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On Isocrates' dual use of the term "sophist"

ABSTRACT: At first sight, Isocrates' use of the term "sophist" (σοφιστής) may appear contradictory as it is associated with both a positive and a pejorative meaning. The article contends that Isocrates was not being unintentionally vague or imprecise as he deliberately used the term to refer to two disparaging groups of professional teachers or writers who, in his opinion, had nothing in common. Isocrates tended to privilege the positive meaning of the term over the negative one, considering the latter as a contemporary deviation of the former.

Keywords: Isocrates, sophist, sophistry, sophistic movement, philosophy, Athenian intellectual context

The term "sophist" (σοφιστής) has a well-known pejorative signification. In various modern languages, it is used to describe any individual who employs clever but unsound arguments in order to deceive others. Such a negative sense is not new and can be traced back to Plato's characterisation of sophistry in fourth century BC. Socrates' most famous companion indeed used the term σοφιστής to label not only a heterogeneous group of intellectuals comprising Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias (the "Sophists", written in modern translations with a capital letter) but also a disparate group of "verbal fighters" including the enigmatic "eristics" and "antilogicians" (written with a lower-case letter). Under Plato's stylus, sophists were predominantly described in a negative light and frequently opposed to "philosophers" or "friends of wisdom".[1]

Plato was not the sole fourth century BC author to have written about sophists. Isocrates, the founder of Athens' first school of φιλοσοφία, also devoted many pages to such characters, having described them in a revealing light in many of his most famous speeches, including the *Defense of Helen*, *Against the Sophists* and the *Antidosis*. Nonetheless, few studies have been dedicated to Isocrates' portrayal of sophists or, more fundamentally, to his use of the term σοφιστής. Although surprising, such a lacuna has its origin in Isocrates' own writings, more precisely in the disconcerting manner in which he describes sophists. On the one hand, Isocrates depicts sophists positively and praises their work. On the other, he criticises them vigorously, paints a grim pictures of their activities and condemns their negative influence. In fact, it is difficult to find a coherent image of sophists in Isocrates' *oeuvre* as he constantly oscillates between these two poles. His "confused" depiction of sophists has even prompted some scholars to question the historical and philosophical significance of his testimony and, in worst cases, to dismiss it as meaningless.[2] In the following pages, I intend to show that Isocrates' description was indeed coherent. I will first analyse the term σοφιστής from an etymological point of view

[1] Plato played a pivotal role in the negative way the sophistic movement was perceived. From the end of the XIX century, however, scholars have started questioning his personal account and stopped taking it at face value. The heterogeneous group known as "the Sophists" has since been partially rehabilitated and its contribution to philosophy evaluated in a more objective light. On the question, see: W. K. C. GUTHRIE (1971) 10. On eristics and antilogicians, see: H. SIDGWICK (1872) 293–6; G. B. KERFERD (1981) 59–67; A. NEHAMAS (1990) 4–14; G. LACHANCE (2017) 45–59.

[2] See, for instance, M. DIXSAUT (1986) 63 and 85, who cites ROBIN (1933) 171. On Isocrates' other "inconsistencies", see: N. H. BAYNES (1955) 160; G. KENNEDY (1963) 197; S. HALLIWELL (1997) 109; K. MORGAN (2004) 135–50.

in order to contextualise Isocrates' use of the word during the first part of fourth century BC. The analysis will show that Isocrates was not at complete odds with his time when he used the term in a positive and a negative manner as the term simply did not have a fixed meaning during that period. I will then analyse several occurrences of the term in Isocrates' discourses in order to shed light on his portrayal of sophists. I contend that Isocrates did not use the term σοφιστής in a contradictory fashion as he employed it to designate two different groups of individuals. I will then conclude by examining the positive characterisation of the sophist, with which Isocrates shares many commonalities.[3]

Etymological overview

From an etymological point of view, the term σοφιστής is far from being negative. Constructed from the root σοφ-, which expresses the idea of experience and mastery, it is a close relative of terms such as "philosophy" (φιλοσοφία) and "philosopher" (φιλόσοφος). An agent noun deriving from the verb σοφίζομαι, the term σοφιστής denotes any individual who practices an art or who speaks cleverly and wisely. Because the verb σοφίζομαι comes from σοφία, which itself derives from σοφός, it was initially linked with the possession of knowledge or technical skills: a sophist was seen as someone who was an expert (σοφός) in one field, possessed important knowledge (σοφία) and was able to transmit it. The oldest preserved occurrence of the term is found in Pindar's *Isthmian* 5, where it is used as a synonym for "poet" (i.e. the primordial teacher of Ancient Greece). The term was thus first employed to describe any individual who excels in an art and is considered knowledgeable, for instance, poets, musicians, orators or diviners.[4]

It remains unclear precisely when the term began to be used in an overtly derogatory manner. G. GROTE held that Plato was solely responsible for its pejorative connotation: the deprecatory attributes linked with sophists are nowhere to be found in the initial meaning of the term.[5] This position was later challenged by several scholars. Based on two occurrences of the term in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (62 and 944), W. K. C. GUTHRIE believed that the pejorative connotation originated from the beginning of fifth century BC.[6] Other scholars, such as P. CHANTRAINE, thought rather that it emerged in the second half of fifth century BC, coincidentally at the time when travelling teachers of virtue (ἀρετή) like Protagoras or Hippias started teaching in Athens in exchange for money.[7] It seems, however, that the exact moment during which the term began to take on a manifest pejorative connotation must be moved to the third or second last decade of fifth century BC. Indeed, of all the fifth century BC authors who employed the term σοφιστής, only the comedic writer Aristophanes used it in an overtly derogative way.[8] In the *Clouds*, performed in 423 BC but rewritten around 418–416 BC, the

[3] In the following pages, I will follow the edition of Isocrates' works made by G. MATHIEU and E. BRÉMOND (1929-1960).

[4] On the etymology of the Greek term σοφιστής, see: G. NORLIN (1928) xii; G. K. KERFERD (1950) 8–9; M. UNTERSTAINER (1960) 65–9; P. CHANTRAINE, (1968) 1030–1; W. K. C. GUTHRIE (1971) 27–54; G. K. KERFERD (1981) 24–41; E. SCHIAPPA (1999) 50–3; V. MOUSBAHOVA (2007) 31–43; J.-F. PRADEAU (2009) 16–8; H. TELL (2011) 21–37; B. D. COREY (2015) 17–21. On the evolution of the term σοφός, see: C. MOORE (2020) 93–104.

[5] G. GROTE (1888) 35–36. On GROTE's reappraisal of the "Sophists", see: G. GIORGINI (2014) 303–28. On the influence of GROTE's position on other scholars, see: B. D. COREY (2015) 18–9 (in particular, note 17, p. 246–7).

[6] W. K. C. GUTHRIE (1960) 9–13, 33 and 67. M. UNTERSTEINER (1960) 67 saw nothing more than an ironic use of the term in both these passages of Aeschylus.

[7] P. CHANTRAINE (1968), 1030–1.

[8] Aristophanes was surely not the only comedic writer of that period to have used the word in an unflattering fashion. See: B. D. COREY (2015) 19, who cites C. CAREY (2000) 430. However, some evidence also suggests that Aristophanes' comedic predecessors and contemporaries used the term in a positive manner. For instance, Cratinus employed the term positively as a synonym for "poet" (frag. 2). Moreover, Eupolis' use of the term in fragment 388

term has a clear pejorative connotation: it describes a group of charlatans and cheaters which comprised "diviners from Thurii, medical experts, long-haired idlers with onyx signet rings, and tune-bending composers of dithyrambic choruses, men of high-flown pretension" (331–334).[9] Sophists are viewed as parasites who take advantage of democratic institutions in order to make more money and who teach others to do so (1111, 1309). Among others, Aristophanes singles out Socrates and Prodicus (361) as sophists, while targeting Protagoras implicitly. This suggests that, by the end of fifth century BC, the term came to be used in a disparaging way in order to describe any intellectual, teacher, philosopher or "scientist" active in Athens.[10]

The other preserved occurrences of the word in fifth century BC are either neutral, positive or unassociated with an overtly deprecatory meaning. In the *Histories,* Herodotus used the term three times in a positive manner as a synonym for "teacher" and "sage". According to Herodotus' description, a "sophist" is someone possessing a profound, even divine knowledge (knowledge about Mysteries [*Hist.* I, 49]) and who is part of a group that included such revered figures as Solon (one of the sages of Greece [*Hist.* I, 29]) and Pythagoras (one of the greatest Greek teachers [*Hist.* IV, 95]). A similar meaning can also be observed in the tragedies of Euripides, also composed for the most part during the second half of fifth century BC. Euripides mostly used the term "sophist" in the sense of "expert" (*Her*. 993; *Hip*. 921), "inventor" (*Sup*. 903), "musician" (*Rh.* 924) or "learned man" (*Rh.* 949). According to Euripides' description, a σοφιστής is a clever individual who is able to invent cunning plans or even show some "sense to insensate fools" (*Hip*. 921). Paired with the adjective δεινός, the term is often used in Euripides to describe someone possessing either knowledge or a skill that renders him powerful, almost all-mighty. It is in this last sense that Aeschylus also used the term σοφιστής in the *Prometheus Bound*.[11]

It is important to note that the ancient positive meaning of the term did not disappear during the first half of fourth century BC as a result of the emergence of the new derogatory sense but continued to coexist with it. In fact, it was not uncommon to find both positive and negative connotations in the work of a same author during that period. Xenophon, for example, harshly criticises "new sophists" who write books about superficial topics that are agreeable to the young generation: these sophists have a negative influence on their pupils, are worthless and prefer superficial language over virtuous thoughts (*Cyn.* XIII 1–9).[12] Xenophon even goes so far as to assimilate sophistry with prostitution (*Mem.* I 6, 13). However, when he writes about a wise man admired by the Armenian prince Tigranes in the *Cyropaedia* (III 1, 14.4), he does

—a fragment in which the term is linked to the act of "babbling" (ἀδολεσχεῖν), a word also used to describe Socrates in fr. 386— may not have been entirely negative: "the fact that the *sophist* is urged to speak suggests that the chorus were at least neutral toward him, or even on his side, at this point in the drama" (S. D. OLSON [2014] 138).

[9] Transl. HENDERSON 1998, 53.

[10] S. WILCOX (1943) 113 however contends that Aristophanes' description of sophists should not be taken too seriously as "Aristophanes misrepresents the sophists perhaps chiefly for comic effects".

[11] Loved and respected by humans for his gifts and sacrifice, Prometheus is loathed by the gods for his treason. He has tricked Zeus himself and stolen fire in order to give it to human beings. He has also taught them how to use fire so they may develop arts and techniques. Due to his cunning spirit, his knowledge and his teachings, Prometheus is thus compared with a "sophist". The comparison is, however, always made by his most severe critics, namely gods and their allies. At the beginning of the play, for instance, Power (Κράτος) describes Prometheus as a "less intelligent sophist than Zeus" (μάθηι σοφιστὴς ὢν Διὸς νωθέστερος [62]). As a bringer of civilisation to humankind, Prometheus is a serious contender to Zeus' omniscience and power. Instead of suggesting that the term is used negatively here —as W. K. C. GUTHRIE thought— this passage rather implies that Zeus alone is the real "sophist" (i.e. σοφός): any man who contends this title with Zeus is bound to be heavily criticised and punished. On the different interpretations of this passage, including its authorship, see: V. MOUSBAHOVA (2007) 32–33 and 43–50.

[12] On the *Cynegeticus* XIII, especially on the individuals targeted as "sophists" by Xenophon, see: L. L'ALLIER (2008) 63–86; L. L'ALLIER (2012) 367–383; D. THOMAS (2018) 612–39. On the authenticity of *Cynegeticus* XIII, see: V. GRAY (1985) 156–172.

not hesitate to employ the term "sophist" to describe such a positive character.[13] In *Memorabilia* IV, he also uses the term as a synonym for σοφός: in IV 1, he hints at the fact that young Euthydemus had gathered books written by renowned poets and sophists (σοφισταί), whom he later describes as "wise men" (σοφοί) (IV 8).[14] Moreover, when Xenophon uses the term "sophist" to describe a negative character, he usually adds a negative adjective or qualification to it, for instance "unjust" (*Cyr.* VI 1, 41.4) or "so-called" (*Cyn.* 13, 1.1). The addition of a negative adjective suggests that Xenophon did not consider the term "sophist" as derogatory in itself: the pejorative connotation only emerged once the negative qualification was added. Also, the addition of expressions like "so-called" (ὁ καλούμενος) suggests that the term σοφιστής was not always used in an adequate way: it could be wrongly attributed to an individual who was not really a sophist or who did not possess authentic knowledge.[15]

As for Plato, although he predominantly uses σοφιστής in a deprecatory manner, it is not rare to also observe positive occurrences of the term in his dialogues. In the *Meno*, for instance, Plato gives the term its original meaning of "sage" or "learned man": sophists appear as knowledgeable in geometry and "call such a line a *diagonal*" (85b). In the *Symposium*, he describes Eros as a "wonderful sorcerer, magician and sophist" who spends all his time philosophising (203d–e).[16] More importantly, in the dialogue entitled the *Sophist*, Plato gives six definitions of the σοφιστής, which are all negative except for the last one. This sixth definition of the σοφιστής (226a–230d) describes an individual who resembles the "true philosopher" and whom Plato calls "noble" or "true" sophist (or, practitioner of "noble" or "true" sophistry [γενναία σοφιστική (231b8)]). This noble sophist refutes the false opinions of his interlocutors in order to purge them of ignorance and make room for true knowledge. Plato, however, concludes this section of the dialogue by adding that the term "sophist" may not be entirely appropriate to describe such an admirable character.

The Greek term σοφιστής was thus first used to describe anyone who practices an art or possesses a particular knowledge. According to the ancient sources that have been preserved, it began to be used pejoratively around the end of fifth century BC, more precisely in the last three or two decades (Aristophanes' *Clouds*). However, after the second half of fourth century BC —as the texts of Aristotle[17], Demosthenes and Aeschines[18] reveal— it was

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[13] "This story is surely meant to allude to the fate of Socrates, and it would be particularly odd if Xenophon chose to use a strictly pejorative epithet in such a context." (H. TELL [2011] 27). "Here is a case of a *sophist* who was neither a poet nor, evidently, a student of the cosmos, but an imparter of sage moral advice." (B. D. COREY [2015] 18).

[14] L.-A. DORION (2011) 67.

[15] As a comparison, in the introduction of *On those who write written speeches*, Alcidamas criticises "some of those who are called sophists" (τινες τῶν καλουμένων σοφιστῶν). These individuals are not as competent in the art of discourse as they think they are and, for that reason, should rather be called "writers" (ποιηταί) than "sophists" (σοφισταί) (§1–2). Those who are called sophists are thus "inauthentic sophists" as they are not competent in the art of discourse. On the relationship between Alcidamas' *On those who write written speeches* and Isocrates' *Against the Sophists*, see: M. MCCOY (2009) 45–66. See also the following discussion in the section untitled "The Authentic Sophist".

[16] Another description of Eros as a sophist can be found in Xenophon (*Cyr.* VI 1, 41.4): Araspas reflected (πεφιλοσόφηκα) on the two natures of the human soul at the school of Eros, the unjust sophist (σοφιστής).

[17] Aristotle not only employs the term σοφιστής in a way reminiscent of Plato's *Sophist* (*Rhet.* 1355b20 and 1397b27; *SE* 165a22 and 171b30; *Met.* 1004b17, 1026b15 and 1064b29) but also to describe individuals that resemble eristics or who were considered as such (*Rhet.* 1404b38, *APo.* 74b23, *Top.* 104b26; *Hist. anim.* 563a7 and 615a10; *Phys.* 219b20). Aristotle only once used the term σοφιστής in its ancient sense of "poet" (*Poet.* 1455a6). He also employs the term to refer to Aristippus, a fellow student of Socrates (*Met.* 996a32), and Lycophron, a possible student of Gorgias (*Pol.* 1280b11).

[18] From 346/5 to 330 BC, Demosthenes (*On the False Embassy* and *On the Crown*) and Aeschines (*Against Timarchus*, *On the False Embassy* and *On the Crown*) use the term σοφιστής as an insult towards each other. Aeschines also employs it to characterise Socrates (*Against Timarchus* 173.2). However, in *Against Aphobus* (13.1; 32.2), Demosthenes used the term in its ancient sense of "clever".

predominantly used in a deprecatory way. The process of pejoration thus took about seventy years to become effective. During that period of transition, the term was used both in a positive and a negative manner, often by the same author. As a writer mainly active during the first half of fourth century BC, Isocrates was thus no different from the other authors of his time. In other words, if Isocrates used the term σοφιστής both positively and negatively, it is not because he was being vague or imprecise: such a use was simply symptomatic of his time, namely a period during which the sense of the term was still not fixed and often oscillated between two opposing poles.

Isocrates' dual use of the term

Late in his life, around the second half of fourth century BC, in a text that has been passed down to us under the title Περὶ τῆς ἀντιδόσεως, or *Antidosis*, Isocrates complains about the many transformations that occurred in Athenian society. When he was young, for instance, his fellow citizens were proud to say that they were wealthy, whereas later on, wealth was seen with suspicion and the rich were unjustly brought to court by sycophants in the name of Athenian democracy (15.159–60).[19] Both values and language had transformed: many terms that were once used in a positive light acquired in fourth century BC a pejorative connotation or negative sense. Important terms such as "to philosophise" (φιλοσοφεῖν) and "sophist" (σοφιστής) are among these. In Isocrates' youth, the term φιλοσοφεῖν had a meaning that closely resembled his personal definition of φιλοσοφία, namely the care of the state's affairs as well as one's own interest. The term subsequently lost its practical aspect and came to be linked with the neglect of life's necessities (15.285). As for the term σοφιστής, Isocrates observes that it once designated individuals who were admired by all their fellow citizens. In Ancient times, it was an honour to study under a sophist, whereas later on, vile characters such as sycophants were better considered in Athenian society than sophists themselves (15.312–3).

When describing sophists, Isocrates constantly oscillates between these two poles: a positive characterisation, which seems to be linked with the ancient signification of the word, and a negative characterisation which has strong links with contemporary practices. The first characterisation, positive, pertains to a virtuous teacher and wise man. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this first positive use of the term. In the conclusion of his discourse addressed to Demonicus, Isocrates admits that nobleness or virtue (καλοκἀγαθία) cannot be attained only by adopting the moral precepts he has just set out in his oration: it is also necessary to "learn from the most beautiful things said by poets and the useful lessons taught by other sophists" (ἄλλων σοφιστῶν [1.51]). Sophists are here depicted as productive/helpful teachers who not only teach the higher classes of society but also have the power to transform a young man into a perfect gentleman (καλοκἀγαθος). Isocrates even thinks that the works of sophists can complement his own as he invites Demonicus to seek out what other sophists have taught. Indeed, sophists can help students in becoming true noble men and overcome the flaws of (human) nature. Thus, Isocrates does not consider the teachings of sophists as detrimental for he admits it is possible to gather useful knowledge from them. A similar positive description can also be found in *To Nicocles*, a protreptic discourse written possibly around the same time.[20]

[19] Isocratean discourses are cited according to the following numbering (since H. WOLF): 1. *To Demonicus*; 2. *To Nicocles*; 3. *Nicocles*; 4. *Panegyricus*; 5. *To Philip*; 6. *Archidamus*; 7. *Areopagiticus*; 8. *On the Peace*; 9. *Evagoras*; 10. *Helen*; 11. *Busiris*; 12. *Panathenaicus*; 13. *Against the Sophists*; 14. *Plataicus*; 15. *Antidosis*; 16. *The Team of Horses*; 17. *Trapeziticus*; 18. *Against Callimachus*; 19. *Aegineticus*; 20. *Against Lochites*; 21. *Against Euthynus*. On the various classifications of Isocrates' discourses throughout history, see the interesting discussion in Too (1995) 10–35.

[20] The discourse *To Nicocles* was written after the death of King Evagoras in 374–373 BC. As for *To Demonicus*, it is often grouped with the Cyprian orations —written during the 370s— on the basis that Demonicus' father,

In this second discourse, Isocrates invites Nicocles, king of Salamis, to become the disciple of sophists. Although he is the supreme ruler of his land, Nicocles still needs to improve himself and should not ignore the teachings of brilliant individuals: he needs to frequent the wisest men (φρονιμωτάτοι), hear the words of poets and study with sophists (2.13). Presented here side by side with the "wisest men" and "poets", the sophist is portrayed as someone who offers an education that can improve students. Nonetheless, Isocrates distinguishes him from the poet, as he only recommends listening to the latter but not studying with him. In this short passage, the term seems to have evolved beyond its first meaning observed in Pindar: the sophist has supplanted the poet as the fundamental teacher in ancient Greece. Moreover, the passage highlights the importance and prestige associated with the role of a sophist in ancient Greek society: a sophist is not only a suitable teacher for young men of good families, he is also a recommended teacher of kings. In both these occurrences of *To Demonicus* and *To Nicocles*, the term "sophist" is entirely exempt from a negative connotation: in itself, the term has a manifest appreciative flavour. Such a depiction departs forcefully from the negative image of the sophist as a corrupter of youth and an amoral teacher.[21]

The second characterisation is far less laudatory. In fact, it is negative and diametrically opposed to the first. In the *Panathenaicus*, published around 339, sophists are described as vulgar individuals who speechify about poetry near the Lyceum and contribute nothing original to their field of study (12.18). More importantly, they are said to calumniate Isocrates' teachings in order to promote their own (12.19).[22] In the *Antidosis*, written a few years earlier around 354–353, sophists are again presented as rivals who spread false information about Isocrates in order to ridicule him and diminish his influence (15.2). These sophists have a bad reputation in Athens. Indeed, the common Athenian usually accuses them of two faults. First, the sophists' art is said to be empty and superficial: no sophist can make better men out of his students. Sophists are thus seen as individuals who possess a shallow science that they trade in exchange for money.[23] Second, the common Athenian associates sophistical teaching with the corruption of the youth: youngsters who study under sophists are said to become worse than before (15.197–8). Sophists are here portrayed as a menace to Athenian youth and society, namely as an important subversive force. Due to their ill repute, these sophists are viewed with less consideration in Athenian society than their predecessors, also called "sophists" (15.312–3).

Isocrates' critique of sophists is not only present in his last discourses: sophists were a cause of concern for Isocrates even at the beginning of his career. In *Against the Sophists*,[24] for

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Hipponicus, was from Cyprus. Even though this last hypothesis is weak, it remains that the two discourses share similar preoccupations. The authenticity of *To Demonicus* has been challenged since the seventeenth century. On the question, see: G. MATHIEU and E. BRÉMOND (1929) 111–2. G. NORLIN (1928) 3 believes that the text is authentic as the arguments against it are based on "insufficient grounds". Interestingly, E. BRÉMOND (1929) 116 rejects the authenticity of *To Demonicus* on the basis that Isocrates, among other things, used the term "sophist" in a positive way and as a synonymous for "poet". E. BRÉMOND has not noticed that this terminological use was not an anomaly: Isocrates also used the term positively in association with "poets" in *To Nicocles* 13 and *Panegyricus* 82.

[21] For other occurrences of the word that are positive or neutral, see: 4.82 (categorised with poets), 5.29 (as authors of written discourses, like Isocrates himself), 11.43 (as people who want to improve their pupils), 15.203 (as individuals who did not abuse their pupils and have even improved them), 15.220 (the best reward for a sophist is to see his pupils become perfect gentlemen) and 15.237 (those who deserve to be accused are not the sophists but the sycophants).

[22] S. WILCOX (1943) 129–30 distinguishes three types of opponents in the *Panathenaicus*, two of them being "sophists". Without justifying his choice, though, he differentiates between sophists of 12.5–6 (who cannot be identified) and the ones from 12.18 (who appear like eristics). Because these passages contain a similar terminology, I consider both these groups as forming only one.

[23] On the false idea that sophists are rich, see 15.155–8. In Isocrates' opinion, only Gorgias succeeded in amassing a small fortune from his teachings.

[24] The title Κατὰ τῶν σοφιστῶν is surely not from Isocrates. In the *Antidosis*, Isocrates refers to this text but without naming it (15.194). An Anonymous grammarian has tried to explain the title of Isocrates' discourses by

instance, Isocrates castigates a group of individuals "engaged in education" (οἱ παιδεύειν ἐπιχειροῦντες), which comprises writers of eristical (13.1–8) and political (13.9–18) discourses, later characterised as "sophists who have recently sprung up" (οἱ… ἄρτι τῶν σοφιστῶν ἀναφυόμενοι [13.19–20]).[25] These "new sophists" are accused of making false promises about their teaching. Some of them promise to teach their students how to better conduct their lives and be happier even though, in Isocrates' opinion, such a science does not exist. Others promise to teach their students how to write discourses and become good orators without noticing that the art of discourse cannot be taught like grammar for it depends on experience and natural qualities. These "new sophists" are ridiculous, unintelligent and often concerned with trivial subjects. In the *Defense of Helen,* possibly written a few years after *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates condemns once again eristical and political teachers, a group later characterised as "individuals who claim to be sophists" (φάσκοντας εἶναι σοφιστὰς [10.9]).[26] These *soi-disant* sophists are writers of paradoxical speeches, a type of discourse already exploited by "old sophists" of Protagoras' time and, thus, unoriginal (10.2). Isocrates denounces texts composed on such ridiculous and worthless subjects —for instance, the praise of bumblebees (βομβυλιοί) and salt (10.12) or the defense of the lives of beggars (10.8)[27]. Sophists of that sort spend their time involved in useless intellectual pursuits and have detrimental effects on their pupils.[28]

Isocrates' contrasting depiction of sophists is quite surprising. It is present not only in different discourses but also sometimes in one and the same text (i.e. *Panegyricus*, *To Philip* or *Antidosis*). How could such a discrepancy be explained? Could the evolution of the term's meaning in fourth century BC be solely responsible for such opposing views about the same type of individuals? Although it cannot be proved with certainty, it appears highly improbable that Isocrates used the term σοφιστής in two opposing manners without realising it, thus contradicting himself.[29] Since Antiquity, it has been known that Isocrates devoted many excruciating years to the writing of his discourses. For instance, it is said that he took about ten to fifteen years to write the *Panegyricus*.[30] Isocrates also stresses more than once the need for a writer to work hard on his text and to pursue relentlessly the right words in order to convey the right thoughts. The use of the term σοφιστής in an inconsistent manner could thus not be the result of an oversight or a moment of inattention on Isocrates' part. Moreover, it seems that the pejorative evolution of the term could not have been be solely responsible for Isocrates' contrasting use of it. Ultimately, Isocrates did use σοφιστής in a negative manner in a text written at the beginning of his literary career (*Against the Sophists*, composed in the 390s) while

highlighting three senses for the term σοφιστής: 1) the wise man or philosopher; 2) the rhetor; 3) the one who deceives truth (G. MATHIEU [1929] 143–4).

[25] It is not clear if these "sophists who have recently sprung up" include both the eristics and the writers of political discourses. M.-P. NOËL (2000) 50 and 56 contends that this group only include the latter.

[26] On the possible date of the *Defense of Helen*, see: G. MATHIEU and E. BRÉMOND (1929) 153–61 and L. VAN HOOK (1945) 54–9.

[27] Antisthenes is said to have discussed βομβυλιοί in his *Protrepticus* (fragments 18a–d). On the praise of salt, see Plato's *Symposium* 177b. Polycrates is also said to have written a praise of poverty. Even though Isocrates criticises paradoxical discourses, it should be noted that he has written two of them: the *Defense of Helen* and the *Busiris*. These have been composed in order to show other writers (i.e. Polycrates for the *Busiris* and perhaps Gorgias for the *Defense of Helen*) how to correctly write a paradoxical speech. On paradoxical discourses, see: T. G. M. BLANK, (2013) 1–33.

[28] For other negative occurrences, see: 12.5 (as individuals described as obscure and worthless), 15.4 (a reference to the same shady individuals described in 15.2) and 15.168 (as people who have a bad reputation). See also: 4.3, 10.2–3, 15.215 and 15.221 (discussed in the following pages). On Isocrates' critique of eristics and its link with Plato, see: G. LACHANCE (2020) 81–96.

[29] K. MORGAN (2004) 146–50 stresses the fact that Isocrates was sometimes inconsistent because he was adapting his discourses to *kairos*. This interpretation is interesting as it can explain inconsistencies between different speeches. However, it is more difficult to use in order to justify inconsistencies in one discourse written for a same audience.

[30] G. NORLIN (1928) 119; G. MATHIEU and E. BRÉMOND (1929) XXIX; G. MATHIEU and E. BRÉMOND (1938) 5–6.

employing it in a positive way in the *Antidosis*, a text written some four decades later. In other words, the slow pejoration of the term σοφιστής did not seem to have had an influence on Isocrates' writings as he also used the term negatively at the beginning of his literary career and positively at the end of it.

If the contrasting use of the term σοφιστής by Isocrates was not the consequence of inattention or the slow pejoration of the term, was it thus deliberate and, if so, why? In fact, there is textual evidence suggesting that Isocrates was knowingly targeting two different groups of individuals when he used the term σοφιστής. In the *Antidosis*, indeed, Isocrates employs twice the expression καλούμενοι σοφισταί ("those who are called sophists") to refer to two opposed groups of individuals. These groups are distinct and are linked to two different time periods. The first group, described in a positive manner, is composed of individuals who were considered as "sophists" by Isocrates' ancestors (τοὺς μὲν καλουμένους σοφιστὰς [15.313]). It includes one important emblematic figure: the Athenian poet, wise man and statesman Solon. According to Isocrates' testimony, Solon was such a good orator and had brought so many blessings on the city that he was included in the list of the seven sophists (οἱ ἑπτὰ σοφισταί [15.235]), also commonly known as the list of the "Seven Sages" (οἱ ἑπτὰ σοφοί).[31] Sophists of the same caliber as Solon are virtuous writers who put their oratory skills at the service of the city. They are honest individuals who mostly concern themselves with useful speeches. Many lines later, Isocrates goes so far as to describe Solon —the best friend of democracy (7.16)— not only as a sophist but as the *first* Athenian citizen to have the honour to be called σοφιστής (15.313). In Isocrates' opinion thus, the term σοφιστής was held in high esteem during Solon's lifetime and indeed a cause for pride and adulation. Such an approbatory characterisation has many points in common with Isocrates' positive depiction of sophists: they both refer to individuals who are concerned with useful discourses, who embody honesty, wisdom and nobleness and who are linked to a nobler time when speeches were not used in vain or to the detriment of the common good. This first group clearly corresponds to the positive signification of the term σοφιστής, used in all likelihood during the seventh and sixth century BC: the sophist is here assimilated with the wise man and corresponds to the ultimate καλοκἀγαθος.

As for the second group of καλούμενοι σοφισταί described in the *Antidosis*, it is composed of individuals who were considered as "sophists" by Isocrates' contemporaries or members from the nearest past generation. The emblematic figure of such a group is the Sicilian rhetorician Gorgias. In the *Defense of Helen* by Isocrates, Gorgias is categorised with "sophists of the time of Protagoras" (Πρωταγόραν καὶ τοὺς κατ' ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον γενομένους σοφιστὰς). These sophists are said to have written paradoxical discourses that had a tremendous influence on contemporary writers. More importantly, they are said to have defended the following philosophical theses: nothing exists of the things that are (Gorgias), the same thing can be both possible and impossible (Zeno) and the multiplicity of natural things can be reduced to one (Melissus of Samos) (10.2–3). In the *Antidosis*, Isocrates provides another list of sophists of the same period, this time more exhaustive: Empedocles, Ion, Alcmaeon of Croton, Parmenides, Melissus, Gorgias and one anonymous character who resembles Anaxagoras (15.268).[32] These individuals are said to have written about futile subjects that dry up the mind

[31] See: Y. L. TOO (2008) 205 and COREY (note 3), 246. A similar description can be found in Herodotus' *Histories* (I, 29), written around the mid fifth century BC: "There came to the city all the teachers (σοφισταί) from Hellas who then lived, in this or that manner; and among them came Solon of Athens…" (transl. GODLEY). According to Aelius Aristides (II 407 Dind.), the Greek orator Androtion, a former student of Isocrates, also used the term σοφισταί in fourth century BC to describe the Seven Sages of Greece. As for Aristotle, he refers to the so-called Seven Sages both as "sophists" (frag. 5) and "wise men" (frag. 8).

[32] I.e. an anonymous sophist who contends that all things are infinite (15.268). In 15.235, Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, together with Damon of Athens, is described positively. However, in this last passage, the good reputation of both these intellectuals only seems tributary to the fact that they were the teachers of Pericles, whom Isocrates revered and considered as the "best orator" (15.234) and "the most moderate, the most just and the wisest"

of those who read them. Isocrates does not recommend studying these sophists' theses as they will not help young men improve themselves in order to become good citizens and virtuous statesmen (unlike the first group of sophists). This second group of sophists corresponds closely to the negative signification of the term σοφιστής and refers to individuals who lived during the fifth century BC: the sophist is here assimilated to an individual who writes about superficial themes that are useless to the common good.[33]

It thus appears that, when Isocrates uses the term σοφιστής in a positive manner, he mainly refers to seventh or sixth century BC wise men, intellectuals or statesmen like Solon. It is also highly possible that he employs that term positively to refer to contemporary individuals who are direct intellectual heirs to Solon and thus authentic sophists in the ancient sense of the term. However, when Isocrates uses the term σοφιστής in a negative manner, he mainly refers to fifth century BC teachers and intellectuals like Gorgias, Zeno, Empedocles, Ion, Alcmaeon, Parmenides and Melissus.[34] As one can easily discern, all these negative figures of ancient Greek "sophistry" correspond for the most part to the modern category of "Presocratic philosophers". Only Gorgias here fits among the traditional Platonic list of "Sophists", namely of paid professors who were engaged in the teaching of rhetoric. All the other intellectuals mentioned instead devoted their time to the study of the cosmos or celestial phenomena. Such a characterisation is surprising from a Platonic point of view; however, it is not markedly different from other ancient testimonies of the fifth and fourth century BC, for instance, either Aristophanes' description of sophists as experts in astronomy (μετεωροσοφισταί [*Nub.* 360])[35] or Xenophon's portrayal of sophists as cosmologists (*Mem.* I 1, 11)[36]. It is also highly possible that Isocrates employs the term negatively to refer to contemporary individuals who are direct intellectual heirs to Gorgias and the like. The discourse *Against the Sophists* would suggest such an interpretation as "sophists that have lived before us" (οἱ πρὸ ἡμῶν γενόμενοι) are said to have influenced "sophists who have recently sprung up" (13.19–20).

If Isocrates gives the word σοφιστής two different referents, as it has been argued above, the accusation of incoherence thus disappears without leaving any traces. Isocrates' depiction of sophists is not confused nor contradictory: he simply uses the term σοφιστής to designate two diametrically different types of professional teachers and intellectuals. The first type is the authentic sophist from seventh or sixth century BC and his heir, while the second type is the illegitimate sophist from fifth century BC and his successor. These two types of sophists seem to have coexisted at the time Isocrates taught in Athens, namely during the first half of fourth century BC. Isocrates condemns vehemently the fraudulent type of sophist. As we will see in the following pages, one of his major recriminations against him pertains to the fact that he claims to be a sophist of the authentic type without really being so, thus giving a bad name to

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of all Athenian citizens (15.111; 16.28). Isocrates opinion of Damon appears much more positive than his opinion of Anaxagoras: "Pericles was a student of two [of these sophists], Anaxogoras of Clazomenea and Damon, the latter being considered in his day as the wisest citizen" (15.235). Describing Damon as the wisest of Athenians, he says nothing about Anaxagoras. It is highly doubtful that Isocrates considered Anaxagoras in a favourable light as he viewed with suspicion astronomical researches (15.261–2; 12.26). On this passage, see: Y. L. TOO (2008) 220–1; R. W. WALLACE (2015) 117–8.

[33] Despite the fact that they lived after the first group of sophists exemplified by Solon the Athenian, original members of this second group are sometimes called "old sophists" by Isocrates (παλαιοὶ σοφισταί [15.268 and 15.285]).

[34] It is not clear if Protagoras is included in this group. After all, Isocrates only described members of this second group of sophists as individuals "from the time of Protagoras". The brief mention of Protagoras in Isocrates' *Defense of Helen* 2 was not included in the testimonials about Protagoras by DIELS-KRANZ. It is also possible that Anaxagoras was implicitly comprised in the group (15.235).

[35] The term μετεωροσοφισταί "alludes indirectly to former notorious φυσιολόγοι, notably Anaxagoras and Protagoras, to whom Prodicus (and the Socrates of the play) are thought of as successors. The word μετεωροσοφίστης may or may not be a new coinage (it occurs nowhere else)…" (C. W. WILLINK [1983] 27).

[36] L.-A. DORION (2010) 60.

legitimate sophists who were also teaching in Athens. In a way, fraudulent sophists are responsible for the negative connotations associated with the term σοφιστής during Isocrates' lifetime.

The Authentic Sophist

Despite Isocrates' use of the term σοφιστής both in a negative and a positive manner, it is usually assumed that he despises (all) sophists and has an unfavorable opinion of them. In other words, between two concurrent Isocratean descriptions of sophists, scholars tend to opt mainly for the negative one, judging the positive description as bizarre or inconsequential. However, some passages from Isocrates' *oeuvre* rather suggest the contrary: Isocrates tends to favour the positive definition of the term over the negative one. All these passages have one element in common: the term σοφιστής is always accompanied by a qualifying word that has the function of highlighting the dishonour with which the term is associated in Isocrates' time and condemn its inadequate contemporary use. Isocrates thus criticises the contemporary pejorative connotations associated with the term while hinting at the fact that he still comprehends it in its ancient positive meaning.

Indeed, despite Isocrates' use of the term σοφιστής in a negative manner to criticise sophists from fifth century BC and their heirs, he still does not consider the term "sophist" as pejorative in itself: rather, it is the way the term is used during his lifetime that he finds faulty and subject to criticism. In the introduction of the *Panegyricus*, for instance, Isocrates announces his intention to give advice about the war against Barbarians and the concord between Greeks. He then concedes that he is aware that "many of those who alleged to be sophists" (πολλοὶ τῶν προσποιησαμένων εἶναι σοφιστῶν [4.3]) have tried to write on the same subject. These sophists did not write adequate discourses as Isocrates feels the need to compose a new one. He even prophesies that his own discourse will be so beautiful and useful that it will supplant all the others speeches written on the same theme by sophists.[37] To characterise these sophists, Isocrates uses the participle of the verb προσποιεῖσθαι, which means "to pretend", "to affect" or "to take to oneself what does not belong to one".[38] Hence, Isocrates is not criticising "sophists" *per se* but more precisely rivals "who alleged to be sophists". Now, if Isocrates describes some concurrent writers as people who pretend to be sophists but are not, it goes without saying that he believes that these individuals assume for themselves a name that does not correspond to what they really are. In other words, the positive title "sophist" is claimed by individuals who do not deserve it. It is not impossible that Isocrates refers here to Gorgias of Leontinoi who, in 408 or 392, produced an *Olympic Speech* on the same subject as the one addressed in the *Panegyricus*,[39] especially since Gorgias is also described in a posterior discourse as a "so-called sophist" (ὁ καλούμενος σοφιστής [15.155]).[40] In this short passage of the *Panegyricus*, the use of the verb προσποιεῖσθαι together with the substantive σοφιστής suggests that Isocrates considers the term σοφιστής in a positive way. What he considers

[37] In 15.61, Isocrates says that the *Panegyricus* had the following effect on other speech writers: "those who previously wrote on this theme destroyed all their speeches, embarrassed by what they had produced, and those who are now supposed to be skilled no longer dare to speak about these things…" (transl. TOO)

[38] *Cf.* Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon.

[39] Isocrates may also have hinted at Lysias, who wrote an *Olympic speech* (*Olympiacus*) in 388 or 384 BC. On that question, see: G. NORLIN (1928) XXXV; G. MATHIEU AND E. BRÉMOND (1938) 4; S. WILCOX (1943) 119–20; M.-P. NOËL (2017) 291–99.

[40] Although the majority of Isocrates' references to Gorgias are negative, it was often suggested that he may have been a student of Gorgias. Y. L. TOO (1995) 235–9 considers the identification of Isocrates as Gorgias' pupil as suspect since all the sources on the question are late. M.-P. NOËL (2010) 58 however highlights that one of these late sources, Quintilian IO, II, 1,13, reports the words of Aristotle.

negatively, though, is the people who arrogate for themselves the privilege of being called "sophists".

Another passage from the Isocratean *corpus* suggests a similar interpretation. In the introduction of the *Defense of Helen*, Isocrates criticises contemporary writers of paradoxical speeches. He alleges that these writers are not original since sophists like Gorgias, Zeno and Melissus wrote exactly the same type of discourses many years ago. These new writers, heirs of fifth century BC's sophists, "claimed to be sophists" (φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφισταί [10.9]) and wrote about ridiculous subjects. The rest of the text suggests that these individuals are not what they say they are: they try to allure youngsters with their paradoxical speeches, but their discourses do not correspond to the expertise they claim to possess, namely politics (τῶν πολιτικῶν ἐπιστήμη); they exult their expertise in domains where it is not possible to evaluate their worth; they write about neglected subjects rather than devoting their time to important themes that are of common interest to the citizens of Athens. Here again, the term "sophist" has a positive meaning in itself, so much so that teachers boast about being "sophists" in order to attract new students. However, they are not what they claim to be —good political teachers— and they write trivial and useless discourses like their forefathers, sophists from fifth century BC. In this passage of the *Defense of Helen*, the use of the participle of the verb φάσκω together with the substantive σοφιστής suggests that Isocrates' critique is not aimed at "sophists" but only at "people who claim to be sophists". Isocrates again treats the term in a positive manner: only the people who arrogate for themselves the title of "sophist" are the object of his unfavorable judgement.

The *Antidosis* confirms once again this last interpretation: Isocrates disapproves of contemporary practitioners who allege to be sophists, but he does not dismiss authentic ones.[41] In a section of the discourse in which he defends himself against the criticisms of "people who do not hate philosophy but blame it harshly", Isocrates highlights one important aspect of such criticisms: people tend to assign the vices (πονηρία) of "people who claim to be sophists" (φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφισταί) to any other teachers of higher education, even though the activities of the former differ from those of the latter (15.215). In the following few lines (15.221), "those who allege to be sophists" (προσποιησαμένοι εἶναι σοφισταί) are described in an even darker light: they are said to be intemperate, irrational and selfish, and to prefer pleasures over things that are beneficial. Inauthentic sophists are responsible for the low esteem in which all teachers of φιλοσοφία are held, including Isocrates. To defend his own school and differentiate himself from all these self-proclaimed sophists, Isocrates asserts that not all teachers of φιλοσοφία are similar: some are virtuous, do not meddle in public affairs and are successful in developing their students' dexterity in speech (15.226–30). It is at this precise point in the *Antidosis* that Isocrates cites the name of Solon and describe him as an authentic sophist (15.231–5), thus opposing this positive representative of noble sophistry to the illegitimate sophist. Only sophists who resemble Solon and other ancient orators who have brought many blessings on the city (i.e. Cleisthenes, Themistocles and Pericles) are legitimate teachers or sophists. Isocrates is thus eager to differentiate himself from sophists of the inauthentic kind. Only the illegitimate sophist, the one who wrongly proclaims to be a σοφιστής, has a bad influence on the other teachers of philosophy, including Isocrates.

These four occurrences of the term σοφιστής, coupled with participles of verbs like προσποιεῖσθαι and φάσκω, clearly suggest that Isocrates does not consider the term "sophist" as pejorative in itself: in fact, the term has such a positive meaning that people try to arrogate it for themselves. Rather, it is the manner in which the term σοφιστής is used in the first half of fourth century BC that Isocrates considers erroneous and inadequate. These four occurrences

[41] See Y. L. TOO (2008) 195–208, who rightly argues that Isocrates is "pluralizing the signification of the label *sophists*" in the *Antidosis*, opposing contemporary sophists "who falsely claim to this title" with genuine ones. See also: G. MATHIEU (1960) 156 and G. NORLIN (1929) 307.

reveal that Isocrates tends to privilege the positive meaning of the term over the negative one. In other words, Isocrates accepts the positive meaning of the term while considering the negative meaning as a contemporary deviation of the former.

Conclusive remarks

Isocrates' use of the term σοφιστής reflected the period during which he was living: in the first half of fourth century BC, the term did not have a fixed meaning and often oscillated between two opposing poles, namely a positive and a negative sense. It is also highly coherent: Isocrates did not used the term in a contradictory manner as he gave the word σοφιστής two different referents (i.e. two different types of professional teachers). The first referent, the authentic sophist, lived during the seventh or sixth century BC and had possible heirs in fourth century BC; the second referent, the illegitimate sophist, lived for his part during fifth century BC and also had probable heirs in fourth century BC. Isocrates did not consider the term σοφιστής as pejorative in itself: rather, it was the manner in which the term was used in the first half of fourth century BC that he considered inadequate. In Isocrates' opinion, there existed an authentic type of sophist, like Solon himself, and one had to try to emulate him. Isocrates' positive use of the term and appreciative description of the authentic sophist transport the reader to a time when culture of discourse corresponded to "liberal pursuits" (καλὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα), namely to the personal culture and civic education of the Athenian *élite*, the καλοκἀγαθοι.[42] It is precisely that same noble culture that Isocrates tried to establish in his school and defended in his discourses. Indeed, in his teaching activities, Isocrates' goal was to help his students develop their full potential in order to become good citizens who would be able to talk, think and deliberate in an adequate manner. By doing so, Isocrates hoped to contribute to the well-being and the prosperity of the city-state of Athens and other parts of the Greek world. The manner in which Isocrates describes his own practice is highly reminiscent of his description of the authentic sophist' practice.[43] Although he never states it explicitly, it is not improbable that Isocrates viewed himself as a direct heir to authentic sophists like Solon.

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[42] Y. L. TOO (2008) 178.

[43] On Isocrates' practice, which he called φιλοσοφία, see: S. WILCOX (1942) 113–33; A. W. NIGHTINGALE (1995) 13–59; S. HALLIWELL (1997) 107–25; D. M. TIMMERMAN (1998) 145–59; E. SCHIAPPA (1999) 162–84; N. LIVINGSTONE (2007); C. MOORE (2020) 210–17. C. MOORE (2020) 215 contends that Isocrates' conception of philosophy was influenced by the conception in place "in the political circles known to Thucydides and his readers as late as the 390 BC".

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