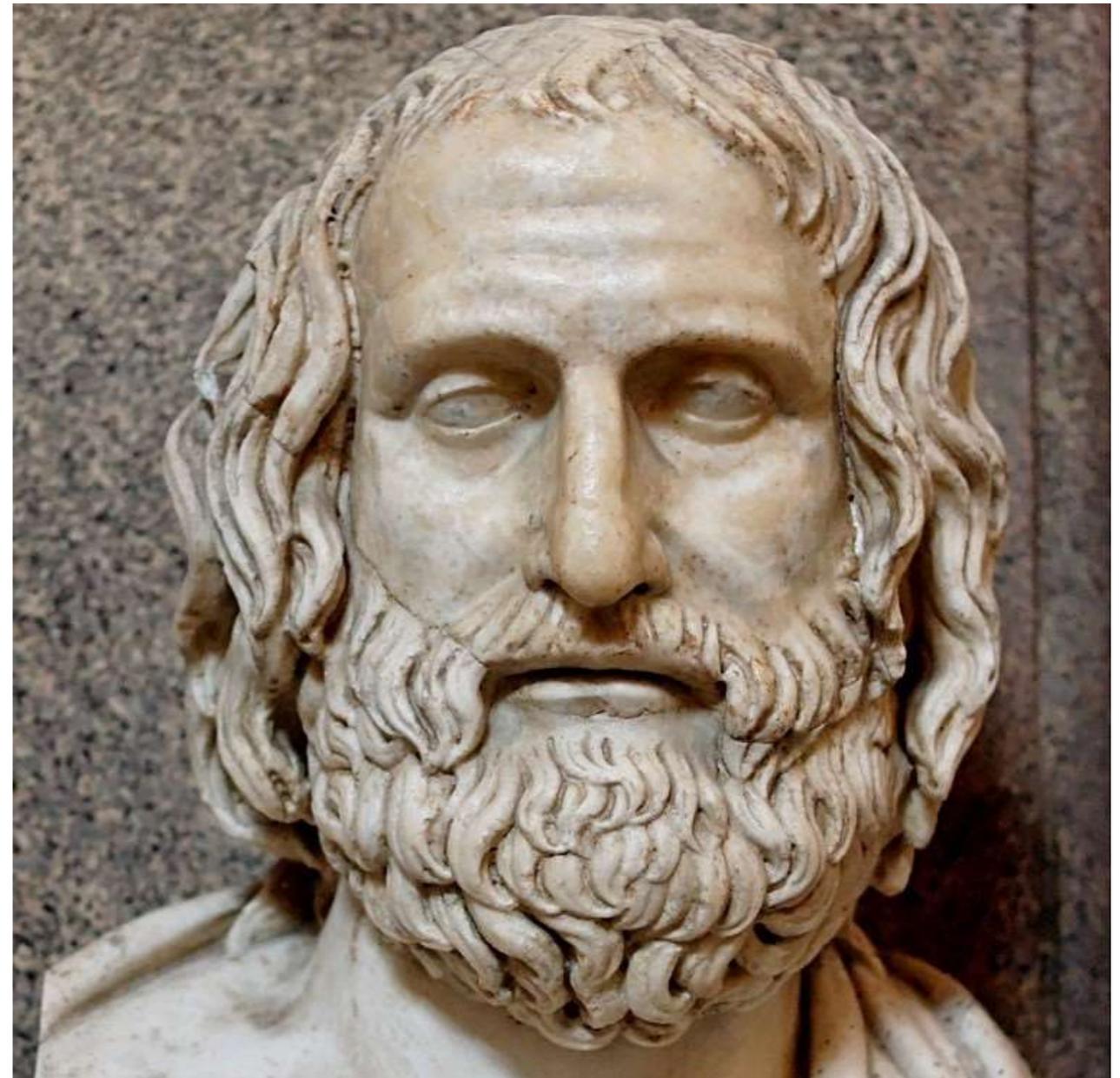
1. There is nothing in Plato's dialogues that clearly justifies his negative portrayal of the sophists
2. Plato does not show how Socrates is importantly different from the sophists he opposes

Today's Agenda

1. Who were Socrates and the Sophists?
2. The Dialogues Themselves: *Sophist* and *Apology*
3. Gaps in the Dialogues
4. My Own Hypothesis

Who Were the Sophists?

- Difficult to separate the sophists from Plato's unfavourable image of them
- Well-spoken, intelligent foreigners
- Hired by young Athenian men to teach them rhetoric for a fee



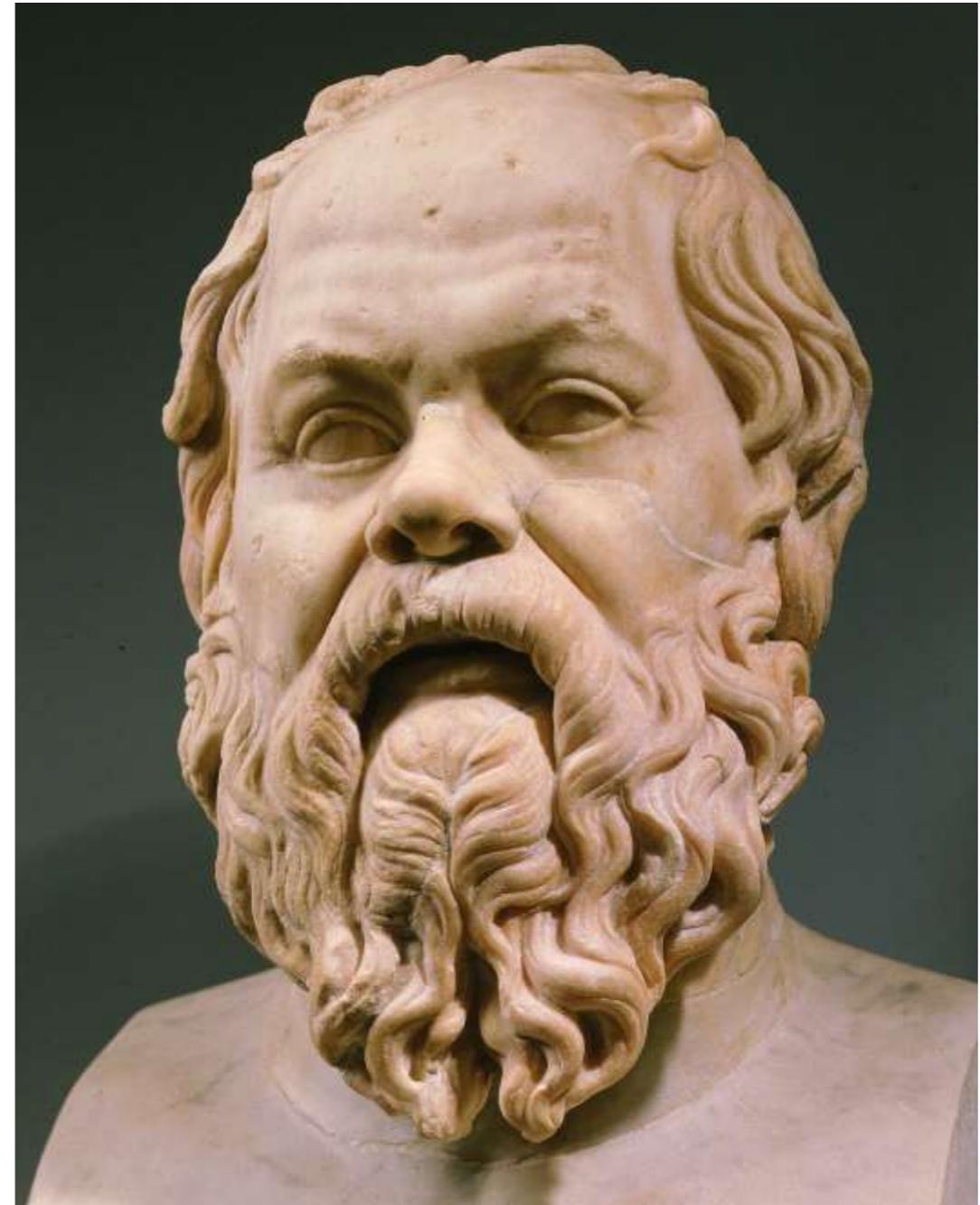
The Clouds

- Aristophanes' *The Clouds* gives us insight into the sophist's dubious reputation outside of Plato
- Symbolism of the character Pheidippides beating his father
- The play also interestingly mocks Socrates



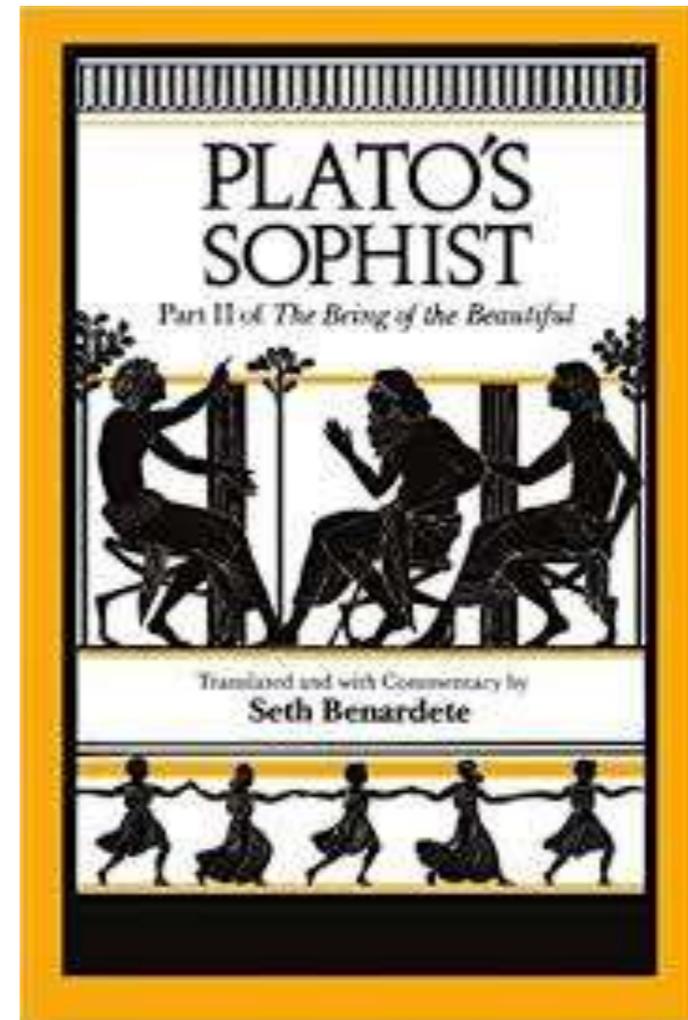
Socrates & the Socratic Method

- Reaching philosophical truth through dialogue
- Socrates' interlocutors often begin confident in their opinion, but become exposed for their biases
- Socrates' interactions were spontaneous
- Did not charge a fee



Plato's *Sophist*

- A dialogue in which Plato attempts to define the sophist
- After a long process of dieresis, he concludes that the sophist is from the...



“money-making species of the eristic, disputatious, controversial, pugnacious, combative, acquisitive family” (226a)

What Does Plato Mean by This?

- A) The sophists are “acquisitive” in the sense that they exploit their students by seeking monetary gain for their teachings
- Earlier in the work, this acquisitive nature is taken to mean that the sophist is a “hunter of rich young men” (231d).
- B) By “eristic, disputatious, controversial, pugnacious and combative” we can take Plato to mean that the sophists argue for the sake of arguing without any real commitment to reaching the truth of a matter

Concern #1

- A) The sophists are acquisitive in the sense that they exploit their students by seeking monetary gain for their teachings
- Earlier in the work, this acquisitive nature is taken to mean that the sophist is a “hunter of rich young men” (231d).

Does Charging a Fee = Being Exploitative?

- Why does the fact that the sophists charged a fee for a service they provide make them exploitative?
- How else could anyone support themselves and their families?
- How is this much different than critiquing philosophy professors for accepting pay for their work?



Concern #2

By “eristic, disputatious, controversial, pugnacious and combative” we can take Plato to mean that the sophists argue for the sake of arguing without any real commitment to reaching the truth of a matter

How Are the Eristic and Socratic Methods Different?

- Plato's second concern is stronger than the first
- Since sophists teach rhetoric, it would make sense that they would be incentivized to perpetuate conflict
- But doesn't the Socratic Method share these qualities?
- Plato doesn't address this problem in the *Sophist*, so we will have to look for an answer elsewhere...

Irwin's and Nehamas' Defence of Socrates

- Terrence Irwin: the Socratic and the eristic method can seem indistinguishable, but differ in respect to intent
- The eristic method is primarily concerned with defeating the argument of opponents
- In contrast, the Socratic Method involves sincerely striving for the truth, persuading others through reason
- Alexander Nehamas: while the eristic neglects the perspectives of others, Socrates consistently reassures that his interlocutors understand what he says and will accept being wrong

My Response

- Readers can only identify the external behaviour of the sophists and Socrates, and therefore intent has to be assumed
- Socrates at times presents confusing arguments that are nonetheless unflinchingly agreed upon with by his interlocutors
- Is it that Socrates is less pugnacious than the sophists or that his interlocutors are too generous?
- To further investigate the differences between Socrates and the sophists, we will have to turn to Plato's *Apology*

Plato's *Apology*: Background



- In 399 BCE, Socrates was put on trial for being impious and corrupting the youth
- The *Apology* presents this trial, Socrates' defence of his philosophical intentions, and an explanation of his role in Athenian society
- Socrates' defence is clearly very eloquent, so for our purposes it will be important to carefully analyze the arguments themselves that he presents

Argument #1: A Divine Justification for the Socratic Method

- The first main argument that Socrates provides involves a justification for his method
- Oracle of Delphi's declaration of wisdom
- Socrates initially conversed with others who he believed to be wiser than himself to prove the Oracle wrong

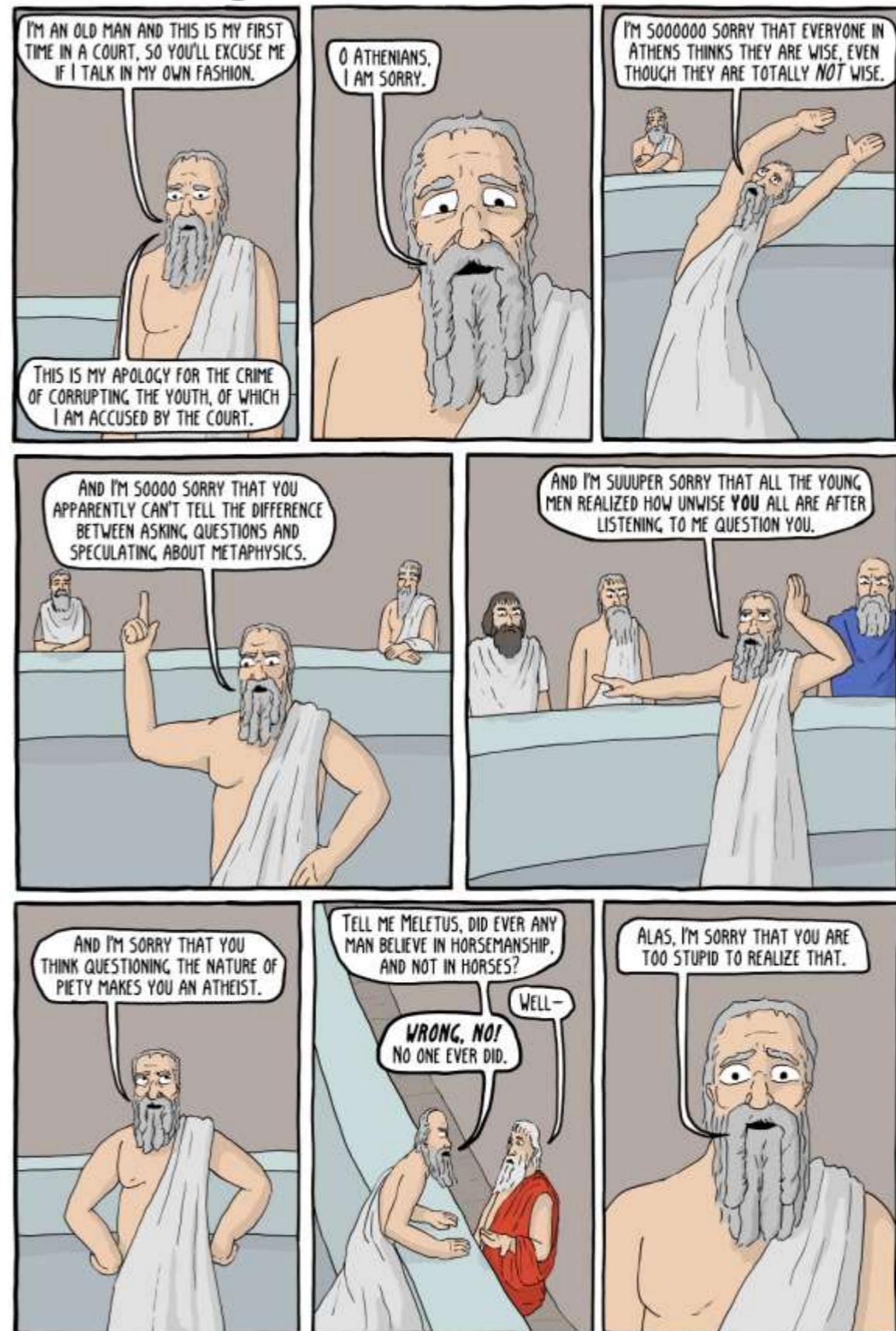


Argument #1: A Divine Justification for the Socratic Method

- Socrates then claims that upon talking to these people, they were proven to know nothing, making him realize that the Oracle was actually right
- While Socrates at least *knew* that he knew nothing, the others he talked to knew nothing but believed that they were wise
- Socrates concludes that the hostility that led people to want to put him on trial in the first place stemmed from their own insecurity of their ignorance

Response to Argument #1

- Socrates seems to indulge in a “humblebrag”
- View of Marina McCoy: *ad hominem* attack?
- If Socrates uses rhetoric to defend himself his argument would seem eristic



Argument #2: Socrates the Gadfly

Socrates further justifies himself as a social gadfly provoking the sluggish Athenian horse:

“Just so, in fact the god seems to me to have set upon the city as someone of this sort: I awaken and persuade and reproach each one of you, **and I do not stop settling down everywhere upon you the whole day**” (30e-31a)

- This passage is interesting for several reasons but importantly sheds light on the the intentions of the Socratic Method
- Socrates presents himself here as a person who relentlessly questions and seems to clearly align himself with the “eristic, disputatious, controversial, pugnacious and combative” qualities that Plato attributes to the sophists in *Sophist*

Argument #3: Philosophizing for Free

“If I was getting something out of this, and if I was receiving pay while I exhorted you to these things, it would be somewhat reasonable. But as it is, even you yourselves see that the accusers, who accused me so shamelessly in everything else, in this have not been able to become so utterly shameless as to offer a witness to assert that I ever took any pay or asked for it. For, I suppose, I offer a sufficient witness that I speak the truth: my poverty” (31b- c).

Argument #3: Philosophizing for Free

Socrates seems to be saying two things in these lines:

1. It is more just to philosophize for free than to charge a fee for it
2. Socrates philosophizes for free and is therefore more just than whomever doesn't (i.e. the sophists)



Responses to Argument #3: Historical Context

- To address this argument, we have to take note of the historical context in which the sophists and Socrates lived in
- As travellers, sophists were prevented from making a living outside of their teaching
- Socrates lived in Athens, giving him the opportunity to make a living outside of philosophy
- Taking this into account, unlike the sophists, Socrates had the luxury of pursuing philosophy as a leisurely activity

Responses to Argument #3: Different Forms of Exploitation

- Socrates' argument here also wrongly assumes that corruption only = financial exploitation
- What about the narcissistic personality?
- What if Socrates philosophized to demonstrate his intellectual superiority over others?



Returning to Plato's Definition of the Sophist

A) The sophists are acquisitive in the sense that they exploit their students by seeking monetary gain for their teachings

- Plato doesn't make it clear why accepting pay for a job is exploitative
- The fact that Socrates didn't accept pay for his teaching does not necessarily mean he is not exploitative

Returning to Plato's Definition of the Sophist

- B) By “eristic, disputatious, controversial, pugnacious and combative” we can take Plato to mean that the sophists argue for the sake of arguing without any real commitment to reaching the truth of a matter
- This seems to be a fair criticism of the sophists
 - But it is not clear how Socrates himself doesn't embody these qualities:
“I awaken and persuade and reproach each one of you, **and I do not stop settling down everywhere upon you the whole day**” (30e-31a)

What Was Socrates'/Plato's Motive then?

- Plato does not make it clear that Socrates' philosophical efforts were psychologically purer than the sophists
- If Socrates was not very different than the sophists, then what compelled him to undermine them?

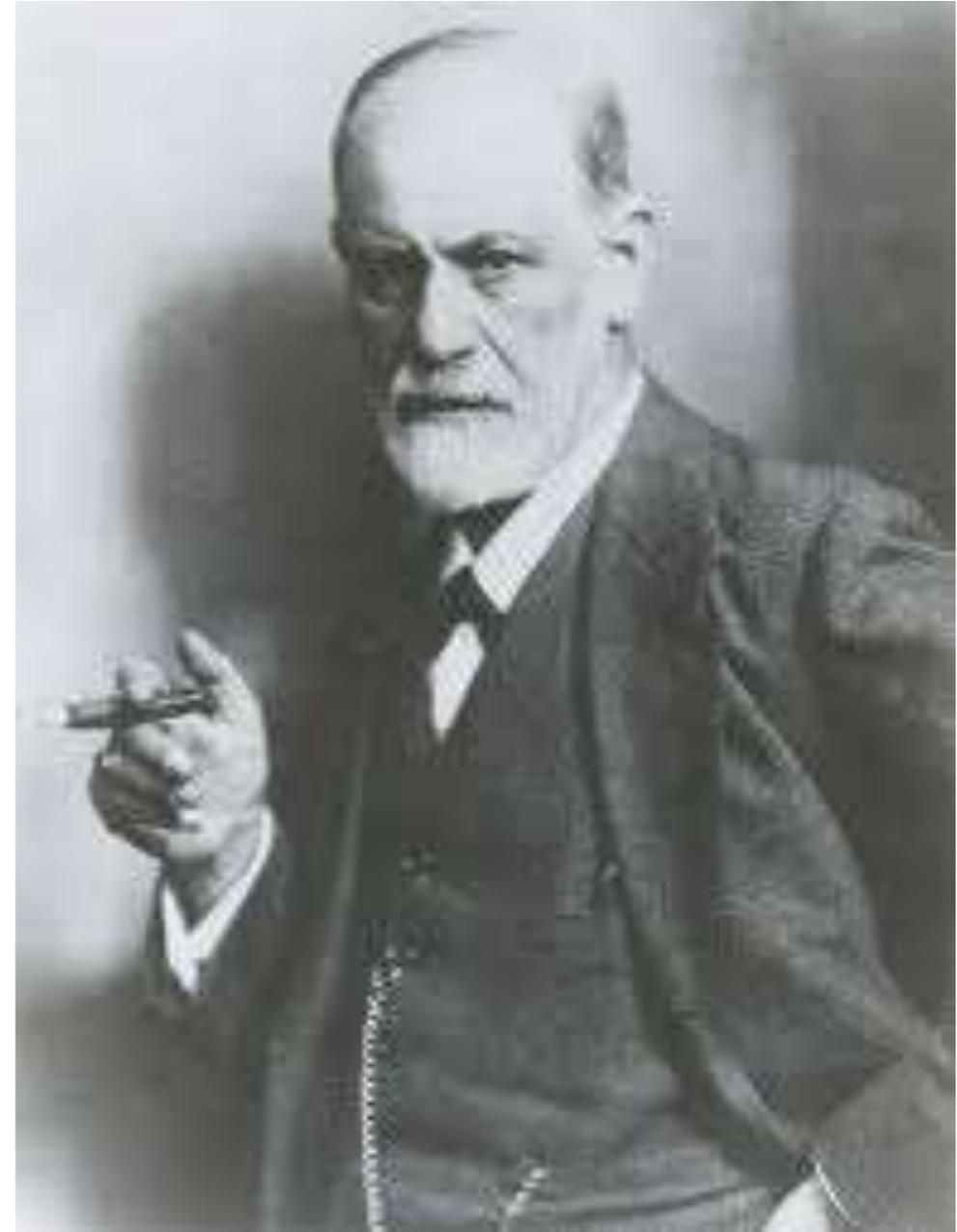
The Scapegoat Hypothesis



- Like America today, 5th century BCE Athens was a powerful empire in a state of decline —> Tendency to scapegoat
- Recall the scapegoating of Socrates and the sophists in *The Clouds*
- Did Socrates throw the sophists under the bus to avoid being scapegoated himself?

Some Wisdom From Freud

- Does Sigmund Freud's notion of "psychological projection" apply to Socrates' hatred of the sophists?
- Perhaps Freud was right to believe that it is common to hate in others what one hates in oneself



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