

Subjectivity and the Modern World

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Abstract: Despite the great technical progress of the modern world, we live, in some parts of Western society at least, in a joyless and despairing world. Many Western countries are in demographic decline and their citizens, thanks to the Covid pandemic, increasingly distrustful of governments and science alike. At the same time, social media has replaced traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, as the new sources of information and opinion about a multitude of issues. Unfortunately, because we are exhorted to be sensitive to everyone's subjective feelings and because we are bombarded on all sides by masses of information, misinformation, and untested opinions, one of the first casualties of this zeitgeist is truth. The genesis of the contemporary estrangement from truth is the post-modern rejection of Modernity and the Enlightenment project in which the hope of humanity was taken to lie in reason and science alone. Religion was to henceforth be a private matter. A rising anti-religious fervour in the nineteenth century prompted Nietzsche to warn that the death of God would have dire consequences for human beings. Despite Nietzsche's warnings, universal religious, moral and social principles grounded in a transcendent reality that demand priority over subjective desires, are now a major stumbling block for a world in which, in God's absence, individual autonomy is the most important value and personal opinion overrides truth. Although post-modernity has provided a propaedeutic to the overconfident reliance of the Enlightenment on the power of an objective reason, it has, in its turn, swung the pendulum too far towards a dogmatic insistence that reality is subjective. This paper, drawing on Plato's dialogues against the sophist, shows that the contemporary estrangement from truth is not new and that the postmodern world is full of sophists too. It is suggested that the chaos of the modern world can only be corrected through a return to a metaphysics in which God, and hence truth, has a central role.

Keywords: post-modernism, Plato, sophism, truth

Introduction

Despite the great scientific, medical, and technological advances of the modern world, we seem to live, in most parts of Western society at least, in pessimistic, discontented and self-absorbed times. As if the Covid-19 pandemic has not been testing enough, modern life has never seemed more difficult than it does at present. Social media, with their variety of applications that encourage self-absorption and facilitate the presentation of a curated self online, have become an electronic public square. More generally, we are bombarded on all sides by masses of information, misinformation, expert opinions, and relentless, strident voices on social media browbeat us into accepting the dogmatic ideological commitments of leading influencers. Amongst the cacophony of voices striving to be heard, contending for attention and recognition, truth is necessarily the first casualty since in contemporary Western society only subjective feelings are what matter. Under the influence of a Marxist reconstruction of Hegelianism, deconstruction and critical theory, echoing Pilate (*John 18:38*), the modern world asks, “What is truth?”, but is not interested in an answer, preferring pre-occupation with individual desires and their fulfilment, provided that these conform to those of an approved, oppressed group or conform to an accepted, progressive ideological world view.

Eschewing foundationalism and any form of objectivity, the new idol, using Bacon’s term, is self-identification with an oppressed group and claimed superior virtue to whoever is designated the oppressor, frequently cisgender white European males. In classical Marxist style, the world is divided between the oppressed and oppressors, black and white, non-racists and racists, climate activists and climate deniers, political progressives and neo-Nazis, secularists and religious believers, trans people and transphobes, amongst other binaries. The good are those who side with the oppressed, black people, non-racists, climate activists, transpeople and other anointed groups, and signal their virtue by their words, if not by their actions. Despite splitting the world into

binaries, paradoxically, this does not lead to a dialectical engagement with contrary beliefs and views, but their condemnation as self-evidently false and “on the wrong side of history.” History itself, of course, can be re-written to conform with present ideology, as evidenced by the craze for the removal of statues of various former celebrated statesmen or community leaders now found to be racists, colonisers, slave owners or oppressors of some other type. That they are commonly white European men is also a black mark against them and reason enough to remove them from their pedestals.

Much of the chaos and turmoil observed in Western society and the genesis of the contemporary estrangement from truth is the post-modern rejection of Modernity and the Enlightenment project in which the hope of humanity was taken to lie in reason and science alone. Theology, once the queen of sciences, was quarantined from the Enlightenment project, and banished to the private sphere of individual religious belief. The Enlightenment project expressed confidence in the power of human reason and the natural sciences alone to uncover the secrets of nature, replacing superstition and credulity with knowledge. Faith in human progress through the discoveries of science replaced faith in God. The many giant strides in technology witnessed in the last one hundred years have repaid that faith many times over. As material prosperity in the West has increased, religious belief has suffered a decline, so that religion, along with theology, has become a private matter, an individual pursuit with little relevance in the public arena. After all, when life is good, human beings begin to believe that it is due to their own efforts and not due to God’s graciousness. Paraphrasing Weil, the further removed from suffering we are the further we are removed from the foot of the Cross and hence from God.¹ More particularly, universal religious, moral and social principles grounded in a transcendent reality that demand priority over subjective desires, are a major stumbling block for a world in which ostensibly individual autonomy is the most important value. Although post-modernity has provided a propaedeutic to the overconfident reliance of the Enlightenment on the power of an objective reason, it has, in

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 124-26.

its turn, swung the pendulum too far towards a dogmatic insistence that reality is subjective.

Paradoxically, though belief in the supernatural, by which we mean a transcendent God, has declined, it has been replaced by a form of Gnosticism in which the mind is more important than the body. Hence, under, for example, Butler's reinterpretation of Hegel, what we are as human beings is defined by the actions which we carry out in fulfilment of our desires.² The individual human being *qua* human person is defined by the way in which he or she acts on his or her desires. Moreover, since it is the individual who determines those desires, it is the individual who is the final arbiter of how the self is to be defined. Thus, subjective feelings, which express the desires of the individual, are the determinants of the self. Spirituality, shorn of belief in God, reduces to mindfulness, that is, a paying attention to what we, as individuals, are doing in the moment.³ Our horizons extend no further than what is of immediate concern to us. Arguably, this self-absorption is the ultimate perversion of the first-person account of the self of which the phenomenology of Husserl tried to provide an account.

In this paper we attack the idea that there is no truth or objectivity, arguing that this is an ancient problem with which Plato deals in a number of his dialogues. We show, through several examples, that without recourse to truth and objectivity, we are left in contradictions which are irresolvable. Moreover, we are susceptible to the false arguments of those who aim to persuade us to their point of view. Making use of Plato's arguments in the *Sophist*⁴, we argue that the denial of truth leads into the dystopian world described by George Orwell in his classic book, *1984*⁵.

² Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987/2012).

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

³ There is nothing wrong with mindfulness as such since it is a first step to God. By itself, however, it is not an adequate replacement for genuine spirituality.

⁴ Plato, "Sophist," in *Plato: Theaetetus and Sophist*, ed. Christopher Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵ George Orwell, "1984," in *Complete Works of George Orwell* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2013), 1174-491.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity and its place in our epistemology are not new problems, but one which have exercised philosophers since ancient times. Plato deals with subjectivity and its relation to knowledge in many of his dialogues, demonstrating that it is a key consideration in our understanding of the nature of knowledge. This is not the only area in which the place of subjectivity is crucial. It is also central to our understanding of ourselves as moral beings who relate to others. Indeed, contrary to Butler's assertion that we are defined by the desires which we enact, Lévinas argues that we cannot be an "I" without the other. That is, self-consciousness arises in the recognition of and our responsibility for the other, not in the fulfilment of our selfish desires.⁶ An understanding of subjectivity, that is, of the human subject and his or her relationship with totality is central to not only our conception of morality but is also central to our conception of truth. Subjectivity, for instance, features in Plato's account of the nature of justice, a major theme in the *Republic*. Plato's account of the state there is also an analogical account of the individual human person.

In the *Republic* Plato considers whether it is best to be just or unjust, since it would seem that the self-interested person will always do better out of any deal than the just person. This is because the self-interested person is not driven by a desire to be fair, but by whatever advantage he or she can gain over another. Adeimantus, for example, argues that people only do what is right for what they can get out of it, preferring to do what is wrong because it is more profitable to them. If they do what is right at all, it is only because they fear social odium or the possibility that they might put themselves at a disadvantage.⁷ There is no clearer statement that people will act according to their own subjective interests, irrespective of whether it is fair or reasonable.

⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," in *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 66.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), [363a-367e]. Note that Stephanus numbers are given here, not page numbers.

In *Theaetetus*, Plato describes the subjective experience of a wind on two different persons. The first person experiences it as a warm wind, the second, as a cool wind. Plato challenges Protagoras's claim that it is the subject who is the determinant, saying, "Man is the measure", and that it is the subjective experience which determines what kind of wind there is.⁸ Plato provides a number of examples of the folly of proposing that it is the subjective experience that tells us anything about what is actual in the world. He illustrates this, for example, by observing that the taste of wine when a person is sick will be different to its taste at another time when the person is healthy.⁹ For Plato, our subjective experiences, since they are episodic, changing from moment to moment, cannot give us anything that we can concretely hold to be true about the world.

What is salient about Plato's discussion of knowledge, that is, of that which is known because it has being, is that it lies beyond subjective experiences, that it is not a matter of what an individual feels, on the basis of subjective experience, to be the case. Plato's solution is to postulate the existence of the Forms, which are eternal, and which depend upon God, the Supreme Good, for their being. Truth, at least in ancient Greek philosophy, is about those things of which we can say that they have being, and falsity is about those things which do not have being. Plato is aware that there is much more to be said about being and non-being if we are to provide an adequate account of the nature of knowledge and of truth. He pursues the discussion of the distinction between being and non-being in several of his dialogues.

In those dialogues Plato considers the sophist challenge to the distinction between being and non-being and the idea of truth. In the twentieth century, the significance of this challenge was ominously expressed by Winston's torturer O'Brien in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who says, "You believe that reality is something objective, external existing in its own right, ...But I tell you Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind and nowhere else." Whatever the Party holds to be

⁸ Plato, "Theaetetus," in *Plato: Theaetetus and Sophist*, ed. Christopher Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), [152a-152e].

⁹ *Ibid.*, [159c10-159e5].

the truth, is truth.”¹⁰ Further on, Winston’s torturer adds, “Reality is inside the skull. You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of Nature. We make the laws of Nature.... Nothing exists except human consciousness.”¹¹ Orwell was prescient: the assault on the view that there is an external objective reality independent of human consciousness has succeeded in banishing it to the margins of discourse. Sophists and their ideological descendants, if they have any use for it at all, believe that truth is whatever they say it is.

Reality and Ideological Commitment

During the last ten years the view that there is no external reality has become mainstream across the world, so much so that an individual’s subjective view of himself or herself has become the touchstone of reality. Some men, for example, claiming that gender is constructed, have taken to identifying themselves as women and demanding that they be accepted as such. Several international sporting organisations have allowed men identifying as women to compete against women. Of course, in certain sports where power and strength are important, this confers a significant advantage. The blurring of the lines between the sexes has become so pronounced that the New Zealand Prime Minister, Christopher Hipkins, when asked what a woman is was unable to reply.¹² Similarly, the Secretary of the Australian Federal Health Department and former Chief Health Officer, Professor Brendan Murphy, when questioned at a Senate estimates hearing was unable to define what a woman is, arguing that there were many definitions.¹³ That the simple reply that a paradigmatic example of woman is one’s mother obviously escaped these two seemingly

¹⁰ George Orwell, “1984,” 1430.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1444-445.

¹² “New Zealand PM struggles when asked to define ‘woman’,” *Sky News*, 4th April 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/new-zealand-pm-chris-hipkins-stumbles-when-asked-to-define-woman-12849593>.

¹³ Frank Chung, “Health boss Brendan Murphy unable to define ‘woman’ in Senate estimates,” *News*, 7th April 2022, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/science/human-body/health-boss-brendan-murphy-unable-to-define-woman-in-senate-estimates/news-story/bad3124ed5e0d97cd666563d7f60ac7d>.

highly educated and intelligent men. The provocative issue of transwomen participating in women's sports is an example of a wilful blindness to biological reality in the service of a pernicious ideology. Although in many instances common sense is now beginning to prevail with biological males being prohibited from participating in women's sport, this is by no means universal. That there has been the need for debate at all about who can compete in women's sports illustrates how far society has lost sight of biological reality and succumbed to an ideological blindness to the differences between men and women. This might have been prevented if not for the misguided and perversely held proposition that reality can be bent to conform to human desires.

During the Covid crisis we were exhorted to "follow the science", to wear masks, to isolate and remain indoors, and to ensure that we had at least two doses of vaccines which had been fast tracked and so had not completed the normal four stage clinical trials that new drugs are meant to undergo before they can be approved for use in the general population. Stringent testing of drugs is carried out in order to ensure that the benefits of the drugs outweigh possible side effects. For instance, the Moderna vaccine was known to cause heart problems, but these were downplayed during its approval for use.¹⁴ Governments were not concerned with the truth, but what was expedient and what they were convinced on flimsy grounds was the right policy. In hindsight, lockdowns and various other measures implemented by the government have been shown to have been ineffective and significant damage was done to not only the economy because many people were unable to continue working, but also to mental health, especially of children. Mental health in children continues to be a particularly significant and little acknowledged problem. The exhortation to follow the science certainly in the case of the Covid pandemic seems to have been a rhetorical flourish rather than a genuine call to follow the science. Ideological commitment, just as it was in the scandalous Lysenko period of Soviet Science, is more important than any putative

¹⁴ See "COVID-19 vaccine: Information for Consumers and Health Professionals," *Australian Government*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/covid-19-vaccines/our-vaccines/moderna>.

objective science.¹⁵ While we might smile at the naivety of Soviet scientists, the very same situation exists at present. For instance, it is received wisdom that we are in the midst of serious humanly caused climate change and that the amount of carbon dioxide that is being released into the atmosphere through human activity must be reduced as soon as possible to net zero. This involves, at least in Western nations, switching from coal and gas energy to so-called renewable energy, such as solar and wind energy. This ignores two things: (i) the biggest users of coal and gas for energy, China and India, and hence the largest producers of carbon dioxide, have no intention of reducing their use, and (ii) the production of wind turbines and solar panels relies on coal and gas energy since most of the production of these is done in China.¹⁶ Not only does this involve using coal and gas energy, but requires significant mining of rare earths and other minerals, which is also energy intensive. Add to this, the need for very large tracts of land to put solar and wind turbines on, destroys significant tracts of animal habitat. Given that wind turbines and solar panels have a life expectancy respectively of fifteen and twenty-five years, the vast arrays of these will need replacing in a relatively short time. While no doubt some of their materials can be recycled, it will certainly involve the mining of more scarce minerals and the continuing manufacture of turbines and panels. Moreover, wind and solar as energy sources are intermittent, since the wind does not always blow, nor the sun always shine. This means that a base load supply of electricity is required to ensure that there is sufficient for both domestic and industrial use to prevent black outs and brown outs. The source of such base load is coal, gas, or nuclear power. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings of renewable energy, at the urging of such bodies as the OECD's International Program for Action on Climate (IPAC), governments have accepted the view that there is a terrible climate crisis upon us, that requires huge investment in renewable energy and the reduction of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to net zero by

¹⁵ See for example, David Joravsky, "The Lysenko Affair," *Scientific American* 207, no. 5 (1962), 41-9.

¹⁶ See for example, Charlie Hoffs, "Mining Raw Materials for Solar Panels: Problems and Solutions," *The Equation*, October 19, 2022, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/charlie-hoffs/mining-raw-materials-for-solar-panels-problems-and-solutions/>.

2050. In Ireland and in the Netherlands ideological commitment has led to the bizarre decision to reduce their cattle herds in order to reduce GHGs. The evidence when scrutinised supports neither this decision nor the huge investment on renewable energy. Both are ideological and political decisions, not rational and scientific decisions.¹⁷

Disagreement with certain opinions, such as, “there are many genders” or “men can have babies” or “white people are privileged because they are white” is regarded as hate speech and is irrefutable evidence that those who hold such views are irredeemably evil and are causing immense harm to oppressed minorities, respectively, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, trans community and black people. Similarly, those who disagree that there is a climate crisis or who question the efficacy of Covid vaccines are regarded as dangerous right-wing extremists who have no right to participate in society. As we witnessed during the Covid pandemic, the unvaccinated were denied their right to employment and banned from restaurants and sporting venues. Vaccination certificates were demanded to be shown if one wanted to enter a restaurant, a sporting venue or workplace. The unvaccinated were prevented from participating in their communities, not because they had contracted the Covid virus, but because they refused to have the vaccine. Masks were mandatory, even though it was well known that they did next to nothing to prevent the spread of the virus. None of the opinions mentioned are based on rational argument, but on appeals to either (i) emotion or (ii) authority. Persuading individuals to hold the same views is more important than seeking the truth. This is not something new, but something that Plato analyses in the *Sophist*. We shall examine the *Sophist* to illustrate that the modern phenomenon of flight from rationality is not new and to propose that Plato’s analysis enables us to understand how the denial of truth and transcendence has emerged. It will be apparent that degeneration of argument into

¹⁷ Space does not permit development of these points here, but it is self-evident that there are significant economic, not to mention social costs in the transition away from reliance on coal, gas and oil. The proposition that concerted action by governments to limit anthropogenic climate change will mitigate global temperature rises is contested and despite claims to the contrary, not settled science.

shrill emotive appeals, subjectivism and the denial of truth is not a new problem.

Sophism

Plato has two intertwined themes in the *Sophist*: the first, deals with the character of being and non-being, and the second with identifying the sophist, who Plato regards as a shady and disreputable character. This is because the sophist denies the existence of falsehood, claiming that there is no such thing since what is false is what does not exist and hence does not have being.¹⁸ In his introduction to *Sophist*, Jowett remarks that the great enemy of Plato is the world of the hater of truth and lover of appearance, who is occupied in the pursuit of gain and pleasure rather than knowledge, and is devoid of true education.¹⁹ While not all sophists were disreputable, Plato's target in the *Sophist* is those who use their skills to persuade and convince others of a particular view and who are not interested in the truth in the slightest. This, of course, follows from holding that falsity does not exist, since what is false is what does not exist. This partly explains the present *zeitgeist* in the Western world where various positions are coercively imposed simply because those that hold them are certain that they are right. The truth is irrelevant, as it is the achievement of specific ideological goals that is important, just like Winston's torturer in *1984*. The ends justify the means.

The Eristics, a species of sophist, Jowett remarks that they make successful disputation or argument the end, rather than the truth, and that: 1) they pursue verbal oppositions; 2) they make reasoning impossible by their over-accuracy in the use of language; 3) they deny predication; 4) they go from unity to plurality without

¹⁸ The connection between the themes is obvious. The sophist claims that what is false is what does not have being, and since non-being is about what does not exist, falsehood does not exist. If this is so, then everything that exists is true, rendering the idea of truth meaningless. For the sophist, this does not lead to a deflationary conception of truth, rather to a dispensing with truth altogether and asserting that what has being is whatever the sophist says it is.

¹⁹ Benjamin Jowett, "Introduction," in *Delphi Complete Works of Plato* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2015), 2031-2033.

passing through the intermediate stages; 5) they refuse to attribute motion or power to being; 6) they are enemies of sense, and may not be the “friends of ideas.”²⁰ Twenty-first century Marxist ideologues are the direct descendants of the Eristics, since, as indicated above, they too pursue dichotomies – dividing the world into black and white, oppressed and oppressor, as we pointed out earlier. Reasoning is impossible, since only those meanings are allowed that conform to their ideological commitments. They are certainly enemies of sense since they do not countenance any ideas except their own and happily contradict their own strongly held views if it suits their purposes. For example, much is said about the need for respecting diversity, but what is meant is diversity only in a particular sense, namely, respecting those who hold the same opinions as they do. They do not mean diversity in which all individuals are accepted nor diversity of views. Jowett reads Plato as characterising the sophist as an imitator or image-maker, lacking in knowledge and expert in the use of illusions, which is to say imitations which are appearances only and hence not real.²¹ The problem which arises because of this, and which Plato recognises, is that this asserts the existence of non-being and the investigation of this is central to Plato in the *Sophist*.

The investigation of non-being is directly connected to the question of the nature of truth and what we understand by reality. The more recent postmodern privileging of subjectivity or “turn to the subject,” can be understood as the outcome of powerful currents of thought stemming initially from reactions to Kant and to the development of psychology in the nineteenth century. For postmodernism, what is central is the privileging of the subject’s descriptions of his or her experiences. These are held to be incorrigible and describe reality. What the subject states about personal feelings and experiences is true and incontrovertible. Objectivity does not exist since there are only subjective experiences. Husserl’s development of phenomenology, on the other hand, following on from Brentano, begins with descriptive psychology and he attempts to develop an account of objectivity through the eidetic reduction of subjective experience. In doing so,

²⁰ Ibid., 2045.

²¹ Benjamin Jowett, “Introduction,” 2050-2051.

he draws on Descartes, though his approach is substantially different.²²

Descartes begins from subjective experience but thinks this is unreliable as guide to knowledge, which was about what had being. He was concerned to distinguish what was real from what was illusion, proposing that it was possible that our senses were being deceived by an evil demon. The only thing we could be sure of was that in engaging in the mental process of thinking, for instance in doubting, we could be certain that something was doing the doubting. The outcome for Descartes is that he was left with a disembodied thinking thing that was cut off from the world. The only way back into the world was through the trace of God that was to be found in the disembodied thinking thing. That is, through the trace of the transcendent absolute being that is God. Since what is known for certain is what is true, Descartes believed that he could secure certain knowledge through an appeal to God, who does not deceive.²³ What this means is that knowledge is not secured through internal subjective experience, but through what is external to the subject. At the very least, this will require intersubjective agreement, which assumes there are others who experience something like what the subject experiences. Experiences to be communicated demand language, and a common one at that, in order to describe the experience so that agreement is possible. Intersubjective agreement in itself is no guarantee the description is of what has being without it, however, we are even more rudderless in a sea of experiences. Intersubjective agreement

²² Husserl elaborates his phenomenological ideas in a number of his writings during his career. See for example: Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960); Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969); Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Third Book. Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences, trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980). (*Ideas III*); Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983). (*Ideas I*).

²³ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

demands a common language to describe what is a common experience. We cannot say, “I see a rabbit”, unless there is a common language which enables the communication of the experience of seeing a rabbit to others. The conclusion to draw from this, recalling Wittgenstein’s comment that there can be no private language, there cannot be any private knowledge.²⁴ For something to count as knowledge it has to be public. Husserl’s approach is different to Descartes, since he begins from the proposition that the consciousness of the subject in its many modes, is directed towards *something* that is external to the transcendental ego or subject.²⁵ Objective knowledge about the world is grounded in what remains after the eidetic reduction of what is subjective, and it is the essence of that to which our intentionality is directed.²⁶ It is this which anchors our grasp of what is real.

Without being able to distinguish reality from illusion there is no means of securing the binaries that Marxist ideologues invoke. In the same vein, the denial of falsity by the Sophist jeopardises the very binaries that such ideologues invoke – there cannot be black and white if there is not first agreement that there are objects that are black or white. Similarly, to be unable to say what is a woman is to either: (i) not know the English word; or (ii) know the word but not know what it refers to; or (iii) know the word but not know what it means; or (iv) deny that there are any objects that can be so described; (v) assert that it has no prescriptive definition and means or refers to whatever a subject takes it to mean or to refer to. The first three possibilities are understandable, especially for a non-English speaker but the last two are problematic. To deny there are any women is obviously false, since it is normatively used to refer to adult females. It is difficult to see how anyone could coherently

²⁴ The discussion on private language takes place in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* beginning Section 243. Wittgenstein is not arguing that we could not have a private language in which we spoke to ourselves about our experiences, we could. We could not communicate to others using a private language, however. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd Ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), sections 243-69.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 33-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

deny that there are adult females. Nevertheless, someone could deny there are women if that individual holds some form of extreme scepticism or objects that the term “woman” does not describe adult females, that is, “woman” is a term referring to the socially defined category of gender, while adult female refers to a biological category. Extreme scepticism is incoherent and the second objection reduces to (v). If it is held that nothing is true or false, denying there are women is to propose that our ontological categories need not include any natural kinds.²⁷ It is a denial that there is anything essential about any object. This would require argumentation, not merely assertion. The assertion that there is no prescriptive definition, and that any subject’s definition is valid means that the term “woman” does not describe anything. Worse still, if there is no agreement about what the term means, it is impossible to apply the term in any meaningful way. Thus, to assert that anyone who claims to be a woman is a woman is irrational because it destroys our ability to use the term to describe a particular group of human beings. It also seems morally objectionable to egocentrically redefine a term to suit a particular ideological position that denies that language is capable of representing the truth of being.²⁸ It is to proclaim an untruth, pervert language and hence, to contend that reality is malleable to human caprice. A pilot seeking to steer north

²⁷ In denying there are women, is to deny that there can be any essences of things that are not determined by human beings. As a result, there can be no natural kinds.

²⁸ There can be no truth of being because there is a denial that there are any essential features of things which distinguish them from other kinds of things. This is because the term “woman” can be used by anyone to describe anything, such as a man who claims to be a woman. This has enormous practical consequences. For example, a “woman” that is biologically male can demand treatment for cervical cancer or hormonal treatment so that “she” can breastfeed an infant. For an article on breastfeeding by transpersons which accepts the idea that gender is fluid, see: J.M. García-Acosta, R.M. San Juan-Valdivia, A.D. Fernández-Martínez, N.D. Lorenzo-Rocha, M.E. Castro-Peraza, “Trans* Pregnancy and Lactation: A Literature Review from a Nursing Perspective,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 44 (2019), doi: 10.3390/ijerph17010044. PMID: 31861638; PMCID: PMC6981677. What is concerning, apart from the ideological commitment to a redefinition of what a woman is, is the way in which health care treatment – and hence, limited health funds – to pander to particular life style choices rather than provision of crucial health care.

does not simply claim that north is whatever the pilot claims it to be, irrespective of the alignment of the compass needle. Allowing individual determination of the meaning of terms renders dialogue impossible, since what words mean and what sense they have are determined by the subject. Philosophers have always contested the meaning of words, especially since the mid-twentieth century's linguistic turn, and how certain statements are to be understood, but it is always in the context that we have to agree to meanings if we are to have a conversation. Philosophers endeavour to understand what is being said. Only in such a manner can they grasp the arguments of those with whom they dialogue. Marxist or postmodern ideologues are not interested in dialogue nor in truth. Unfortunately, if we cannot define what a woman is, it follows neither can we say what a transwoman is. Similarly, it follows that neither can we say what a man or a transman is. Categories collapse into nothing, and we have no anchoring points to enable us to structure reality. We need a distinction between being and non-being, since we need to be able to say that there is something X described as "X" and there is not something Y described as "Y". Truth cannot be avoided.

For Plato, the means of being able to make epistemic claims is to be able to distinguish between what has being, that is, has reality, and what has non-being, what does not have reality. As well as this, in order to be able to engage in dialogue, we need agreement about the terms that we use for the things which have being and those that do not. This means that Plato has to consider that in some sense non-being has to exist, but this seems to be impossible, since it suggests the being of non-being.²⁹ Fortunately, modern philosophy has ways – not available to Plato - to handle the existence of things which do not have being, such as, "the present king of France is bald." The existential quantifier can be used to describe a set of things of which there is no member. The problem from Plato's sophist's point of view is that non-being is being accorded an existence that it does not have. In the *Sophist*, Plato concentrates on determining the nature of being and to argue that the sophist is a charlatan.

²⁹ Benjamin Jowett, "Introduction," 2052.

In talking about being, we are also aware of its relation to non-being, since if we claim to know the concept “beautiful”, we also can know “not-beautiful”, similarly with “just”, we can know “not-just”. Thus, it seems that not-being is understood as other than being and is in relationship with being. Opposition and negation are a form of non-being and such non-being has a kind of being. What kind remains to be seen, but it is not the same kind of being as those things which have being. On the basis that non-being has a kind of being, the sophist argues that there is no falsehood because there is no such thing as non-being. This is mistaken since the kind of being that non-being has is not the same kind of being that being has.³⁰

Plato says that the imitator who has only opinion, may be either someone who thinks he knows or the dissembler who is conscious he does not know, but disguises his ignorance.³¹ There are also those who are indoctrinated and who are not concerned about knowing at all but who have an opinion that they think everyone should have. This is worse than the imitator who thinks he knows or the dissembler who does not know, since for the ideologue, knowing is irrelevant, because it is convincing someone that matters as it will advance her position. The sophist because he holds there is no falsehood, is characterised as the maker of short speeches, whose art may be traced as being: i) contradictions; ii) dissembling; 3) without knowledge; iv) human and not divine; v) juggling with words; vi) phantastic or unreal; vii) art of image-making.³² The last could be said to be the occupation of media directors who act as “spin doctors” for politicians.³³

Plato’s dialectic can be compared to Hegelian dialectic. Hegelian dialectic, Jowett says, may be described as a movement from the simple to the complex. Hegelian dialectic begins with generalisations of sense, passing through ideas of quality, quantity, measure, number, etc. and ascending from presentations to representations, hence to an essence that is detached from outward form. It is notable that these ideas closely follow Aristotle’s

³⁰ Ibid., 2056-2057.

³¹ Ibid., 2058.

³² Ibid.

³³ By “spin doctors” we mean media units whose job is to ensure that the image of the particular politician and of any decisions that he or she makes looks good. They also act to limit any bad press.

categories. It combines the I and not-I, or subject and object, enabling the arrangement of thoughts in relation to one another.³⁴ Of interest here is the postulation of the I and its opposite, the not-I. We identify the I with the subject, or the subjective and the not-I with the objective. In doing so, we have an analogous issue with the kind of being each possesses. Plato held that what had being were the ideas or forms which were to be found in the mind or soul, whereas what was not-I and which, if we identify it with the objective lies outside the mind and can be identified with an external world, but this is non-being, which is to say is not real in the way in which the world of ideas or forms is. But the soul is not all of being, so not-I also refers to what is the divine or the infinite. This means that I and not-I do not divide the world into subject and object in a simple way.³⁵ Through a dialectical process we come to see the relation between I and not-I, subject and object as complex. Jowett argues that some of the so-called laws of thought (for example, “All A = A” or Nothing can at the same time be both A and not-A) have been shown by Hegel to be silly, since the form of the maxim itself is virtually self-contradictory, as a proposition implies a distinction between subject and predicate. That is, “A is A”, the law of identity, strictly, has A as subject and A as object, which is a distinction between the two, thus the formulation itself results in a violation of the law of identity. Presumably we could also say that numerical identity is violated, since there is an A on one side and another on the other side, so the two As are not numerically identical. Jowett claims that this means that we have be willing to admit that two contradictories may be true.³⁶ There are antinomies where it seems that such a claim makes sense, for instance, in reconciling human freedom with determinism. In the above case, however, we can reformulate the law in such a way as to avoid these objections. Nevertheless, what seems to be alluded to here is the imprecise nature of natural languages.

³⁴ Benjamin Jowett, “Introduction,” 2063.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2066.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2066-2067. We need not agree with Jowett here, nevertheless, what is pointed out is the need to explicate what we mean by “equals” or “is identical with” in a way in which the objection that in the statement, “A is A” violates identity can be avoided. This is by no means simple.

To the 'either' and 'or' philosophy, 'Everything is either A or not A', according to Jowett, should at least be added the clause 'or neither', 'or both'.³⁷ This acknowledges that there is a nest of problems associated with the complexities of language that are uncovered once we confer meaning on the symbols that appear in simple propositions. Hegel's method of sifting through different interpretations through thesis and antithesis enables us to get closer to a more complete understanding of a particular problem, even if it does not lead to a solution. It demands a willingness to enter into an authentic dialectic in which there is a sincere quest for truth as far as it can be ascertained. Superficially, this seems to provide support for the view that it is not possible to say what a woman is, since it allows that not everything is A or not-A but could be neither or both. Thus, everything is either a woman or not a woman or neither (a woman or not a woman) or both (a woman and not a woman). Though the concept of "woman" is arrived at through experience and so is *a posteriori*, a clear normative definition can be and has been formulated. It is this definition, based on biology, which allows us to distinguish men from women. Without such a definition there is no means of recognising those who might not fit the definition. Acknowledging the complexity, however, does not mean we should revise the definition. The onus is on those who wish to expand this definition to provide compelling argument why this definition should be revised. Logic alone does not provide support for such revision. Though it has its limitations, the movement between thesis and anti-thesis, which is attributed to Hegel, is also Plato's method in the *Sophist*.

In the *Sophist*, Plato begins by delineates a method whereby we can distinguish between the sophist, the statesman and the philosopher. The method consists of making successive divisions between two things until it is possible to settle on one thing. The template that Plato uses is tried out on determining what kind of thing angling, that is, fishing is. It is a somewhat artificial method, since we have to have some idea of the divisions we are going to make between things. For instance, Plato establishes what angling is by considering whether it involves hunting, then whether it involves land animals or water animals, then whether the animals

³⁷ Ibid., 2068.

are swimming on the water or under the water, whether fishing involves spearing or catching with hooks, and so on. Eventually, what the divisions narrow down to is what it is agreed is called angling. Plato applies the same method to deciding what a sophist is.³⁸

Plato initially defines the sophist as someone privately for hire who uses persuasion to hunt human beings (rich and reputable young men) and who has a semblance of education.³⁹ The sophist is someone who sells ‘food for the soul’ or knowledge, that he or she has acquired in the same way that a merchant might buy goods and sell them. The sophist trades in knowledge, including knowledge of virtue.⁴⁰ The difficulty that Plato identifies is that the sophist is someone who does not know, but thinks he does, observing that this is probably the origin of all the mistakes in thinking that anyone of us makes.⁴¹ The conceits of the soul can be overcome, says Plato, through refuting ignorance and hence leading someone to humbly accept that he needs instruction and mental purification. This is education and seems to be something which could be called sophistry. Sophistry as an art seems to be practised by the sophist.⁴² There is a salutary lesson for all teachers here that we should be aware of our ignorance and not seek to pretend that we have more knowledge than we have. Admitting ignorance is a step towards knowledge. The sophist aims to use a veneer of education to exploit others, a common enough experience in the contemporary world also, where charlatans spruik their fake educational wares online. At this point Plato summarises what the sophist seems to be: (i) a hunter after rich and impressionable young people in order to get money from them; (ii) a merchant dealing with the goods of the soul; (iii) a retailer of these goods; (iv) a lessons salesman who also sold his own lessons (manufacturing the learned wares he sold; (v) an expert in debate and eristic argument; (vi) a purger of ignorance, clearing away opinions that obstruct knowledge.⁴³ The sophist, says Plato, is shown to possess some type of belief-based knowledge,

³⁸ Plato, “Sophist,” [221b1-221c5].

³⁹ *Ibid.*, [223b1-b5].

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, [224a1-c5].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, [229c5-c10].

⁴² *Ibid.*, [230a-231a].

⁴³ *Ibid.*, [231d1-e5].

which enables him to dispute all manner of topics, but he does not have truth.⁴⁴ Plato compares the sophist to a painter who is able to paint things that from a distance look like real things, since the sophist uses words to beguile people into thinking that their fictitious arguments are true and that the speaker is the wisest of people. They soon learn by bitter experience that what the sophist has told them is not true.⁴⁵

Crucial to the discussion of truth is the question of what is, and, contrariwise, what is not, since what is true is about what is the case, what has, according to Plato, what has being. Although Plato's argument concerns itself with ancient theories of what elements combine to make things the things that they are, the argument has more generally applicability to what gives things being. Plato turns to discussion of being and non-being, proposing that non-being, taken to be what is not, has to have some kind of being otherwise we could not speak of the thing that we say has non-being, that is, is not. Part of the puzzle includes the question of whether everything that is forms part of one thing or whether there are many things. The puzzle arises because Plato asks whether a thing having being means that there are two things, not one, since there is the thing and its being. This leads to incoherence since this separates the being of something and the thing itself. Subsequently when we ask about being itself, it has no content if it is not being of something. Neither does it make sense to speak of the being of being.⁴⁶ The discussion at this juncture raises questions without providing an account of being.

Another line of inquiry leads Plato to consider the idea that not everything which has being will have a physical body, for instance, the soul does not, but then there is the problem of how we would know such things. The answer is that something has being if it is able to act upon another thing. The mind, for example, is able to solve a problem. Secondly, something will have being if it is able to be acted upon by another thing. A teacher can teach a pupil so

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, [233c10].

⁴⁵ Plato, "Sophist," [234d1-e5].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, [243d5-245c5]. Of course, Aristotle later distinguishes between the essence of a thing and its existence. Puzzles concerning essence and existence have persisted to the modern day.

that he learns something. This leads to further discussion of whether we can know an item of knowledge, since in knowing we act upon it and so it is changed through being known by us. Plato considers whether this means that what is has to be always changing, since it appears that it cannot remain at rest or whether it has to be immutable if it is to have being. He concludes that we should regard what is as being constituted by everything both changing and unchanging.⁴⁷

This response, however, Plato says suffers from the same problem as saying that something is both hot and cold. Change and rest have being, but this means that being is something over and above either of these. Moreover, being is neither changing nor at rest, so is a third thing.⁴⁸ There is now another problem, that of whether being can be added to change and to rest, and what the implications of this will be. This leads to a further question of whether things can mix together or not, leading to the response that some things will be able to mix together and some not, just like letters of the alphabet mix together to form words, but not every combination of letters form words. Plato concludes that this requires expertise, just as knowing which notes mix together to give a tune require a musician. Being able to determine what items of information can mix together to give us knowledge, enables us to arrive at the definition of a philosopher.⁴⁹ The philosopher is someone who has knowledge and knows how to acquire it. Crucially, the philosopher has knowledge of being and hence, the truth. While Plato arrives at the conclusion that the philosopher has knowledge of being, the question of what being is has not been settled. Plato moves to another way of thinking about being. By making use of the form of difference, Plato is able to show that such things as ‘not big’ do not imply the opposite of ‘big’, but merely a contrast with it. Hence, if big has being, then so does ‘not big’, similarly, beautiful and not beautiful and what is and what is not are contrasting things and so what is not has being just as what is has being.⁵⁰ Plato’s argument here rests on being to show that if we consider change

⁴⁷ Plato, “Sophist,” [248c4-249d5].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, [250a1-250c1].

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, [253c5-253c10].

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, [258b5-c5].

and rest, it is obvious that these have being, but both differ from one another. Difference as a form also has being, as does sameness. Non-being can be said to partake of the form of difference since it is not being, but since difference has being, non-being also partakes of being. Of course, much more needs to be said about the plausibility of this argument, but it establishes that non-being has a form of existence or being. This sets the stage for Plato to consider whether the sophist is right to say that falsehood is what is not, since it is obvious that we can have false beliefs and we can also speak falsely. Plato has been shown that what is not has being and hence it is a mistake to say that falsehood is what is not. The sophist is therefore wrong to claim that there is no falsehood.

This is not sufficient, as we have already indicated, there is also the question of being able to communicate and so Plato begins with an analysis of speech, arguing that it is not merely a matter of stringing words together, but involves nouns (names) and verbs together.⁵¹ Plato contrasts the statements 'Theaetetus sits' and 'Theaetetus with whom I am conversing, flies'. The first is true, while the second is false.⁵² It does not mean that those things which are false do not have being, just that they are different from those things which are true. This means that there can be false speech. Similarly, beliefs, thoughts and appearances can turn out to be false, since thoughts are form of internal speech, beliefs expressed through internal speech and appearances also internalised speech, at any rate related to thoughts and beliefs.⁵³ Hence, various ideological claims may not only involve falsehood but may also misuse language. The assertion that biological men can also be women, for example, is not only false, but also a misuse of language.

Conclusion

Returning to the sophist, Plato concludes that the sophist can be defined as someone with expertise in deception, since we are able to allow that what is false has being.⁵⁴ The sophist is put down

⁵¹ Plato, "Sophist," [262a1-e15].

⁵² *Ibid.*, [263a1-b5].

⁵³ *Ibid.*, [263b10-264b1].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, [264d5].

as someone who does not know, but is an imitator of the wise person, is an expert in imitation, belonging to the contradiction-producing dissembling part of belief-based expertise, the word-conjuring part of the apparition-making kind from image-making, a human sort of production marked off from its divine counterpart – someone who belongs to this group of people will be the sophist.⁵⁵ The sophist is someone who is difficult to distinguish from those who genuinely quest for truth and who try to be honest in their advice to others. This is because they are clever at imitation and know well how to lead others astray. Since they care nothing for the truth, they have little respect for others and have no qualms in using of power to achieve their ends. Plato says that sophists are marked off from the divine and, we might add, as a result, deny the world is intelligible. The hallmark of the beliefs of sophists is their incoherence.

What we have described is the modern Marxist ideologue and their kindred spirits. We conclude, though, there is much further work to be done to challenge the postmodern *zeitgeist* which tranquilly accepts the sophist's rejection of a distinction between being and non-being, reality and illusion. In this paper, we have tried to show that the deliberate attempt to propose that there is no such thing as falsity – which of course means there is no such thing as truth – has ancient roots and there are equally ancient rejoinders. We looked briefly at Plato's discussion of the nature of the sophist and his discussion of being and non-being. There is much more to be said about the connection between what has being and what does not, and how we might arrive at the truth. Plato shows us that those who argue that there is no truth are sophists and hence are charlatans. We should be very wary of such individuals. We reiterate Orwell's prescient warning in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that we should be wary of those who claim that reality is not something objective and existing in its own right but exists nowhere else but in human consciousness, since the result of this is the possibility of the manipulation of human beings by not only the state but also social media, corporations and those with a vested interest in persuading others of a particular ideological viewpoint. The denial of truth leads to the denial of God, and as Nietzsche warned, the loss of freedom of speech and enslavement.

⁵⁵ Ibid., [268c1-d1].

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