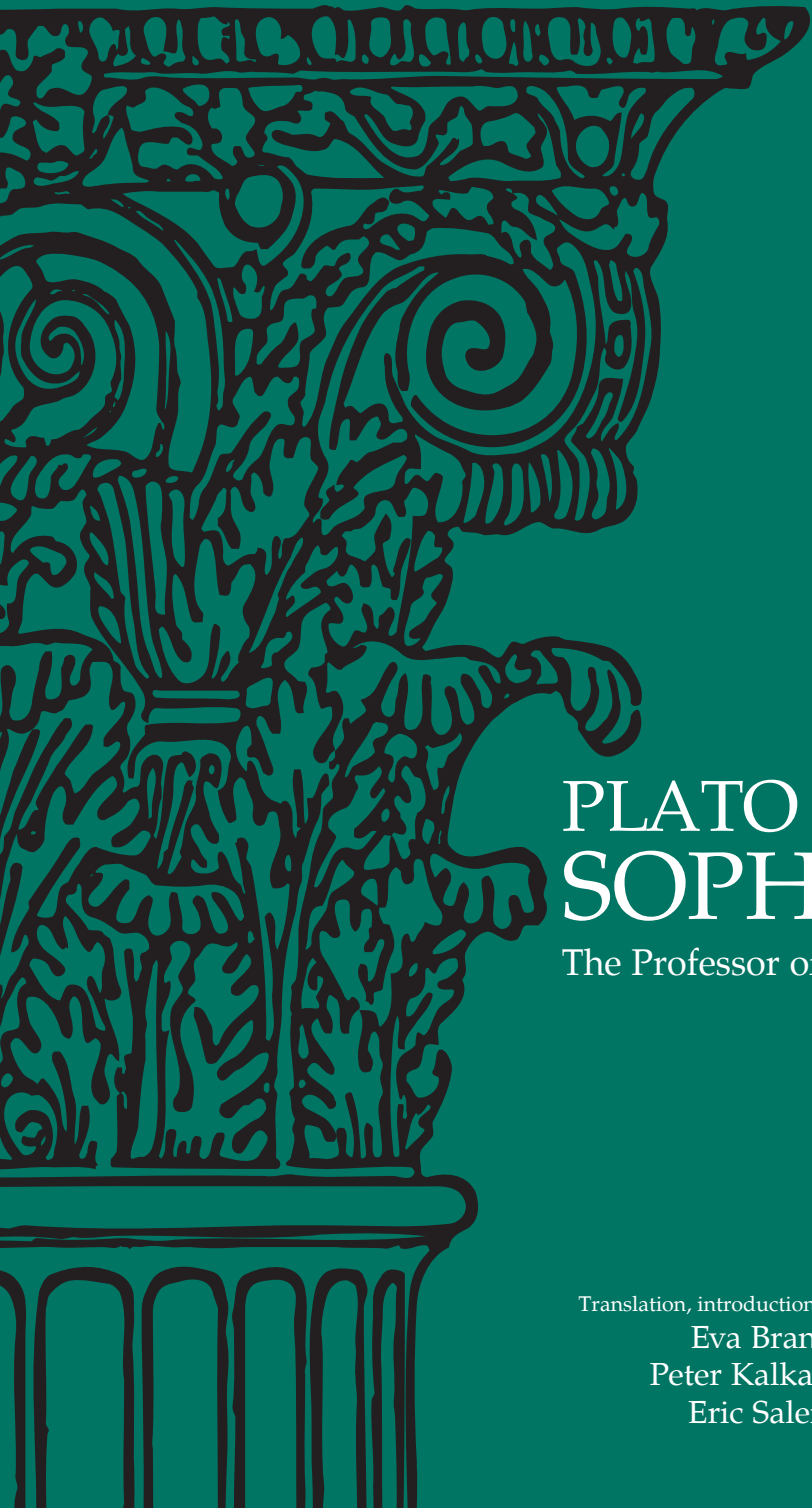


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PLATO  
SOPHIST

The Professor of Wisdom

Translation, introduction, and glossary

Eva Brann

Peter Kalkavage

Eric Salem

PLATO: SOPHIST  
OR  
THE PROFESSOR OF WISDOM

With Translation,  
Introduction and  
Glossary

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Projected Trilogy

The drama of the *Sophist* is part of a continuing conversation. Three of its participants had talked the day before: Socrates who is known to the world as a philosopher, the brilliant young geometer Theaetetus who so uncannily resembles the ugly Socrates, and Theaetetus' elderly teacher Theodorus. A young friend of Theaetetus who shares not the looks but the name of the elder Socrates is a silent bystander in both conversations. In the earlier conversation, recounted in the dialogue *Theaetetus*, the young mathematician proves unsuccessful in his attempts to answer Socrates' question: What is knowledge? The dialogue ends with Socrates' urging his partners to resume their talk the following morning: for now Socrates must go off to answer the charges brought against him by Meletus, charges of impiety and corruption of the youth.

The conclusion of the *Theaetetus* leads us to expect another conversation between Theaetetus and Socrates the next day. Instead, as we see from the opening of the *Sophist*, something very different is about to take place. Theodorus has modified the terms of the appointment by bringing along a stranger, whom he recommends to Socrates as "a very philosophical man." Socrates seizes on the possibility that Theodorus has not recognized the stranger correctly: Perhaps he is a god in disguise! Theodorus brushes off this suggestion. The stranger is not a god, though he is godlike, for that is what he, Theodorus, calls all philosophers. By speaking so confidently—one might say, so unreflectively—of the stranger's philosophical nature, Theodorus unwittingly poses the question that will haunt the conversation: Who *is* the philosopher? Socrates intimates that true philosophers always appear in disguise, sometimes as statesmen, sometimes as sophists, while at other times they appear to be "in a totally manic condition." This last appearance drops out of sight. By calling attention to the possibility that Theodorus is deceived, Socrates has shifted the focus of yesterday's inquiry: the search for knowledge becomes the hunt for the purveyor of ignorance—the sophist.

The trinity sophist-statesman-philosopher suggests a triad of dialogues: *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philosopher*. We have the *Sophist* before us. The *Statesman* also exists, and its conversation takes place right after that of the *Sophist*. But there is no Platonic dialogue named the *Philosopher*. We

are left to wonder: Has the philosopher's nature already been implicitly revealed somewhere in the course of the two existing dialogues?

## The Plot

In the prologue to the dialogue the stranger takes Theaetetus as a partner in the hunt for the sophist. To prepare for this difficult task, they first hunt down the fish-hunting angler. In this way the search for the sophist begins. (216A-221C).

- I. *Getting*. The sophist turns up within five divisions of the getting art, the art of acquisition. Among other things, he is an angler-like hunter of rich kids, a sham virtue salesman, and a professional athlete in contests of words. (221C-226A).
- II. *Separating*. The sophist is then found a sixth time as a practitioner of the homely art of separating, which includes spinning, combing and cleaning. In particular he is shown to be a philosopher-like cleanser of souls, who refutes others with a view to removing opinions that impede learning. (226A-231B).
- III. *Making*. Confronted by what seems to be a disordered heap of possible determinations of the sophist, the stranger and Theaetetus decide to focus on one aspect of sophistry, the sophist as debater. Debating turns out to be a kind of making: the art of making spoken images of all things. This art of imitation has two forms: likeness-making and apparition-making, the making of true and of distorted images. But it is unclear in which division the sophist belongs. (231B-236D).

A. The very positing of an image-making art entails a number of difficulties; to articulate and resolve them is the task of the remainder of the dialogue. The existence of images presupposes that Non-being *is*. But Non-being appears to be unutterable, indeed, unthinkable. If the hunt for the sophist is to be brought to successful completion, the stranger and Theaetetus must find some way to say that Non-being *is* and Being *is not*—even if this involves committing a kind of intellectual parricide against the stranger's teacher, Parmenides. (236D-242B).

B. The turn to the question of Being occurs at the exact center of the dialogue. The stranger begins his inquiry into Being with a critical examination of claims men have made about it: He must show that Being is as difficult to come to terms with as Non-being. Six claims in all are shown to be wanting. The claim that

# The Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom

Theodorus

Socrates

Stranger from Elea

Theaetetus

216 A *Theodorus*: In accordance with yesterday's agreement, Socrates, we have duly come ourselves, and we're bringing along this stranger of sorts. His kin is from Elea, and he's an associate of the people around Parmenides and Zeno—a very philosophical man.

*Socrates*: Has it escaped your notice, Theodorus, that—by Homer's account—you're bringing not a stranger but some god? He says that

B besides the other gods the god of strangers especially becomes a companion to those men who participate in just reverence, and that he “looks down on both outrages and lawful conduct.”<sup>1</sup> So perhaps here too some one of the higher powers may be accompanying you, to keep an eye on us and to refute us, since we are feeble at giving accounts—a sort of refuting god.

*Theodorus*: That, Socrates, is not the stranger's turn of mind; he's more measured than those who take polemics seriously. And to me

C the man seems to be in no way a god, though certainly godlike. For that's what I call all philosophers.

*Socrates*: Well said, my friend. But I'm afraid that this kind is not much easier to discern than that of “god.” For certainly these men, abetted by the ignorance of others, make their appearance in all sorts of ways, roam about the cities and look down from on high at the life of those beneath—I don't mean the artificially philosophical but those who are so in their very being. To some people these men seem to be in no way honorable and to others in every way worthy,

D and sometimes they make their appearance as statesmen and some-

<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey* IX 269 ff; XVII 485 ff.

- times as sophists, and sometimes they give the sense of being in a totally mad condition. I would, however, love to ask our stranger,
- 217 A if he likes, how the people who live over there tend to regard these things and what they've named them.

*Theodorus:* What things?

*Socrates:* Sophist, statesman, philosopher.

*Theodorus:* Since you're perplexed, what in particular and what sort of thing were you minded to ask about them?

*Socrates:* Just this: Are they accustomed to think that all these things are one or two, or do they divide them into three kinds—just as there are three names—and attach a kind to each one, name by name?

*Theodorus:* He won't, I suppose, begrudge you a run-through of these things. Or what should we say, stranger?

- B *Stranger:* Just what you did, Theodorus. I don't begrudge it at all, nor is it difficult to say that they generally consider them to be three. And yet, to mark off clearly what they are one by one is not a small nor an easy job.

*Theodorus:* It just so happens, Socrates, that you've gotten hold of arguments very close to those we happened to be questioning him about before we got here. What's more, he put us off then in just the way that he's now putting you off—after all, he admits he's certainly heard these things talked over enough and hasn't forgotten them.

- C *Socrates:* Well then, stranger, don't refuse us this first favor we've asked of you, but tell us only this much: Is it your preferred habit to go through whatever you wish to make clear to someone all by yourself in a long account? Or do you like to proceed through questioning? That's what Parmenides too once used—and he went through splendid accounts—when I was present as a young man and he at the time was very old.

- Stranger:* When the person to whom the conversation is addressed
- D is un irritating and compliant, Socrates, the easier way to go through it is with another. If not, by oneself is easier.

*Socrates:* Well then, you can choose anyone you wish of those who are here. All of us will listen up meekly. Still, if you use me as advisor, you will choose one of the young men, this Theaetetus here or even one of the others, if that's more to your mind.

*Stranger:* Socrates, I feel a certain shame about making our first meeting together, not an exchange of brief words for words, but instead a spinning out at great length of a long account by myself—even if it's with another—as if I were making a display. For in truth what must

"This is one of the best translations of a Platonic dialogue I have seen in any language."

Stanley Rosen  
Boston University

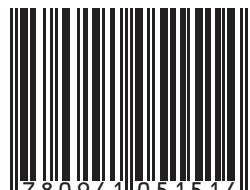
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