Says Who? Modes of speaking in the *Euthydemus*[1]

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With very few exceptions, the relatively small number of scholars who have lavished attention on Plato's *Euthydemus* have found it fertile soil in two respects. For some, it is a compilation of fallacies committed by the sophistic brothers, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, designed to serve as an introductory sourcebook of bad argument – a forerunner to Aristotle's *Sophistici Elenchi*.[2] For others, it contains a significant contribution to Platonic ethics by way of a compressed and vexing argument for the view that compared to other purported goods (e.g. health and wealth), wisdom is the only good 'in itself' (280b-282a).[3]

By contrast, in her various papers and lectures on the *Euthydemus*, M.M. McCabe discerns a much wider variety of topics at issue in the dialogue (e.g. self-knowledge, a rejection of consequentialism), and while focusing on specific passages, has situated her interpretations within a view of the text as a whole.[4] So, too, in the target paper for this volume, 'First Chop your *Logos*… Socrates and the Sophists on Logic, Language, and Development' (hereafter 'Chop'), McCabe argues that a close reading of several passages reveals the sophistic brothers' deployment of a formidable position or view on the relation of language to the world that presents a serious challenge to Socrates' assumptions about statements and saying, and that Plato's response to the challenge emerges from consideration of different elements at play

[2] R. Robinson, 'Plato's Consciousness of Fallacy', (1942, although Robinson argues that Plato neither clearly conceived the individual fallacies, nor took them very seriously); R.K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (1962); R.S.W. Hawtrey, *Commentary on Plato's Euthydemus* (1981), 19-23; For considerations against reading the dialogue as a handbook of fallacy, see McCabe, 'Silencing the Sophists: the Drama of Plato's *Euthydemus*', (1998), 139-168. A further exception to the fallacy-handbook reading is Myles Burnyeat, 'Plato on how to Speak of What is Not: *Euthydemus* 283a-288a' (2002).
[3] E.g. T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (OUP: 1995), 32-33, 73 ff., 118-20; Daniel Russell, *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life* (2005), 16-47. Compare McCabe's 'Out of the Labyrinth: Plato's Attack on Consequentialism' (2005), 189-214: Although centred on the ethical upshot of the passage, McCabe discusses both Socratic episodes and considers the dialogue as a whole.
[4] In addition to her papers on the *Euthydemus* (cited throughout), McCabe has offered treatments of the dialogue in her Sather Lectures (2017) and the 2019 S.V. Keeling Memorial Lecture.

throughout the whole dialogue. Due to limited space, I will restrict myself in this introduction to a sketch of the structure of the *Euthydemus*, for those unfamiliar with it, and an outline of McCabe's reading of the sophistic challenge and Plato's response to it, occasionally gesturing towards key claims or objections advanced in the commentaries in this volume (though I have generally been unable to note McCabe's detailed responses in her reply piece, 'Who's Who and What's What').

§1 The *Euthydemus*

The *Euthydemus* is framed by Socrates recounting to his friend Crito a conversation from the day before, with Euthydemus, Dionysodorus, a youth, Cleinias, and his adoring friend Ctesippus. This conversation contains five episodes. Of the five, two are 'Socratic': Socrates gives a display of the kind of protreptic speech or argument he wants from the sophists, in convincing Cleinias to pursue wisdom. The other three are 'sophistic': the sophists repeatedly confound their interlocutor by having them agree to one contradiction after another. The Socratic and sophistic episodes are neatly interleaved, bestowing a vivid clarity of structure on the dialogue. In the frame, Socrates describes the brothers as expert refuters of whatever is said, true or false, and as possessing 'eristic' wisdom (272b9-10).

In the first sophistic episode (275d-277c), Euthydemus and Dionysodorus take turns questioning Cleinias, who soon contradicts himself multiple times on the question whether it is the wise or the unlearned who learn. He first answers that it is the wise, but then agrees that learners are in fact ignorant, so not wise. He then agrees that wise pupils learn, and was previously mistaken. But then he says that learners learn what they don't know, then that they are knowing. Finally, he agrees that learners are not knowing.[5] In the encounter, the novice Cleinias is interrogated by one brother after the other, without pause. Socrates says they throw

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[5] For details of these arguments, grouped as four sub-arguments, see McCabe's 'Chop' 11-12; cf. Christine Thomas' commentary, '"Learning' and Learning at *Euthydemus* 275d-278d', 3.

him for a fall (277d) and aim arguments at him like a ball (277b), and each time Cleinias counter-says or contradicts himself – denying, confused, what he earlier affirmed – the brothers' followers applaud in cheering admiration.

After consoling Cleinias, Socrates attempts to reform the conversation in the first Socratic episode (277d-282d). In a well-known argument, Cleinias agrees that everyone wishes to do well by possessing good things (e.g. wealth, health, virtue, good fortune). Socrates then amazes Cleinias, suggesting that good fortune and wisdom are the same, and leading him to agree that if a person possesses wisdom, he has no need of good fortune in addition. Under further questioning, Cleinias agrees that since knowledge directs good use, no other good is worth anything without wisdom. Wisdom alone is good, ignorance alone bad, and nothing else by itself is either: so Cleinias ought to pursue wisdom.[6]

In the second sophistic episode (283b-286c), Socrates confirms that he wants Cleinias, presently not wise, to become so. But since he wants him to be 'no longer what he is now', the sophists say Socrates 'wish[es] for nothing other than his death'. This 'Killing Cleinias' argument enrages Ctesippus, who accuses Dionysodorus of falsity. In response, the sophists secure Ctesippus's agreement that when a person speaks of something, he speaks of 'what is', and then that when speaking of something, he speaks the truth (283e-284b). But Ctesippus rejects the conclusion that saying is saying the truth, insisting that one who speaks falsely does not say things that are. However, he agrees that things that are not, being nowhere, cannot be made otherwise by speaking of them, but, since speaking is a kind of 'making', nobody speaks things that are not (*ta mê onta* 284c2-3).[7] Nonetheless, he maintains, Dionysodorus did not speak the truth, since he did not say things *as* they are. A little later, the brothers reject the possibility of counter-saying (*antilegein*, 285d7). After questioning, Ctesippus agrees that there are statements

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[6] See also McCabe, 'Labyrinth'.
[7] The text here (284b5-7) is uncertain, although it seems right, following Gifford (and Hawtrey, and Sprague) and McCabe in this volume to read ὥστε καὶ εἶναι for ὥστ' ἐκεῖνα at 284b6 (and otherwise leave the text as Burnet prints it).

(*logoi*) for each of the things that are (*ta onta*, 285e9), and that they say each thing as it is (285e10-286a1). They remind Ctesippus that nobody says what is not, then suggest four corollaries (286a4-b6): (1) if two people speak a *logos* of the same thing (*pragma*, 286a5), they do not counter-say one another; (2) if neither says the *logos* of the thing, neither has it in mind, so they do not counter-say one another; (3) if one says the *logos* of the thing, while another says the *logos* of another thing, then they do not counter-say one another; (4) if one speaks of the thing, while the other does not speak at all, they do not counter-say one another.[8] Ctesippus agrees to the first two, but after the last is rendered silent, prompting Socrates to suggest that the amazing-seeming argument, depending on the claim that false speech is impossible, is self-refuting.

Socrates continues questioning Cleinias in the second Socratic episode (288d-293a). Recalling the distinction between possessing and using something well, Socrates asks Cleinias what knowledge, concerning the production and good use of things, will make for a happy life. Cleinias answers with complex and sophisticated reasons for rejecting the arts of speech writing and generalship as candidates for this knowledge (indeed, Crito, in the frame is incredulous, in light of Cleinias' youth and inexperience). Socrates then examines the supposition that the kingly art and the statesman's art, as the expertise of ruling all things, is the knowledge of good use conducive to happiness. But since they cannot discern how it accomplishes this, their search ends in *aporia*.

In the third sophistic episode (293b-303a), the sophists declare that Socrates has had the knowledge he seeks all along, without knowing it: Since he knows something and is a knower, and not a not-knower, and because the sophists disallow qualifications, Socrates ultimately agrees

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[8] Following McCabe's reading in 'Chop' of four possibilities for speech. Hawtrey, by contrast, identifies only three possibilities, running together (3) and (4) as the first person saying the *logos* of the thing, while the second does not (108). Sprague's translation distinguishes (3) and (4), but her monograph suggests only (4) (17). Jones and Sharma, in their commentary 'Eristic Combat at *Euthydemus* 285e-286b', reject McCabe's reading, and the general translation of b5-6 as pointing to the second person remaining silent, arguing for only (1-3) (7n.15): they argue that *to pragma* at 286b5 is the object of both *legô* and *legeis* (and take it to be the object of the cognate participles in b6), and read *ê* at b5 to usher in the sophists' understanding of the third possibility, signalled by *hotan* at b3. McCabe's reading, they argue, would require *hotan* (or similar) at b5. In response, McCabe argues that b6 refers to 'the person not speaking', and that *hotan* at b3 holds fixed the case that the first person says the *logos* of the thing, while *ê* at b5 presents the second alternative in view for that case, i.e. *that the second person does not speak at all* ('Who's Who', 9n.32).

to the assertion that he always knows everything.[9] The same prohibition produces a raft of arguments for a variety of astonishing conclusions (e.g. Ctesippus's father is a dog). Ctesippus becomes adept at the brothers' eristic method, even something of a convert, while Socrates, too, appears impressed. Finally, when the dialogue returns to the frame argument, Crito tells Socrates of an unnamed spectator to the previous day's conversation (widely taken to be Isocrates), who is fiercely critical of the sophists and philosophy. The dialogue closes with Socrates reassuring Crito of the value of philosophy, and of his practicing it with his sons.

§2 Chopped *logos*

McCabe analyses the sophistic position or view that lies behind the four possibilities for 'saying' articulated in the argument against the possibility of counter-saying (286a4-b6). On this view, there is a one-to-one correspondence between statements (*logoi*) and things (*onta*, *pragmata*) that is exact, exhaustive, and fully determines truth, so that a statement either succeeds in articulating what it is about – is meaningful – and is in each case true, or it fails, and is meaningless.[10] Statements in this way work like names of the entities or states of affairs they are about, each statement being a complete, indivisible entity (or else gibberish) – and so, as Nils Kurbis details in his commentary, 'The Importance of Being Erroneous', the sophistic view has much in common with certain contemporary accounts of meaning, in which reference figures as the core element, or the meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its referent. Being atomic and determinate of the truth, on chopped *logos* there is no way for a statement to say something about some entity or thing that is different from what another statement says about it. For, the first *logos* speaks about its thing, and articulates it completely, while the second speaks about a

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[9] For detailed discussion of the second and third sophistic episodes, and their relation to the frame discussion – in particular for the suggestion that here Plato is investigating extreme and moderate versions of the Principle of Non-Contradiction, as well as the question of self-knowledge – see McCabe, 'Waving or drowning? Socrates and the sophists on self-knowledge in the *Euthydemus*' (2013).

[10] See (1)-(4), 'Chop', 7-8.

different thing. Sayings say the same thing, or speak past one another in speaking about different things, or else there is no speaking at all.[11]

Moreover, McCabe points out, it follows that there cannot be any logically structured relations between *logoi*. Since relations of entailment require a conception of truth-functionality such that the truth of one *logos* guarantees the falsity of its negation, and since on chopped *logos* all *logoi* are true (or else meaningless), no *logos* can entail any other. Entailment also requires at least partial overlap of content between statements. But chopped *logoi* do not exhibit overlap, since each is exclusive, and exhaustive, relative to its corresponding pragma. Higher-order statements, too, are precluded, insofar as they are also subject to truth-functionality. Theoretical claims in philosophical logic are likewise excluded, since universal claims concerning conditions of reference and truth would falsify (otherwise meaningful) statements. McCabe does not elaborate on the metaphysical picture underlying chopped *logos*, as it lies beyond the scope of her project, but it is presumably one in which *pragmata* are just as radically chopped: if so, there would be no relations between *pragmata*, including relations of persistence through time. But without conditions of identity, there can be no account of change over time.[12]

Resistance to the notion of a persisting subject, of which a property may be truly predicated at one time, but not another, or predicated in varying degrees at different times, emerges with McCabe's observation that a specific use of the verbal form, *legein*, is deployed alongside the sophistic use of *logos*. Insofar as speaking is saying a *logos*, on chopped *logos*, speaking is fully determinate in the same way – temporally atomistic or immediate, steadfastly in the present: speech that exhibits or suggests development or difference over time is precluded. So the argument against counter-saying at 285e-286b, and its presupposition of chopped *logos*, is a neat elaboration of the stance underwriting 'Killing Cleinias'.

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[11] Jones and Sharma reject McCabe's 'chopped *logos*' reading of 286a4-b6, which serves as the foundation of her target paper for this volume, entirely ('Eristic'). See McCabe's careful and comprehensive replies in 'Who's Who', 4-9.

[12] See McCabe, *Plato and his Predecessors* (2000)

§3 The Challenge to Socrates

Socrates asserts, but does not establish, that the sophists' argument (*logos*) is self-refuting, that in the process of overthrowing other arguments (*logoi*), it 'overthrows itself' (286c, 288a). Later, he suggests that by silencing others, the sophists silence themselves (303d-e). It is unclear, however, that he is entitled to these claims (made, McCabe notes, with increasing desperation). For, the philosophical view underpinning chopped *logos* is formidable, its central tenet – that between *logoi* and things in the world there is an exact one-to-one correlation – being extremely difficult, if not impossible, to disprove. This is because any attempt to prove its falsity will assume a notion of truth-functionality. It will thus presuppose a contrary relation between language and the world and so beg the question against chopped *logos*. Hence Socrates faces a serious dilemma. He either makes use of a different, higher-order and truth-functional sense of *logos* in asserting that the sophists' argument is self-refuting, and thereby begs the question against their underlying position (or – worse – fallaciously equivocates in his use of '*logos*' when alleging self-refutation), or, he simply rejects their position without argument. But then, on either alternative, is Socrates better than the sophists? If he argues fallaciously, is he the inverse of the 'noble' sophist described in the *Sophist* (230b-231b) – is he, in the *Euthydemus*, a wolf disguised as a dog?

Note, too, that the sophists do not offer a complete statement of chopped *logos*, or plainly assert its central tenet, and it is unclear that they could do so without self-refutation. It seems doubtful – though McCabe does not discuss the question – that they could defend it in argument as a theoretical position. Defence would require denying that the relation between language and the world is other than that supposed by chopped *logos*, and so would contradict and undermine the very relation supposed. If this is right, then defence of the position or view dubbed chopped *logos* would be dialectically self-refuting. Instead of direct defence, however, the strategy of the sophists is to state what follows directly from their position: the four possibilities for two people speaking a *logos*, which precludes counter-saying, at 285e-286b. The position of

chopped *logos*, then, takes a stand on the principles of argumentation at the level of philosophical logic, which, since it concerns what is fundamental, cannot be shown to be mistaken without assuming the very principles of argumentation that it denies.

What, then, are the alternatives to this extreme, and as McCabe describes it 'unpalatable' position? In his response piece, 'Some Aspects of Aspect', Nicholas Denyer suggests that the sophist's arguments (including that against counter-saying) as understood by McCabe, can easily be discredited by the obviousness of its invalid nature. We know – as do the sophists, Denyer claims – that their conclusions cannot in fact follow from their premises, irrespective of whether we can explain why or theorise about logical inference, since the premises are true and yet the conclusions are (generally) patently false.[13] In response McCabe *inter alia* presses the question of distinguishing fallacy from paradox, and suggests that passing over the second sophistic episode as mere trickery fails to engage with the serious metaphysical question of persistence through change that, she argues, it challenges the reader to address (31-6).

Another alternative is to dispute the difficulties alleged to ensue when saying 'what is not', and so the impossibility of falsehood. Such arguments – addressing the alleged difficulties – do not figure in our dialogue, but take up much of the *Sophist*. On this view, the *Euthydemus* sets up the problems, while the *Sophist* provides a plausible, principled alternative.[14] A yet further – and *prima facie* more attractive – alternative that turns on discerning a structural unity within our dialogue, is to read Plato, with McCabe, as presenting a counter to the sophists' challenge to Socrates within the *Euthydemus* itself.

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[13] 'Aspects', 5-6. Relatedly, we might think that obviousness of *validity* occupies a well-established place in logical theory: The obviousness of the four basic figures is sufficient for Aristotle to ground his syllogistic logic (*Pr. An.* 25b32ff.), and he seems to regard the principle of non-contradiction as transparently true, such that its denial amounts to absurdity (*Met.* IV.3 even though, somewhat controversially, he nonetheless proceeds to respond to those who would deny it).

[14] Myles Burnyeat, 'Plato on how to speak of what is not: *Euthydemus* 283a-288a' (2002). Kurbis also notes the *Sophist*'s compositional account, which distinguishes subject and predicate expressions and specifies truth conditions for *logoi*, as constituting a robust alternative to chopped *logos* ('Importance' 10-11).

§4 Aspect and Fallacy

In response to the sophistic challenge, McCabe contends, Plato encourages the reader to notice the focus on process and change throughout the dialogue, and its connection to grammatical aspect. The distinction between the imperfective and perfective aspect in uses of the verb 'to learn' comes to the fore in Socrates' consolation of Cleinias immediately after the first sophistic episode. In particular, Socrates says at 277e5-278b2, Cleinias's failure to keep in mind the distinction between the process of gaining knowledge, or learning (imperfect), and the state of having done so, or understanding, having learned (perfect,) explains why he became confused and contradicted himself.

Although McCabe allows that the point of the episode *could* be to point up a fallacious equivocation on the sophists' part of the term 'learn', she argues forcefully that it cannot be reduced to a series of fallacies that turn on two distinct and independent senses of the term: if it did, what people undertake to do when setting out to learn may not result in what they accomplish, having learned.[15] Plato's central point, McCabe argues, is to underline the different stages in the process of learning and the corresponding change in the subject. The progressive, developing state of affairs – the *pragma* or *pragmata* the statements refer to – contain elements that in some sense persist, e.g. the learning subject, and those that undergo alteration over time, e.g. the development of a body of knowledge. It requires continuity throughout the process, as opposed to something more 'chopped', such as discrete, independent, events.

The unifying theme of the dialogue is epistemological: why and how one ought to learn, acquire knowledge, and become wise. Within this context, Socrates' insistence on continuity within a process, at the level of metaphysics as well as grammar, underwrites the Platonic

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[15] Denyer objects to McCabe's insistence that difference in aspect is not always (and in the case of learning discussed is not) a difference in sense ('Aspects', 1); In 'Learning', Thomas argues, against McCabe, in favour of a reading of the first sophistic episode as pointing up an ambiguity between senses of learning that refer to distinct, causally connected, stages of the learner and does not require the (strict) identity of the subject over time (4-8). But the causal connections (and their *telos*) may be captured by the continuity of sense: See McCabe's response, 'Who's Who', 34-5.

response to chopped *logos* and its challenge to Socrates. This continuity may be regarded as ground in the thing or *pragma* towards which the endeavour of learning is directed, especially where the goal is rich and complex, e.g. a body of knowledge or a science, or as grounded in the subject, the person who learns and is transformed by the process and yet remains the same person. McCabe suggests that Socrates' emphasis on continuity, together with his conception of learning as normative, strongly suggests that what Plato is emphasising to the reader is not the pitfalls of lexical ambiguity or equivocation of sense, but the structure and value of the single process of learning and becoming wise. This process, McCabe further suggests, is not independent of the goal of knowledge and wisdom, as means to ends, but incorporated within it.[16]

§5 The teleology of learning and saying

Socrates' depiction of becoming knowledgeable as goal-directed or teleologically structured entails the possibility of aiming at, but failing to reach, the *telos*. Development along a continuum in learning stands opposed to making mistakes, failing to grasp an inference, or not remaining consistent in one's claims, but also to aiming at comprehension of a complex causal system or body of knowledge, and falling short. By illustrating a parallel structure for the activity of saying (*legein*), McCabe suggests, Plato augments the response to the challenge to Socrates of chopped *logos*, by showing how the very activity of saying presupposes a conception of success defined in opposition to failure. Just as learning aims at knowledge, saying has the truth as its end, and therefore presupposes a conception of truth – internal to the act of saying – defined in opposition to falsehood, a case of saying something other than what is aimed at.[17]

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[16] In 'Learning', Thomas explores the notion of teleological structure for saying that McCabe describes. She suggests that, like housebuilding, it requires many stages within the activity to be completed, but unlike it does not issue in a product external to the process. But see McCabe's response in 'Who's Who' (25-28, 34). Cf. McCabe, 'Labyrinth'.

[17] Merrick Anderson objects, in his commentary, '*Legein* to What End?', that not every saying aim at truth. In 'Who's Who' (20-22, 25-28), McCabe clarifies that she attributes to Plato a broad conception of saying (as nonetheless distinct from acts such as exclaiming) as not explicitly aimed, in each act of saying, at assertion of truth, but for which truth-directedness is a condition of success, so that speakers are answerable for what they say.

By contrast, in the second sophistic episode, in the arguments against counter-saying and against saying what is not, the sophists deploy a conception of saying that, though it exploits the sense in which saying is doing and making, confine it to a simple success term: the action has an object, 'what is', and to fail to have an object – to say 'what is not' – is failure to engage in the activity, failure to speak at all. But Plato then shows them amplifying failure conditions in the example of the orator, whose speech is extended through time, so may fail to finish, and, being aimed at persuasion, may not succeed. And indeed, their own arguments are built up out of individual sayings, extended through time, and, in the somewhat *ad hominem* postscript to the argument against saying what is not, the sophists even countenance speech as affecting a person's reputation. In these modalities too, then, the sophist's own conception of saying has, within the activity of saying, failure conditions.[18] Plato's solution to the challenge faced by Socrates is to demonstrate the teleological complexity of saying, which even the sophists, as they weild chopped *logos*, cannot but partake of.

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On McCabe's rich and subtle reading of the dialogue, the defensive strategy to be employed against chopped *logos* and the challenge to Socrates in the *Euthydemus* cannot be direct, deductive argument, since that cannot establish matters of principle in philosophical logic. The indirect response, she suggests, instead presents an account of saying that is 'rich and ample' in being truth-directed, complex, and requiring the subject's reflective commitment, and on which counter-saying and falsehood are both possible.[19] To the extent that the sophists avail themselves of these features of saying in presenting their arguments, they are, like Socrates, committed to the teleological account of speaking that opposes chopped *logos*. In these moments, then, Plato

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[18] In their commentary, 'Teleology and Sophistic Endeavour in the *Euthydemus*', de Souza and Vazquez suggest that Plato presents the sophists' activity as having a distinct, *eristic* teleological structure, a rival to the teleology of saying that threatens Plato's response to the sophistic challenge.

[19] In his commentary, 'Isocrates' Pragmatic Reflective Life at *Euthydemus* 304d-306e', Tony Leyh argues that Isocrates' veiled appearance at the end of the dialogue prompts the reader to notice that Isocratean pragmatism, like Plato's teleological account of 'saying' (as *per* McCabe's reading), provides normative grounds for the rejection of chopped *logos*, and so is a competitor to Plato's own account.

shows them legitimising relations between *logoi*, and running the risk of self-refutation. But for the most part, on McCabe's reading, Plato shows them as proponents and exploiters of chopped *logos*, and so as refusing to allow that we can make mistakes in our endeavour to get it right about the world, and about our lives. Thus, McCabe argues, they are ultimately presented as 'refuters of the self'.