

The Manifold Beast Animality Between Ontology and Method in Plato's *Sophist*

Federica PIANGERELLI* 

ABSTRACT. This paper offers a reading of Plato's *Sophist* centred on the image of the sophist as a "manifold beast" (226a6), described as "elusive to hunt down" (218d3). Far from being a mere metaphor, this characterisation plays a pivotal role in the dialogue's dialectical development from both a methodological and an ontological perspective. Indeed, as a cunning prey, the sophist not only demands a sustained and flexible hunt capable of capturing him in his many guises but also compels his own hunters to reconsider their conceptual resources, ultimately leading them beyond Parmenides' prohibition. On this basis, the sophist's animality – depicted as a wild beast, almost monstrous – is not merely a denigrating device, but a theoretical one that drives philosophical inquiry into a dark and unexplored region: the intertwining of Being and Non-Being.

Keywords: Dialectics; Hunting Strategy; Poikilia

*Wonders (ta deina) are many,
and none is more wonderful (deinoteron) than
the human being Sophocles, An. gone, 332.*

The guiding question of Plato's *Sophist* is: Who is the sophist?¹ More precisely, how is this figure to be defined in its inextricable relation of both

* University of Macerata, Italy, f.piangerelli@unimc.it

¹ As Thomas A. Szlezák argues (*Reading Plato*, Routledge, 1999, pp. 87-89), Plato's dialogues are structured according to three interrelated theoretical strands: (1) the overriding issue, the aggregating force that breathes life into the text and which Plato never lets his readers forget about; (2) the thematic hub of the writing, the philosophically crucial question which assesses the worth



resemblance and difference to the statesman and the philosopher (216b-217b)? The answer is far from straightforward. As the Eleatic Stranger observes at the very outset of the search, the sophist belongs to a genus that is “difficult and hard to hunt down (*chalepon kai dysthereuton*)” (218d3)². The adjective *dysthereutos* deserves particular attention, for it immediately casts the inquiry within a demanding hunting context. Consequently, the Stranger and Theaetetus – and, alongside them, we as readers³ – are called upon to participate actively in the investigation-hunt, abandoning a static and contemplative stance in favour of a dynamic and practical one.

Building on this initial image, this paper, while making no claim to exhaustiveness, offers a reading of the dialogue as a whole to determine whether the reference to hunting functions merely as a metaphor or instead carries a deeper methodological and philosophical significance, while also exploring the theoretical implications of comparing the sophist to an animal – or, more precisely, to a “manifold beast (*to poikilon ... to therion*)” (226a6)⁴.

1. Hunting the Hunter

The hunt thus begins. Because it is difficult, it must proceed according to a *methodos* (218d5), that is, a set of procedures whose logical force lies in their capacity to adapt flexibly to the nature of the animal, much like a map that gradually

of the overriding issue and/or confers it legitimate meaning; and (3) the foremost problem which the argumentative development must grapple with. Applied to the *Sophist*, this interpretative framework yields the following scheme: (1) the search for the definition of the sophist; (2) the investigation of Non-Being; and (3) the dialectical conception of reality.

² All translations are based on S. Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), with slight modifications.

³ Plato devised a brilliant form of writing, that proceeds not only dialogically but also through a deliberately enigmatic mode of expression. Its purpose is to engage the reader in “serious games” of varying degrees of difficulty, inviting them to discover possible solutions independently and thereby to undertake a genuine “philosophical exercise”. For an examination of this crucial hermeneutical issue, see M. Migliori, *How Plato Writes. The Educational and Protreptic Intent of the Great Student of Socrates*, Academia Verlag, 2023.

⁴ A clarification is in order. Given the richness of content and theoretical complexity of the *Sophist* (cf. n. 1), the argument will inevitably touch upon several issues of fundamental importance – for instance, the critical reappraisal of Parmenides’ philosophy, the notion of the image, and the problem of falsehood – each of which would require a rigorous analysis that, however, cannot be undertaken here for reasons of space and argumentative coherence. The present paper will instead focus primarily on the theme of hunting and on the comparison of the sophist to a “manifold beast,” leaving in the background the intricate scholarly debates regarding these other issues.

takes shape, is progressively refined, and is continually recalibrated as the investigation unfolds⁵. To undertake this task with full awareness, the Stranger suggests first practising on easier prey, whose capture – that is, whose definition (*logos*) – requires the same method and can therefore serve as a paradigm for more challenging investigations. The choice falls upon the angler (219a-221c). Without any preliminary exposition, the two hunters immediately embark on the inquiry and develop it through the interplay of two techniques, that is collection (*synagoge*) – a generalising tool which, by moving across a plurality of elements, enables one to trace the unifying logic that underlies and connects them – and division (*diairesis*) – an elementarising tool which, through progressive distinctions, makes it possible to identify all the constituent parts of a given concept. Though opposed, both of these instruments are complementary⁶ and necessary for constructing a conceptual net that progressively narrows the field of search and brings the quarry within reach⁷. Together, they constitute the dialectical method⁸.

⁵ Composed of the prefix *meta* (“beyond,” “along,” “through”) and the noun *hodos* (“way,” “road,” “path”), the Greek term *methodos* refers to a set of procedures employed in the pursuit of a given object of inquiry. More importantly, however, it implies that inquiry must conform to the nature of its object, requiring reasoning to adapt itself to the reality under investigation and thereby indicating that logical procedures must remain grounded in the object itself, as argued by S. Nonvel Pieri, “Memoria di memoria. Strati della scrittura in Platone,” in M. Migliori and A. Fermani (eds.), *Platone e Aristotele. Dialettica e logica*, Morcelliana, 2008, pp. 323-342, p. 323.

⁶ The complementary relationship between collection and division has been emphasised, for example, by D. Henry, “A Sharp Eye for Kinds: Plato on Collection and Division,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 41/2012, pp. 229-255. By contrast, N. Iwata, “What is the Process of Division for?,” in L. Brisson, E. C. Halper, and R. D. Parry (eds.), *Plato's Sophist. Selected Papers of the Thirteenth Symposium Platonicum*, Verlag Karl Alber, 2024, pp. 99-106, focuses exclusively on division (*diairesis*) and argues that it serves neither a heuristic nor a definitional function.

⁷ Cf. Fig. 1. As M. Vegetti argues, “Struttura e funzioni della dicotomia nel *Sofista*” in M. Bianchetti, E.S. Storace (eds.), *Platone e l'ontologia. Il Parmenide e il Sofista*, Edizioni Albo Versorio, 2004, pp. 95-104, p. 101, Platonic dialectic leads not so much to a formal definition, in the Aristotelian sense, as to a kind of “focal meaning” within the network of relations in which the subject of inquiry is situated.

⁸ Adapting to the infinite and multifaceted contours of reality, collection and division reveal the full versatility of the dialectical method, not least because they can be employed according to different patterns of application, namely: (1) a descending and external collection-and-division model, which aims to define a Form by reconstructing and characterising the network of conceptual relations in which it is embedded. In this regard, the Stranger offers a valuable methodological indication precisely in the *Sophist* (264d10-265a2): “Let's try once more, by splitting in two (*schizontes diche*) the proposed genus, to proceed always toward the right-hand part (*dexia*) of the section, keeping to that in which the sophist shares, until, once we strip away all things that he has in common and leave his own nature, we may exhibit it, primarily to ourselves, and then to those who are by nature nearest in genus to a pursuit of this sort”. Therefore, one should proceed *preferably* by dichotomous division – although priority must always be given to the natural articulations of the Form, which may also number more

The paradigmatic value of this exercise lies both in its form and in its content⁹. Indeed, the Stranger recognises a kinship (*syngeneia*) between the sophist and the angler. Just as the angler is an “artisan (*technites*)” rather than “artless (*atechnos*)” (219a5), so too the sophist is not a “layman (*idiotes*)” (221c9), but “truly a sophist (*alethos sophistes*)” (221d2): insofar as he bears the name *sophistes*, he cannot be anything other than a sophist. It is worth recalling that the Greek noun *sophistes* is polysemous, denoting an “expert” or “skilled craftsman”, but also someone “prudent” or “wise”, as well as, in a pejorative sense, a “charlatan” or a “chatterer”. The same semantic field also includes the term *technites*, which means “artisan” or “craftsman”, but also “trickster” or “intriguer”. Accordingly, does the hunt for the sophist begin under the sign of a decisive feature to be explored: is he someone highly skilled in what he does, even if his *technē* may involve deception?

The kinship lies in the fact that both are “hunters (*thereutai*)” (221d3), thus share the same art, namely hunting (*thereutike*), a branch of acquisitive art (*ktetike*). They differ, however, in the prey they pursue – whereas the angler hunts swimming animals, the sophist hunts terrestrial creatures in the fertile meadows of wealth and youth. It is precisely this “many-species (*polyeides*)” (221e7) pedestrian hunt that must now be investigated further. The adjective *polyeides* provides an important clue: it suggests that the pursuit undertaken by the Stranger and Theaetetus will not be simple or straightforward but will require them to follow multiple paths.

than two (i.e. *Phaedrus*, 265e; *Sophist*, 222b-c; *Statesman*, 287c) – and preferably by following the right-hand branch – although, given the ontological priority of the Form, it is sometimes necessary to proceed along the left-hand branch, or according to multiple directions, both horizontally and vertically, thereby involving the use of cross-divisions (i.e. *Sophist*, 265e-266a). The *Sophist* offers excellent examples of these theoretical models, ranging from the angler paradigm to the multiple, interwoven schemes aimed at defining the sophist. (2) A transversal and internal collection-and-division model, which aims to understand, in qualitative and quantitative terms, the constitutive structure of a single Form (i.e. *Philebus*, 16c-e). (3) An attractive-repulsive model, which examines the interconnections among the Greatest Kinds, that is, among Forms so general that the collection-and-division model gives way to the dynamics of attraction and repulsion alone (i.e. *Sophist*, 254b-256d).

⁹ Among other scholars, N. Notomi (*The Unity of Plato's Sophist: Between the Sophist and the Philosopher*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 77) emphasises the methodological and epistemological value of the angler's paradigm: “The method of division (*diairesis*) is demonstrated, rather than explained, in the model of the angler. Using the model, the Eleatic visitor demonstrates the way to define an object by the method of division: to divide art from general to specific and finally fix the species of a particular art (219a4-221c4). Practice is important to dialectic, and through practice we can acquire the method of inquiry (*methodos*; cf. 218d5, 219a1)”. D. Ambuel, *Image and Paradigm in Plato's Sophist*, Parmenides Publishing, 2007, p. 33, however, emphasises the kinship between the angler and the sophist: “The angler himself, ostensibly chosen at random as a trivial and easy example, not only provides a metaphor for the inquiry – the attempt to take the sophist, an elusive prey – but also will prove to be a figure analogous to the sophist: the hunted is the hunter”.

The first of these lines of inquiry appears in the next stage of the investigation, which concerns the distinction between the hunting of “wild animals (*ton agrion*)” and that of “tame animals (*ten hemeron*)” (222b5), together with the recognition that human beings are included among the latter, that is, that there is also a form of hunting directed at human beings¹⁰. Prey and predators, therefore, are found among human beings as well, but their interactions are far more subtle and sophisticated than those of wild animals, since they unfold within the civic world – the “social forest” of the *polis*. More precisely, alongside forms of domination based on overt violence, there is also the “art of conviction-producing” (222c10), which operates through the deceptive power of speech. When practised in the private sphere, this art is further divided into two forms: on the one hand, the hunting of lovers, namely erotic art, which involves the exchange of gifts; on the other, the wage-earning form. The latter, in turn, encompasses both “flattery (*kolakeia*)” (222e7) – the art of luring its victims through the bait of pleasure while seeking in return nothing more than its own sustenance – and an art that promises to cultivate “associations (*homilias*)” (223a4) for the sake of virtue in exchange for money¹¹.

The conceptual net has now been tightened sufficiently to bring the quarry within reach, as the Stranger observes:

Then, as it seems, according to our present reasoning, Theaetetus, the part of appropriative, coercive, hunting art which hunts animals, land animals, tame animals, man, privately, for pay, is paid in cash, claims to give education (*doxopaideutike*), and is a hunt after rich and promising youths, must – so our present argument concludes – be called sophistry (*sophistike*) (223b1-7).

This definition is anything but figurative. It captures a distinctive aspect of the sophist, who adopts a genuinely predatory strategy: his bait is the promise of virtue, his trap the seductive illusion of knowledge – that is nothing more than a semblance of education – which takes hold of the appetitive part of the soul¹², and

¹⁰ As Lenner notes, Z. Lenner, “*Erōs*-Hunter in the *Sophist*: who chases whom, how and where?”, in L. Brisson, E. C. Halper, R. D. Parry (eds.), *Plato's Sophist*, cit., pp. 163-171, p. 166, a paradoxical reversal takes place here: “While the Stranger and Theaetetus hunt the sophist as a beast (*therion*) throughout the whole dialogue, the sophist, on the other hand, appears first and foremost as a hunter, though paradoxically not of wild beasts (*theria*) but of tame animals (*hemera zoa*)”.

¹¹ The semantic range of *homilia* is particularly significant here: the noun can denote “association”, “meeting”, or “group,” but also “relationship”, “intimate union”, “sexual relation”, as well as “conversation”, and “discussion”. Its use in this context is particularly suggestive in light of Xenophon's characterisation of sophist as “prostitute (*pornos*)” (*Memorabilia*, I, 6, 13).

¹² It is no coincidence that this part of the soul is regarded as “a complex and many-headed beast (*therion poikilon kai polykephalon*)” (*Republic*, IX 588c7-10). For a more detailed discussion of the “brutish part

his spoils the wealth of his victims. In short, from this perspective, he is a hunter of rich young men.

This result makes explicit a feature already at work in the angler paradigm: the reflexive structure whereby the Stranger and Theaetetus pursue a hunter who remains, at the same time, both predator and prey¹³. Far from being merely an evocative metaphor, this recursive structure reveals a fundamental methodological principle: to capture a hunter, one must in turn become a hunter, carefully following the traces of the quarry and adapting one's strategy to the very skills that make it elusive. The dialectical method is particularly well suited to this task because, starting from a general framework, it opens up new lines of inquiry through successive differentiations, allowing the prey to be tracked down from multiple directions.

2. Hunting the Manifold Beast

The hunt is not yet over. Indeed, the Stranger states:

But let's still look over here as well, for that which is now being sought does not at all share in a trivial (*phaules*) art but rather a very manifold (*poikiles*) one. There's, for instance, among the previous remarks, an apparition that suggests that it is some other genus and not that which we now claim it to be (223c1-4).

Without calling into question the results achieved thus far, the inquiry must nevertheless continue, albeit from a different perspective. Such a shift is required by the very nature of sophistry, insofar as it is *poikile*, thereby bringing to the fore the priority of the ontological dimension over the methodological one.

The choice of the adjective *poikilos* is particularly revealing, as it adds a crucial piece to the theoretical path that is gradually coming into view. Indeed, it denotes something "worked in various colours", "embroidered", or "adorned in various ways", as well as something "multiform", "manifold", and "complex"; but it may also convey the meanings of "obscure", "mutable", "unstable", "astute", and "shrewd"¹⁴. The

(*ta theriode*)" in human beings and its ethical and political implications, see E. Cattanei, "Al di sotto' di emozioni e virtù? La 'bestialità' in Platone e Aristotele", in S. Langella, M.S. Vaccarezza (eds.), *Emozioni e virtù. Prospettive su un tema classico*, Orthotes, Salerno, 2014, pp. 23-44, pp. 29-34.

¹³ As F. Wolff's paper, "Le chasseur chassé. Les définitions du sophiste", in *Etudes sur le Sophiste de Platon*. Publiées sous la direction de P. Aubenque. Les textes de ce volume ont été recueillis par M. Narcy, Bibliopolis, 1991, pp. 19-53, aptly suggests in its title.

¹⁴ The semantic richness of *poikilos* is further highlighted by its contrast to *phaulos*, which conveys the meanings of "easy", "slight", "simple", "ordinary", "inefficient", and "bad" but also those of "careless", "thoughtless", "indifferent".

connection with the semantic plurality already associated with *technites* is therefore not incidental but is further developed, thereby making the multifaceted character of sophistry – an art already conceived as *polyeides* – even more evident. By placing it within the sphere of *poikilia*, at the intersection between description and evaluation, Plato emphasises both its allure, deriving from its richness and variety, and its deceptive nature, which lies in its intricate and elusive character¹⁵.

Consequently, the dialectical hunt must continue to explore its intricacies in order to capture its many faces as comprehensively as possible. In doing so, the search proceeds through the same terrain and according to the same conceptual framework, taking up an aspect already revealed in the angler paradigm (219d-e), but now pursuing it from a different perspective. Specifically, along the axis of acquisitive art, the division gives rise to two further branches: hunting, on the one hand, and exchange, on the other. As collection and division proceed in this latter direction (223c-224e), the general map becomes increasingly dense, leading to further definitions of the sophist: a retailer and/or merchant of learning concerned with virtue, whether of his own production or acquired from others¹⁶.

Having explored this path as well, the Stranger states: “Let’s still consider whether the genus that is now being pursued (*metadiokomenon*) does not resemble after all something like the following (224e6-7)”. Once again, without calling into question the results already obtained, the inquiry requires a further shift¹⁷,

¹⁵ In Plato’s thought, *poikilia* denotes a complex and ambivalent quality, combining beauty, variety, and multiplicity with the risks of instability, deception, and excess. Often associated with the poetic and artistic production widespread in democratic Athens, it may prove as fascinating as it is dangerous, insofar as it gives rise to harmful pleasures (cf. J. Fine, “Plato and the Dangerous Pleasure of *Poikilia*,” in *Classical Quarterly*, 71, 1/2021, pp. 152-169). Precisely this ambiguity explains why *poikilia* also acquires a pejorative connotation in Plato’s works, becoming one of the distinctive features of the democratic city in a broad sense (see, for instance, *Menexenus* 235a; *Republic* VIII, 557a-d; 561a-e; *Laws* IV, 704d-705b). On this point, see L. Bertelli, “*Poikilia*: il variopinto mantello della democrazia,” in E. Berardi, F. L. Lisi, D. Micaella (eds.), *Poikilia. Variazioni sul tema*, Bonanno Editore, 2009, pp. 215-226.

¹⁶ This second dialectical procedure proves particularly complex, as it involves a dense interplay among at least four elements: (1) the retailer, (2) the merchant, (3) learning of one’s own production, and (4) learning acquired from others. Depending on how these elements are combined, different definitions of the sophist may emerge, although all of them remain branches of the same fundamental line of inquiry. Cf. M. Migliori, *Plato’s Sophist. Value and Limitations of Ontology*, Academia Verlag, 2007, pp. 35-38. This provides an excellent example of how the dialectical method can adapt itself to the manifold contours of a complex reality: by subtly shifting its divisions, it can follow different traces of the same object and bring its various aspects to light.

¹⁷ On two occasions (*eti ... idomen* 223c1; *eti skopomen* 224e4), the Stranger invites Theaetetus to observe the sophist from a different perspective. Indeed, by virtue of its ontological *poikilia*, this beast must also be hunted through a multifocal approach capable of illuminating as many of its facets as possible. On the *Multifocal Approach* as a hermeneutic paradigm for ancient Greek

explicitly reactivating the image of the pursuit of a fleeing quarry, as indicated by the verb *metadioko* (“to pursue”, “to chase” and “to investigate”, “to research”). The fundamental line of investigation remains that of acquisitive art, but it is now examined in its agonistic form, namely, as an art of verbal combat, a contest of speech against speech. The outcome of this new search is the definition of the sophist as an eristic (225a-226a).

In their own way, both the merchant and the eristic may also be regarded as hunters, although they employ less conspicuous predatory strategies: the former through commercial exchange, the latter through verbal contest. Consequently, as the inquiry confronts a quarry that is both technically skilled and ontologically multifaceted, the recursive structure of the dialectical method becomes at once less explicit and more demanding. Indeed, the pursuit of this elusive predator must continue, as the Stranger and Theaetetus themselves acknowledge:

Stranger – You do see, then, that it’s truly said that this beast is manifold (*to poikilon ... to therion*) and, as the saying goes, cannot be taken by the other hand.

Theaetetus – Then we must do it with both.

Stranger – Indeed we must, and to the best of our ability we have to do it in this way, tracking a trail of his (*ichnos autou*) of the following sort (226a6-b2).

For the first time in the dialogue, the sophist is explicitly portrayed as a *therion*, that is, a “beast” or “wild animal”, thereby evoking the sphere of hunting in a twofold sense: the *therion* is at once a fierce predator and an elusive quarry. This beast, however, is *sui generis*, for its habitat is not the wild realm of forests but rather the civilised space of the *polis*; it is precisely this displacement that makes it all the more unsettling, while also revealing its *poikilos* character¹⁸. Indeed, this creature is described as *thaumastos* (225e4), a term that encompasses both admiration – “marvellous”, “extraordinary”, “admirable”, “excellent” – and estrangement – “strange”, “extravagant”, “absurd”.

Within the folds of this ambivalent portrayal, a crucial insight emerges: the sophist is compared to a wild beast not because he is somehow less than human, but because his elusive and polymorphous nature exceeds ordinary conceptual boundaries, thereby provoking philosophical inquiry and compelling dialectic to pursue him ever further¹⁹.

philosophy see E. Cattanei, A. Fermani, M. Migliori (eds.), *By the Sophists to Aristotle through Plato*, Academia Verlag, 2016.

¹⁸ When applied to a beast, the adjective *poikilos* can also mean “dappled” or “spotted”.

¹⁹ After all, *thauma* is both the source and the nourishment of philosophy itself. Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 2, 982b12-21.

To capture such a quarry, a single hand is not enough: the hunter must employ both, carefully tracking every trace it leaves behind²⁰. This exhortation contains a crucial methodological insight: the figurative reference to “both hands” may be understood as an invitation to extend the scope of the search beyond acquisitive art, bringing productive art (*poietike*) into play as well and thereby returning to the very first division of the investigation (219a-d).

3. Hunting a Tame Animal

Further adapting their hunting strategy²¹, the Stranger and Theaetetus embark upon a new path, one that proves more extensive than any of the previous ones (226b-231b) and culminates in an anomalous definition. From this perspective, the sophist turns out to be a purifier of the soul from “folly (*amathia*)” (229c9), that is, a sophist whose defining features completely reverse those encountered thus far. Through refutation (*elenchos*), employed with a genuine educational aim (*paideia*), he frees the soul of his interlocutor from “vain seeming-wisdom (*doxosophia*)” (231b6), namely, from the very kind of knowledge ordinarily sold by the other sophists. This cathartic activity – which, precisely because it produces purification, constitutes a form of *poietic* art, although it is not explicitly described as such – gives rise to “noble sophistry (*gennaia sophistike*)” (231b8)²². In introducing this characterisation, the Stranger fears attributing too great an honour to the “low-grade” sophists, yet the two figures resemble one another, like “a wolf to a dog (*kyni lykos*), the most savage to the most tame (*agrioton hemerotaton*)” (231a6). Hence, one must “keep his guard up when it comes to similarities (*peri tas homoiotetas*), for the genus is most slippery (*olistherotaton*)” (231a7-8).

²⁰ In other words, the Stranger and Theaetetus must be like the Laconian hounds (Plato, *Parmenides*, 128c): formidable hounds endowed with an extraordinary sense of smell and unparalleled agility in pursuing their prey.

²¹ Indeed, this dialectical procedure begins with a collection, which leads to a new *technē*, namely, the art of discernment (226b-c).

²² The Greek adjective *gennaia*, besides meaning “noble”, “high-born”, and “excellent”, can also mean “good of its kind”; in this case, the *kind* in question is precisely sophistry, of which the best and most praiseworthy form is singled out. Consequently, the “noble sophist” is not a hybrid between the sophist and the philosopher – as, i.e., R. Rosen argues in *Plato's Sophist. The Drama of Original and Image*, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 131—but rather expresses the hybrid, or better, composite nature of sophistry itself, as J. Solana notes in “Socrates and ‘Noble’ Sophistry (*Sophist*, 226b-231c)”, in B. Bozzi, Th. M. Robinson (eds.), *Plato's Sophist Revisited*, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 71-85, pp. 82-83).

As the inquiry progresses, dialectic has entered its most slippery terrain, that marked by similarities and dissimilarities, which require the utmost attention in order to avoid error. To make explicit the deeper meaning of this fundamental epistemological issue, the Stranger resorts to an image drawn from the animal world. The dog and the wolf are so similar that they may easily be confused: both are predators and conduct the hunt with cunning and skill, yet they differ in the purpose and manner in which they exercise this activity. The wolf, indeed, as a wild predator, hunts independently for its own sustenance; the dog, on the other hand, as a domesticated predator, places its abilities at the service of human beings rather than hunting solely for its own survival.

Far from implying a precise literal correspondence, an analogous dynamic characterises the relationship between the noble and the ordinary sophist: both belong to the genus of sophistry and therefore employ the same operative tools, such as *elenchos*, and pursue the same prey, yet they diverge in the ends they serve and in the manner in which they carry out this activity. The ordinary sophist, in fact, by cunningly concealing his true nature, sells *doxosophia* under the guise of education, but only for his own sustenance; the noble sophist, by contrast, acting openly, eliminates *doxosophia* because he is moved by a higher and genuine educational aim. The animal image therefore does not merely illustrate the proximity between two figures; it reveals that the true difficulty of dialectical inquiry lies in distinguishing forms that share the same outward features and operative means but differ radically in their ends²³.

At this stage of the inquiry, the significance of the “other hand” becomes fully apparent: once brought into play, it proves indispensable to the increasingly difficult attempt to capture the sophist in all his manifestations. This beast, indeed,

²³ Particularly relevant in this regard is M. Bonazzi's thesis (“Of Dogs and Wolves, Fathers and Sons, Sophists and Philosophers,” in L. Brisson, E. C. Halper, R. D. Parry (eds.), *Plato's Sophist*, cit., pp. 55–69), which focuses on the complex opposition between the dog – representing the philosopher and the gentle guardian (*Republic* II, 375a, 376a-b) – and the wolf, associated with the sophist and the savage tyrant (*Republic* I, 336b; VIII, 565d; *Phaedrus* 241d). In particular, the scholar demonstrates how porous the boundary between these two animal figures truly is (pp. 55–57): if poorly educated, dogs can degenerate into wolves or even ally themselves with them (*Republic* III, 416a-b; *Laws* XII, 906c-d). Consequently, this permeability directly mirrors the difficulty of distinguishing between the ordinary sophist and the “noble sophist”, especially when the distinction is made on the basis of method alone. Insofar as both Socratic *elenchos* and sophistic antilogic rely on refutation and contradiction, a purely formal approach fails to distinguish the gentle hound from the savage predator (pp. 62–63). More generally, for a more detailed discussion of the comparison between dogs and wolves in the *Republic*, cf. C.P. Long, “Who Let the Dogs Out?: Tracking the Philosophical Life among the Wolves and Dogs of the *Republic*”, in J. Bell, M. Naas (eds.), *Plato's Animals: Gadflies, Horses, Swans, and Other Philosophical Beasts*, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 131–146.

is *olistheros* ("slippery", and also "elusive", "hard to grasp") precisely because it is *poikilos*, and conversely, *poikilos* because it is *olistheros*. It resists any rigid and unilateral conceptualisation, as shown by the fact that, despite its many negative aspects, it also reveals a positive one. At first glance, this intricate interplay may appear perplexing:

Theaetetus – But on account of the fact that he has come to light as so many (*dia to polla pephanthai*), I am by now perplexed (*aporo*). Whatever should one say, speaking truly (*alethe*) and with conviction, that the sophist in his being is (*ontos einai*)?

Stranger – That you are perplexed (*aporon*) is likely enough. But, you know, we must believe that he too is by now intensely perplexed (*aporein*) as to wherever he will still slip through (*diadysetai*) the speech. The proverb's right, it's not easy to escape from all the holds. So we must be now especially keen to set upon him.

Theaetetus – You speak beautifully.

Stranger – But first let's step aside and take as it were a breather, and let us calculate before ourselves while we're resting just how many the sophist has appeared to us (231b9-d2).

For the first time in the dialogue, the hunt reaches an *aporia*, that is, a "difficulty of passage", a "state of being at a loss", "embarrassment", or "perplexity". Yet, far from marking a defeat, this impasse becomes a genuine "question for discussion", providing a reason to pursue the philosophical inquiry further²⁴. Indeed, owing to the reciprocal nature of the chase, the sophist himself, in his frantic attempt to escape, is beginning to falter. Since he cannot evade capture indefinitely, the pursuit must intensify precisely now, when he is at his most vulnerable. From this stage onward, against the background of the conceptual maps already drawn, the hunt descends to a deeper level, seeking to "sight (*katidein*)" (232a4) the single characteristic that underlies, unifies, and explains at a deeper level all the sophist's manifestations, while preserving the distinctive validity of each²⁵. However, reaching this distinctive feature requires a sort of "qualitative

²⁴ On the broader function of *aporia* as an educational and philosophical device within Plato's dialogues, see M. Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons. Übungsstücke zur Anleitung im philosophischen Denken*, De Gruyter, 1987.

²⁵ As, for instance, G. Movia, *Apparenze essere e verità. Commentario storico-filosofico al "Sofista" di Platone*, Vita e Pensiero, 1994, p. 190, points out, although Plato here emphasises the complexity of the diairetic operations and draws attention to the limitations of the results to which they lead, this does not mean that the definitions-descriptions of the sophist obtained thus far are inadequate to the essence of their object, even if they do not yet fully reveal its nature. By contrast, F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The Theaetetus and the Sophist of Plato Translated with*

leap”: starting from the issues that have emerged thus far, the inquiry must problematise the scope and significance of the sophist’s art by questioning its underlying theoretical presuppositions²⁶.

In any case, it is worth highlighting a fundamental dynamic: if the hunt has reached this critical stage, this is also thanks to the polymorphic beast itself, whose complex nature and wily behaviour prompt its hunters to sharpen their conceptual tools and refine their discernment.

4. Hunting a Many-Headed Creature

After summing up the definitions established so far (231d-232a), the search does not begin anew but rather takes up a revealing remark about the sophist: namely, that he is a “contradictor (*antilogikos*)” in every argument and a “teacher (*didaskalos*)” (232b6-8) of this art, because he is capable of persuading the young that he alone possesses wisdom in every subject, although he does not. This is the *thauma* (233a9) of the sophist: to appear wise without being so, that is, to pretend to be what he is not. Indeed, as has been clear since the very beginning of the inquiry, this figure is a *technites* or, as he is now described, someone *deinos* (232c9): “clever”, “skilful”, “marvellously strong”, “powerful” but also “fearful” and “terrible”. His ambivalent nature, poised between prowess and menace, thus receives further confirmation.

To gain a clearer understanding of this aspect of sophistry, the Stranger compares it to imitative art (*mimetike*), which likewise serves as a *paradeigma* and is, in fact, “the most manifold (*poikilotatos*)” (234b4). For the sophist produces “spoken images (*eidola legomena*)” (234c6) that give the impression of conveying the truth, while remaining far removed from it. This power is almost magical, making the sophist not only an “imitator (*mimetes*)” (235a8) but also a *goes* (235a8): an “enchanter”, “magician”, or “sorcerer”, in other words, a clever trickster who beguiles his audience through verbal illusion.

From this line of reasoning, the inner structure of the sophist’s predatory technique emerges with increasing clarity: his preferred prey are the naïve young and, more generally, all those who, regardless of age, lack knowledge of the truth;

Running Commentary, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, pp. 181, 184, and 186-187, and S. Rosen, *Plato's Sophist*, cit., p. 132, regard the examination conducted thus far as merely a banal and insufficiently rigorous introduction to the dialogue’s real argument.

²⁶ As J. Monserrat Molas and P. Sandoval Villarroel, “Plato’s Enquiry concerning the Sophist as a Way towards ‘Defining’ Philosophy,” in B. Bozzi, Th. M. Robinson (eds.), *Plato's Sophist*, cit., pp. 29-39, p. 33, note this conceptual juncture marks a “turning point” and a “shift” in the course of the argument.

his bait is the promise of comprehensive knowledge and of the ability to teach it; his net, finally, is an extraordinary verbal skill. In light of this, the trap of the hunt closes ever more tightly around him:

Stranger – Let us come, then, now and from this point on have our task to be no let-up on the beast. For we've pretty nearly encompassed him in the kind of net that's instrumental in dealing with things of this sort in speeches at least (*perieilephamen en amphiblestriko tini ton en tois logois*), and so he'll not escape from this.

Theaetetus – What sort is that?

Stranger – The fact that he is just one of the genus of conjurers (*ton thaumatopoion*) (235a10-b6).

The verbal net closing around this elusive beast – now explicitly described as a kind of *thaumatopoios*, that is, a “conjurer”, “juggler”, “wonder-worker”, and “acrobat” – becomes ever more constraining, requiring an increasingly precise hunting strategy. It is therefore no coincidence that the Stranger states:

It's been resolved, then, to divide as quickly as possible the art of image-making (*eidolopoiiken*), and in our descent, if the sophist straight off awaits us patiently, to seize him on the orders set forth by the royal speech, and on our handing him over to it to declare the catch. But if, after all, he slips in somewhere into the several parts of mimetics, then it's been resolved to follow his trail by always keeping up the dividing of the portion that welcomes him until he is seized. Neither he nor any different genus shall ever on any terms make the boast that it has avoided the pursuit of those capable of pursuing in this way (*methodon*) in each individual case and in general (235b7-c6).

No one can claim to have escaped the assaults of the dialectical method, the very method that, although operative from the outset of this hunt, is only now beginning to be explicitly articulated. It proceeds by progressively narrowing the stretch of ground – that is, the Form – in which the prey repeatedly takes refuge, until it is finally brought to bay and captured. Yet the superiority of dialectic does not entail immediate simplicity; on the contrary, its success depends to no small extent on the repeated setbacks imposed by the nature of both the prey and its terrain.

In the present inquiry, the hunting ground is that of *mimetike*, a landscape replete with hiding places where the sophist can cunningly conceal himself. Indeed, the art of image-making, one of its branches, divides into “likeness-making (*eikastike*)” – the art that produces a truthful image, insofar as it is as similar as possible to its original model, while preserving the proper ontological distance from it – and “appearance-making (*phantastike*)” (236c7) – the art that produces a deceptive

image, insofar as it presents itself as its original model, failing to preserve the proper ontological distance from it and thereby claiming to be what it is not. This fork in the path temporarily brings the hunters' pursuit to a halt, as the Stranger himself acknowledges:

I'm not yet capable even now of observing with clarity. But in his being, the man's amazing (*thaumastos aner*) and very difficult to be caught sight of (*katidein panchalepos*), since even now he has very skilfully and elegantly (*mala eu kai kompsos*) fled into a species that affords no way for a definite tracking (*eis aporon eidos*) (236c9-d3).

Like a wily and resourceful beast, the sophist – who is and remains a human being – has taken refuge in what appears to be an impenetrable lair. Far from being derogatory, this blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal, by virtue of its intrinsic *thau*ma, becomes the epistemological driving force of an inquiry that acquires an increasingly profound philosophical significance. Notably, it is the Stranger himself who acknowledges this philosophical deepening, for he is introduced from the very first page of the dialogue as “a man very much a philosopher (*mala andra philosophon*)” from Elea, “a comrade of the circle of Parmenides and Zeno (216a3-4)”²⁷. With increasing astonishment²⁸, he realises that the sophist has set a deadly trap for those attempting to capture him as a *goes*, that is, a producer of falsehoods. Indeed, in speaking of falsehood, the argument has dared to imply that “that which is not” is (*to me on einai*) (237a3-4), thus reviving the paradoxical intertwining (*symploke atapon*) of Being and Non-Being, the very intertwining that Parmenides had declared both impossible and forbidden (DK28B7 = 237a; 258d).

Through a brilliant spiral construction, the prey once again becomes the hunter, and the hunters become the prey, drawn into an exceedingly perilous path punctuated by a series of *aporiai*. These reveal, within the Eleatic paradigm, the impossibility of refuting Non-Being without falling into self-contradiction, since

²⁷ Regarding the philosophical nature of the Stranger, Lenner's reading is particularly interesting (“*Erōs-Hunter*”, cit., pp. 168-169): he shows himself to be hunting for truth for its own sake (246d9), encouraging the young Theaetetus not to give up this pursuit. For this reason, he is a “dialectician” and a “divine lover,” who follow in the footsteps of Zeus (*ichneuontes*) (*Phaedrus*, 252e1-253a8).

²⁸ Indeed, he declares with a certain *pathos*: “You blessed innocent! We’re engaged in an altogether difficult examination, and that’s the way it is in its being. For to appear and seem but not to be, and to speak some things but not true—all these are forever full of perplexity, in former times and now. What manner of speech there must be to say or to opine (that) false things in their being are, and in the utterance of this not get stuck in a contradiction, that’s altogether difficult, Theaetetus” (236d9-237a1).

doing so necessarily requires entangling it with Being (237b-239c), as well as the impossibility of accounting for the ontological status of image (239c-240c) and falsehood (240c-241a), both of which repeatedly presuppose this very same *symploke atopon*.

These pages provide a vivid depiction of the sophist's insolent character²⁹, for, as a truly "many-headed creature (*polykephalos*)" (240c4), he forces his opponents, even against their will, to acknowledge that "that which is not" is in some sense. Indeed, the Stranger and Theaetetus find themselves in the grip of this beast, whose animality assumes a monstrous dimension, evoking the monstrous and multiform creatures of the ancient Greek mythological imagination, such as the Lernaean Hydra, the nine-headed serpent; Cerberus, the three-headed hound; and the Chimera, the composite beast with the body and head of a lion, the tail of a serpent, and a goat's head emerging from its back³⁰. Accordingly, the epithet *polykephalos* – a further figurative intensification of his *poikilia* – makes manifest the *thauma* that the sophist arouses not in the young, who remain far from truth and constitute his customary prey, but in philosophers: they cannot be deceived; rather, through a subtler expedient, they must be led into a "crisis of reason" that brings to light the contradictions inherent in their own theses. This further characterisation of the sophist amplifies his enigmatic nature: he can be drawn out of concealment and captured only through an increasingly refined conceptual effort. The hunt, in fact, has reached a decisive point:

²⁹ This exchange, for instance, is particularly revealing: "Stranger – It's evident, Theaetetus, you've not seen a sophist. Theaetetus – Why's that exactly? Stranger – Your impression will be when you do that, he has shut his eyes or does not have them altogether. Theaetetus – How's that? Stranger – Whenever you offer him your answer in this way, if you mention something in mirrors or fabrications, he'll laugh at your speeches, whenever you speak to him as if he were seeing, by pretending that he's not familiar with either mirrors or bodies of water or sight altogether, but he'll ask you it only on the basis of speeches" (239e3-240a2).

³⁰ It is no coincidence that, in the *Euthydemus* (297c-d), Socrates regards the Hydra as a kind of sophist: the proliferation of the monster's heads – which, when cut off, grow back again – evokes the proliferation of sophistic argumentation, always ready to counter and refute. Euthydemus is, in fact, explicitly compared to the Hydra, while Dionysodorus is likened to the crab that, according to the myth, came to the Hydra's aid in its struggle against Heracles. Moreover, both sophists-eristics are associated with Proteus, the "Egyptian sophist" (*Euthydemus* 228b), that is, the old sea god of the *Odyssey* who, in order to escape Menelaus, continually changes his form, becoming a lion, a serpent, a leopard, a boar, and so forth. As F. Casadesús Bordoy aptly observes ("Why is it so Difficult to Catch a Sophist?" in B. Bozzi, Th.M. Robinson, *Plato's Sophist*, cit., pp. 15-27, pp. 21-25) the figure of Proteus, with his metamorphic, illusory, and almost magical ability, fully mirrors the sophist's strategy of evasion in the *Sophist* – a true *goes* – which, however, has an ontological foundation: his *poikilia*.

Stranger – But now’s the time to take counsel: What must we do about the sophist? If we track him to his lair and set him down in the art of the lie-makers and enchanters (*ton pseudourgon kai goeton*), you do see how readily available and many the objections and perplexities are (*antilepseis kai aporias*)?

Theaetetus – They are indeed.

Stranger – Well, it’s just a small part of them that we’ve gone through, though they are almost unlimited.

Theaetetus – If that’s the case, it’s impossible after all, it seems, to seize (*helein*) the sophist.

Stranger – Then what? Shall we in that case go soft and now stand aside and withdraw (*apostesometha ... malathakisthentes*)?

Theaetetus – No, I for one say we shouldn’t, if even to a slight degree we can get a hold on (*epilabesthai*) the man at any point (241b4-c6).

The outcome of the chase hangs in the balance. Yet, despite the many *aporiai* that have emerged – and the countless others still concealed – the Stranger is determined to press on in search of the “device (*mechane*)” (241a4) that would enable any reasonable person to assent to the strange intertwining of Being and Non-Being. At the same time, he is acutely aware of the gravity of this revolutionary undertaking in relation to the Parmenidean prohibition, which is why he addresses three earnest requests to Theaetetus (241c-242b):

1. To show forgiveness and be satisfied if, at any point, they depart even slightly from so mighty a discourse;
2. Not to take him to be a kind of parricide, since they will have to “put the speech of their father Parmenides to the torture” and force it to admit that “that which is not” is in some respect, and that “that which is” is not in some way. As the Stranger himself puts it, “we now must have the nerve to set upon the paternal speech, or dismiss it altogether, if a kind of reluctance keeps us from doing it” (242a1-3). This is the decisive and radical alternative upon which the entire inquiry depends;
3. Not to think him crazy if, at every step of the refutation, he appears to turn himself upside down, for this requires venturing along a path “fraught with danger (*parakindyneytikos*)” (242b6), one that has never been explored before.

5. The Beast’s Lair: the Intertwining of Being and Non-Being

These three requests mark a radical turning point not only in the course of the dialogue, but also in the entire history of Western ontology.

First, they lead to an unprecedented dialectical conception of Being, which, in the Gigantomachia (245e-249d), is defined as the “power (*dynamis*)” to “affect

(*dran*)” or “be affected (*paschein*)” (247d-e; 248b-e). Second, in order to establish this definition on firmer grounds, they require a detailed analysis of the dialectical relations among the Greatest Kinds (254b ff.) – Being, Motion, Rest, Sameness, and Difference. This very analysis, in turn, provides a rigorous account of the Form of Non-Being, understood not as the contrary (*enantion*) of Being – a notion that the inquiry had long since abandoned – but as other (*heteron*) than Being, or, more precisely, as that part of Difference which stands opposed to the being of each particular without thereby denying its existence (258e-259b). Indeed, having reached this point, the Stranger is careful to stress that the Non-Being forbidden by Parmenides has in no way been reinstated by the argument, thereby implicitly confirming that he is no parricide after all. At the same time, however, the inquiry has taken a decisive step beyond the strict Parmenidean prohibition by uncovering another sense of Non-Being, which proves to be the necessary condition for preserving and explaining the complexity of reality, whose structure consists in a dynamic nexus of relations.

In these theoretically dense and conceptually significant pages of the *Sophist* – which would warrant a fuller analysis but fall beyond the scope of the present paper – one element deserves particular attention for the purposes of our analysis: the pivotal role played by the sophist in this extraordinary “philosophical venture”. Indeed, the Stranger acknowledges that the instruments of dialectical art – properly the exclusive prerogative of the philosopher pure and just (235e) – here are deployed in order to flush out the sophist, of whom he says:

He is a fugitive (*apodidrascon*) into the darkling of ‘that which is not’ (*eis ten tou me ontos skoteinoteta*), to which he attaches himself by a knack, and on account of the darkness of the region (*dia to skoteinon tou topou*), he is hard to get an understanding of (254a4-6).

Through a certain skill, this manifold beast has lured the two hunters into its lair, believing that it has captured them instead. Its hiding place is the darkness of Non-Being, to which it clings, convinced that this refuge is impregnable. Indeed, it seems impossible to venture into and find one’s way through this dark region, which appears destined to remain forever obscure, since it is both ontologically problematic and conceptually contradictory. Yet the Stranger and Theaetetus not only dare to enter it but also adopt a method that enables them to find their way through it step by step. This darkness, however, cannot withstand dialectic, which, by dispelling every shadow, gradually brings the truth to light. And the truth is that this lair is not that of Non-Being as the contrary (*enantion*) of Being – truly inaccessible to inquiry and long since excluded from the argument – but rather of

Non-Being as other (*heteron*) with respect to Being: the domain in which Being and Non-Being are dialectically intertwined. This achievement is decisive, for it leaves the sophist vulnerable even in his very lair, thereby overcoming the greatest obstacle that he had placed in the path of his pursuers and significantly undermining its claim to elude every blow³¹.

6. Hunting Lions, Satyrs, and Centaurs

The hunt, however, is not yet over. To capture the sophist, it is necessary to demonstrate that Non-Being is intertwined with the very structure of discourse (*logos*). Were this not the case, falsehood (*pseudos*) and deception (*apate*) – the tools proper to sophistry – could not exist. Equipped with the instruments of dialectical inquiry, the Stranger and Theaetetus successfully accomplish this further task as well (259d-264b).

On the basis of these results, the final dialectical procedure resumes precisely where the previous one had come to a halt (236c-d; 264c ff.), but this time it is pursued to completion. The sophist is finally flushed out as a “conscious dissembler (*eironikos mimetes*)” (268a7) who, as a true *goetes* and *thaumatopoios*, produces wondrous verbal deceptions with which he ensnares his prey through conversation in private. This definition is deemed “the truest (*talesthestata*)” (268d4); indeed, without invalidating any of those previously established, it explains and grounds them with greater theoretical clarity: whereas they focus on “what” the sophist-hunter does, this one grasps the deeper mechanism that makes him such an ingenious and skilful hunter, focusing instead on “how he manages to do it”. The inquiry therefore supplies the missing piece of the mosaic, revealing the underlying unity of the sophist’s manifold manifestations while preserving the distinctive validity of each, which together constitute the beast’s ontological *poikilia*³².

³¹ P. Pellegrin, “Le *Sophiste* ou de la division. Aristote-Platon-Aristote”, in P. Aubenque, *Etudes*, cit., pp. 390-416, regards this ontological turn as necessary for orienting and bringing the hunt for the sophist to its conclusion, a hunt that, in his view, is truly such insofar as, up to this point, it has traced multiple paths without knowing *a priori* which one will prove decisive. He writes (p. 410): “C’est le ‘détour métaphysique’ du dialogue qui met fin à ce vagabondage cynégétique en validant la bonne piste”.

³² For an overall collection-and-division scheme encompassing the various definitions of the sophist, albeit traced only in its general outlines, cf. Fig. 2. Although the final definition captures the essence of the sophist in a profound and conceptual manner, all the other definitions, too, in their more descriptive and phenomenological scope, are indispensable for tracing and comprehending as fully as possible the one-in-many identity of this *poikilos* figure. Accordingly, the different stages of the hunt for the sophist, which unfolds along a variety of paths, are all interwoven with one another,

The *Sophist* comes to an end here, but the pursuit of the sophist extends beyond it. Indeed, the *Statesman* – the dialogue that immediately follows – offers a striking dramatic continuation³³: at precisely the moment when the true statesman must be distinguished from the multitude of figures who claim to be one, the Stranger and Young Socrates engage in the following exchange:

Stranger – Well, then, one must examine these lottery kings, along with priests and their servants, as well as some other very large crowd which has just now become evident to us with the separation of the previous groups.

Socrates – But just whom do you mean?

Strangers – Some very strange ones (*mala tinas atopous*).

Socrates – Why exactly?

Stranger – Their genus is of every kind of tribe (*pamphylos*), as it appears on just now examining it. Many of the men bear a resemblance to lions, centaurs, and others of this sort, and a very large number to satyrs and the weak and wily beasts (*tois asthenesi kai polutropois theriois*), and they quickly exchange their looks and capacity with one another. And yet for all of that, Socrates, it's my impression that I've come to an understanding of these men just now.

Socrates – You must speak, for it seems that you're catching sight of something strange (*atopon*).

Stranger – Yes, for it's from a failure of recognition that everyone falls in with the strange (*atopon*), and in this particular case I myself was now affected in just this way.

suggesting a unified – but not univocal – vision of the dialogue as a whole, in line with Notomi, *The Unity*, cit. Moreover, with regard to the connections between the various definitions, the position of D.G. MacIsaac, "The False Appearance of the Sophist Himself in the First Six Definitions of Plato's *Sophist*", in *Plato Journal*, 25, pp. 95-123, is particularly noteworthy: the first six are an enactment of what is investigated philosophically in the last. The earlier definitions, therefore, are by no means "errors" but rather a carefully structured illustration of how the sophist, through speech, produces a distorted image of himself that nevertheless appears beautiful from a distance – that is, in the eyes of the naive and ignorant. Yet the sophist's true nature is one: he is a predatory hunter whose sole aim is to obtain money from his students, who are lured by the promise of virtue or political success. Furthermore, according to MacIsaac, it is essential to read the *Sophist* alongside the portraits of sophists found in other dialogues – most notably the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras* –, since it is there that Plato dramatically reveals the sophists' true intentions, what they actually teach, and the disastrous effects they have on the young.

³³ On both the gap and the continuity between the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* as an exemplary instance of the distinctive form of philosophical writing invented by Plato (cf. n. 3), see M. Migliori, *Il Disordine ordinato. La filosofia dialettica di Platone*, 2 voll., Morcelliana, 2013, pp. 105-110. Therefore, as Z. Lenner, "Erös-Hunter", cit., p. 10, writes: "The reader is also on the hunt, trying the best he can to collect dramatic clues, solve unsolved perplexities, and explain philosophical digressions, in order to become himself a philosopher, according to Plato's own acknowledgment of his main purpose in writing".

I suddenly got bewildered when I caught sight of the chorus that deal with the affairs of the cities.

Socrates – Of what sort?

Stranger – The greatest enchanter of all the sophists and most experienced in this art (*ton panton ton sophiston megiston goeta kai tautes tes technes empeirotaton*). He is very difficult to remove from those who are in their being statesmen and royalty, and yet he has to be removed if we're going to see as plain as day that which is sought (*Statesman*, 291a1-c6)³⁴.

Only at this point does the Stranger, in astonishment, realise that the truest and most dangerous form of sophistry is the one that applies its deceptive power to the political sphere, beguiling not a single individual but entire crowds of citizens. This astonishment, however, is not entirely warranted, since a careful reading reveals that this political and public dimension of the sophist is already anticipated in the *Sophist*, in the passages leading to the final definition. There, the figure of the “demagogue (*demologikos*)” (268b9) already emerges clearly, that is, one who dissembles in public in long speeches³⁵. The *Statesman* thus does not introduce a new stage in the hunt but extends the net already set in the *Sophist* to its widest possible field of operation, thereby enabling the sophist to be captured in his most insidious guise: that of the greatest enchanter.

Only at this point, therefore, does the proteiform (*pamphylos*) identity of the sophist fully unfold, revealing his capacity to assume the most various guises – tame animals, wild beasts, and even mythological creatures advancing in a “troop of Centaurs and Satyrs” (303c5-6). Above all, these latter figures, poised between the human and the animal, vividly convey the hybrid nature of this subject, which resists any rigid classification and compels his hunters to venture even into the most unexpected terrains – from the private sphere to the public realm – to ensnare him in the full exercise of his elusive and deceptive power.

7. Concluding Remarks

The analysis presented in this paper underscores one point in particular: the sophist's initial characterisation as “difficult and hard to hunt down (*chalepon kai dysthereuton*)” (218d3) serves not only a descriptive but also a programmatic and prescriptive function. Specifically, this characterisation does not merely signal an

³⁴ Translation by S. Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³⁵ Cf. Fig. 3.

epistemic difficulty inherent in the attempt to define such a subject; it also provides methodological guidance for confronting this difficulty, calling for the search to be approached through the paradigm of the hunt. Far from being an ornamental metaphor, hunting is embedded in the theoretical structure of the dialogue in a way that is more profound than that suggested by an image of philosophical inquiry as a patient and open-ended quest for truth³⁶: it is rooted in a fundamental ontological feature of the sophist – his animality.

The category of animality proves particularly effective because it shifts the focus of the argument onto a level more complex than that implied by a mere comparison with an animal. Rather, it captures something constitutive of the sophist's mode of being – his resistance to fixed classification. The sophist is polymorphic, and his exceeding of rigid, fixed, and univocal determinations challenges the categories through which philosophy attempts to comprehend him. His animality should therefore not be understood as an external image imposed upon him, but as a way of expressing this constitutive resistance to capture. The sophist, indeed, is to be understood as a wild animal not because he belongs to the sphere of the irrational – for the course of the inquiry itself reveals his cunning – but because he resists being securely located within a determinate conceptual category. His “wildness” – in both its wondrous and disquieting aspects – acquires an ontological significance: it names the instability of the object itself, insofar as the sophist continually escapes the conceptual determinations through which thought seeks to grasp him.

This is precisely why the hunt is methodologically necessary. If the sophist could be assigned once and for all to a stable genus and species, the inquiry could proceed through straightforward classification. Yet the sophist's polymorphic identity repeatedly resists such an operation, compelling philosophy to reconfigure the very instruments through which it seeks to capture him. The dialectical “conceptual nets” must therefore remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate an object that does not simply occupy a predetermined place within the classificatory structure, while the later examination of Being and Non-Being requires an even more radical reorganisation of the conceptual framework itself, leading thought into a region that had remained obscure because it had been regarded as impenetrable.

³⁶ In this regard, it is particularly noteworthy that Xenophon's *Cynegeticus* not only attributes to hunting a distinctly paideutic function, insofar as it disciplines and shapes both body and soul (§12), but also explicitly contrasts it with the superficial form of instruction associated with the sophists: whereas the sophists teach their pupils to deceive through the use of words, hunting instead contributes to the cultivation of genuine virtue (§13).

To conclude, the characterisation of the sophist as a beast should not be understood as a mere form of degradation or denigration – although he remains a dangerous figure, one of whom one must remain wary – but rather as an expression of his irreducible otherness, his elusive and polymorphic nature, which makes him an “active prey”. He is not simply an object passively subjected to philosophical investigation: while being hunted, he hunts in turn, drawing his own hunters into an increasingly arduous philosophical adventure. The hunt for the sophist becomes, paradoxically, a hunt in which philosophy hunts itself: the more elusive and dangerous the prey proves to be, the more the inquiry is forced to transform itself. In attempting to capture the sophist, philosophy must renew its conceptual instruments and ultimately reconsider the ontological categories through which it understands what is. The sophist’s resistance to capture is not an obstacle external to philosophical inquiry; it is precisely what makes the inquiry philosophically productive and ontologically transformative.

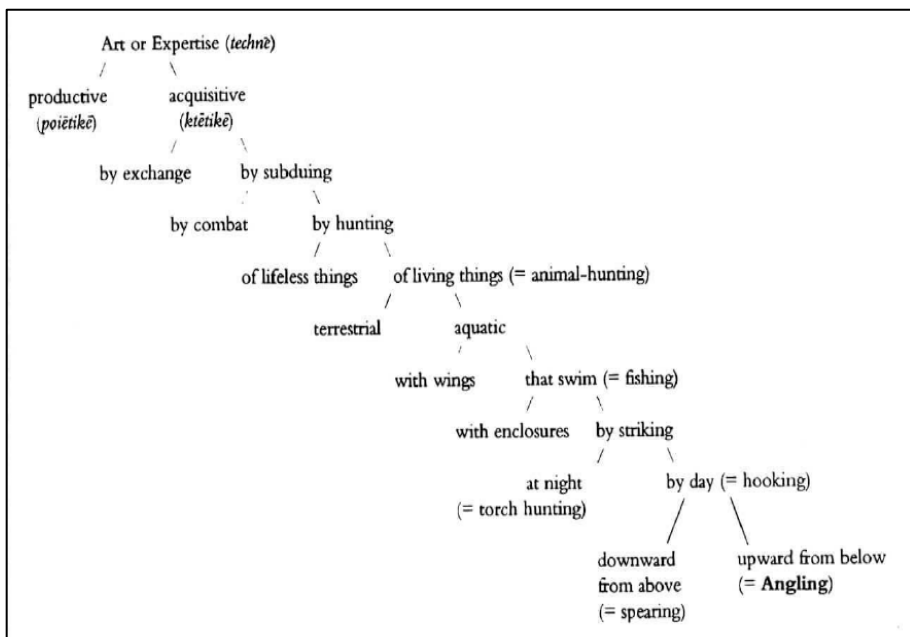


Fig. 1. From M.L. Gill, “Division and Definition in Plato’s *Sophist* and *Statesman*”, in D. Charles (ed), *Definition in Greek Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 172-199, p. 177.

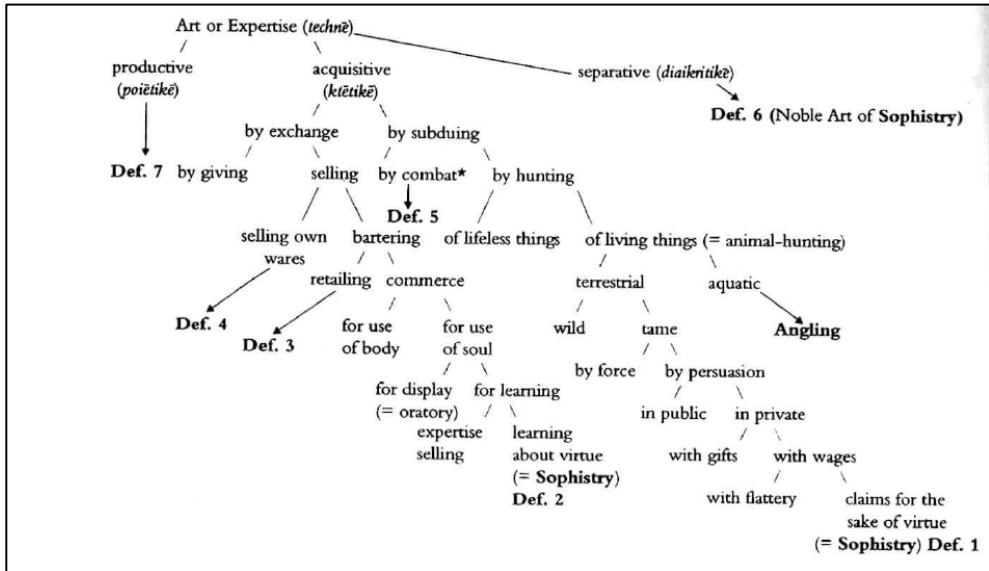


Fig. 2. From M.L. Gill, "Division", cit., p. 178.

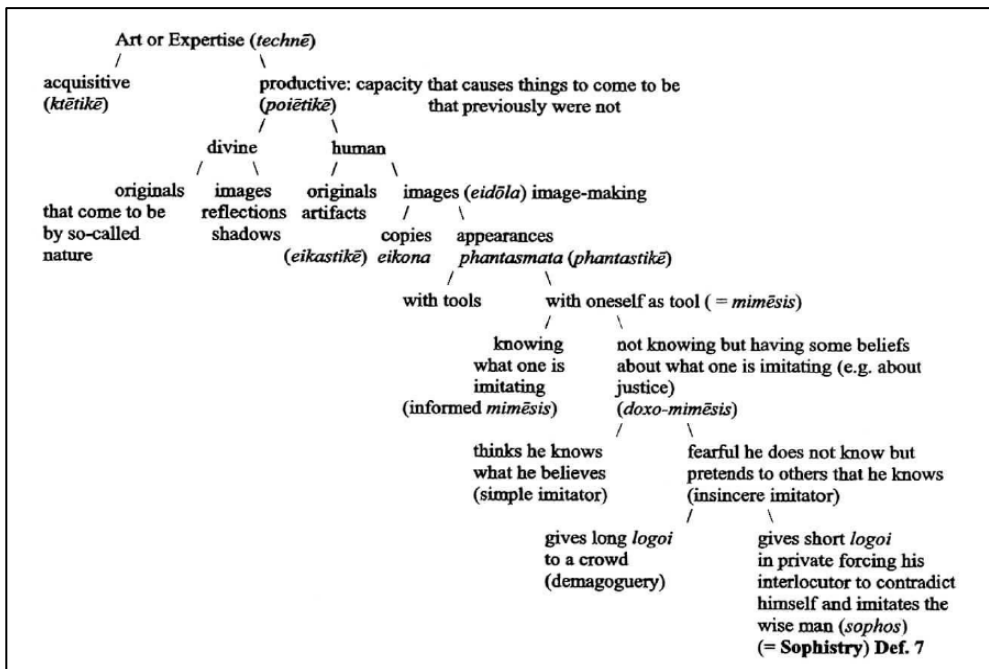


Fig. 3. From M.L. Gill, "Division", cit., p. 185.