

The Unknown Paul: Philosophers and Sophists in Acts 17

Mark D. Given

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

I wish to set the stage for my pursuit of the unknown Paul of Acts 17 with some short excerpts from Ernst Haenchen's commentary, *The Acts of the Apostles*, specifically from chapter forty-one which covers the scene of "Paul in Athens."

συμβάλλω can mean "to converse with" but also to "engage in an argument" (Bauer, *Wb* 1539). This double meaning or lack of sharpness in the description continues all through and is part of the individual character of this scene . . .¹

. . . above all we should not overlook the allusive references to Socrates: Paul speaks in the marketplace to every man--like Socrates. They think he is introducing new gods--like Socrates. And Socrates came before the court on that account and was sentenced to death.²

. . . Luke conjures up the shadow of Socrates . . .³

I want to highlight two points made in these excerpts. First, this entire scene is characterized by a pervasive ambiguity, even *double entendre*, as the use of συμβάλλω demonstrates. Second, the entire scene conjures up the shadow of Socrates, i.e. Paul is cast in the role of Socrates. My thesis is that these points are intimately related, and that recognition of this fact is crucial for recognizing the *sophistication* of Luke's Athenian literary menagerie and the unknown Paul who inhabits it.⁴

¹ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 517.

² Haenchen, 527.

³ Haenchen, 528.

⁴ The fruitfulness of linking the Socratic allusions with the speech itself has also recently been demonstrated in an article by Karl Olav Sandnes ("Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul's Areopagus Speech," *JSNT* 50 [1993] 13-26). As the abstract succinctly states, "This article presents three arguments: (1) the rhetorical strategy to be used by a speaker faced with a critical audience was *insinuatio*, subtle approach, to speak with concealment; (2) Paul's way of introducing Jesus in this speech is surprisingly cryptic, and leaves the audience with questions; (3) the use of Socrates

We can begin by asking why it did not occur to Haenchen to connect these two important aspects of the scene--the linguistic presence of ambiguity and the ghostly presence of Socrates. Careful attention to where he does and does not find evidence of intentional ambiguity supplies the answer. Where Haenchen *does* find examples of “double meaning or lack of sharpness in description” is in the narrative framework of the scene. Where he *does not* find examples is in the discourse of the characters. The best illustration of this fact is his treatment of Paul’s *captatio benevolentiae*, i.e. “currying of favor,” in v. 22. Haenchen translates it as: “You Athenians, I see that you are highly religious in every way.”⁵ “Highly religious” is his rendition of δεισιδαιμονεστέρους, a highly ambiguous adjective that can be taken as a compliment, “very religious,” or as an insult, “excessively religious,” “superstitious.” Haenchen concludes that “What is involved here, however, is not [the latter] meaning (which always has a flavour of reproach), but the cautiously appreciative ‘religious’.”⁶ What Haenchen does, then, is to indulge in the classic either/or thinking that pervades interpretation of the Areopagus speech. The equivocal is rendered univocal. Danger is thus averted. What danger you may ask? The danger of presenting the image of a Paul who does not play fair with his audience. A Paul who intentionally deceives his audience with ambiguous language. In short, a Paul who cheats.

In an article which recently appeared in Brill’s new journal *Biblical Interpretation*, I demonstrate that this use of δεισιδαιμονεστέρους is only the beginning of a series of double meanings in Paul’s speech. As the speech continues and “. . . the orator says, ‘What therefore you ignorantly worship, this I proclaim to you,’ does he mean, ‘What you worship unknowingly,’ or ‘What you worship improperly/shamefully?’”⁷ ἀγνοῦντες can bear either connotation. Similarly, when the orator reaches his *peroration* in v. 20, “Does the phrase, ‘the times of ignorance,’ refer epistemologically to ‘the times of misconception’ or morally to ‘the times of culpable error?’” ἄγνοια can bear either connotation. Does the orator say that God “overlooks” or “despises” the times of ignorance? ὑπεροράω can bear either connotation.⁸ Once these ambiguities are recognized, the entire speech is transformed into a highly sophisticated doublespeak, understood one way by “the oratees, who are inquisitive and philosophically inclined pagans,” and in quite another way by “the narratee,

traditions found quite clearly in the prelude to the speech is seen as shedding light on Paul’s indirect speaking in the speech itself. Paul’s aim was to promote curiosity and elicit questions.”

⁵ Haenchen, 515.

⁶ Haenchen, 520.

⁷ Mark Given, “Not Either/Or but Both/And in Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3,3 (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 366.

⁸ The D manuscript replaces υπεριδων with παριδων, from παροράω. This verb could also be understood two ways. Either “God, having noticed the times of ignorance,” or “God, having overlooked the times of ignorance.” Either way the negative connotation of ὑπεροράω is avoided.

Theophilus, who, like the implied reader, is now, on the basis of his reading of Acts up to this point, an insider.”⁹

Once we recognize that what Luke gives us is a Paul who deceives his audience with intentional ambiguities, we are better prepared to see why the pervasive presence of ambiguity and the pervasive presence of Socrates in this scene are not unrelated. But first we must turn our attention to Socrates and ask to what sort of character Luke is likening his dialectical Paul. When Luke places the mantle of Socrates on Paul’s shoulders, is it an unambiguously positive maneuver?

To judge from the remarks of New Testament scholars who have commented on Luke’s Paul-Socrates equation, one would have to answer a resounding yes. And this positive appraisal of such an association also holds true for scholars who have found evidence of the Socratic philosophical tradition in the authentic letters of Paul. The prime example is Hans Dieter Betz who explicitly argues in his *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition* that Paul consciously sides with philosophy in its great struggle with rhetoric/sophistry.¹⁰ From the time of Plato, Greek, and later Roman, philosophers in the Socratic tradition sought to distinguish between their own philosophic rhetoric, one of truth and reality, and sophistic rhetoric, one of falsehood and mere appearance.¹¹ Indeed, Plato himself barely allowed the possibility that dialectic, which he considered the true philosophical discourse, could be called rhetoric at all, leaving Aristotle to describe a philosophic rhetoric that could then be distinguished from a sophistic one. But the influence of Plato’s more extreme division was by no means limited to the classical period. The polemical dispute between philosophy and rhetoric had a continuous history for over two millennia, well into the eighteenth century when rhetoric ceased to be the crowning glory of a liberal education.¹²

The deceptive nature of this debate has received a fair amount of attention from classicists in recent years. As George Kennedy says,

⁹ Given, 363. See p. 369 for discussion of how other terms in the peroration are rendered “undecidable” by the pervasive presence of ambiguity.

¹⁰ Hans Dieter Betz, *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner “Apologie” 2 Korinther 10-13* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972). E.g., “Windisch erkennt richtig die antisophistische Tendenz der paulinischen Argumentation. Im folgenden werden wir zu zeigen versuchen, daß Paulus hiermit in einer bis auf Socrates zurückgehenden Tradition steht” (14). And later, “Als ‘μυμητής τοῦ Χριστοῦ’ stellt [Paulus] sich also hinein in die Tradition des griechischen Humanismus und versteht sich mit dieser Tradition im Kampfe befindlich gegen das Programm der ‘Sophisten’” (146).

¹¹ Betz, 14-42, provides a fine survey of much of this polemic from the time of Plato to Paul.

¹² “While Plato’s hostility towards rhetoric, expressed over a thirty-year period, was idiosyncratic and extreme, the rivalry between the two disciplines persisted just as long as rhetoric was a living force. It flared up in the second century BC; again in the first century AD, in the movement known as the ‘second Sophistic’; in the Middle Ages it formed part of the recurring ‘Battles of the Liberal Arts’; in the Renaissance it was largely found in the humanists’ attack on scholastic philosophy; while in later periods it has been the work of individuals rather than coherent groups” (Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988] 148).

Some modern readers sympathize with philosophy in its dispute with rhetoric. In the former discipline they see devotion to truth, intellectual honesty, depth of perception, consistency, and sincerity; in the later [*sic*], verbal dexterity, empty pomposity, triviality, moral ambivalence, and a desire to achieve self-interest by any means. *The picture is not quite so clear cut.*¹³

Indeed the greatest stumbling block to maintaining a clear cut binary opposition between philosophy and rhetoric is that opposition's very foundation--Plato's Socrates. Consider these remarks by prominent classicists found in Gregory Vlastos's recent authoritative treatment of the historical Socrates entitled *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*.

E. R. Dodds: "It looks rather as if Plato was content at this stage to let Socrates repay the Sophists in their own coin, as no doubt Socrates often did." Paul Friedländer: Socrates believes that to educate deluded persons "he must resort to dialectical tricks"; and he "knows how to deceive better than all the sophists." W. K. C. Guthrie: "Plato lets Socrates make a wickedly sophisticated use of ambiguity when he likes." Charles Kahn: Socrates uses "dialectical trickery" to win his argument against Polus in *G[orgias]*. 474c-475c.¹⁴

These quotes stand at the beginning of a chapter titled "Does Socrates Cheat?" By no means does Vlastos himself want to endorse such opinions, and at times it sounds as if he is writing yet another apology for Socrates. Nevertheless, his own strategy for refuting the charge that Socrates was cunning and deceptive strongly confirms that in some ways the charge is undeniably true. According to Vlastos,

What creates the problem is the Socrates of Plato's earlier dialogues--complicated, devious, cunning, and not averse to playing pranks on his interlocutors upon occasion. Does *he* remain always free of resort to deceit? I want to argue that he always does *when arguing seriously*: this is the all important qualification.¹⁵

And how can we know when Socrates is serious? ". . . *when Socrates is searching for the right way to live, in circumstances in which it is reasonable for him to think of the search as obedience to*

¹³ George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 9. Italics mine.

¹⁴ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 132.

¹⁵ Vlastos, 133-134.

divine command, his argument cannot involve wilful untruth.”¹⁶ How comforting it would have been for the often thoroughly duped interlocutors of Socrates to have known this! For instance those involved in the *Protagoras*, a veritable war of words between Socrates and the great sophist named in the title. Vlastos admits that Socrates enters into this contest with complete prognostication of Vince Lombardi’s famous sporting logion, “Winning isn’t everything; it is the only thing.” The contest begins with an opening speech by Protagoras, a masterful exhibition, featuring, among other things, some brilliant interpretations of Simonidean poetry. The speech is greeted with loud applause and Socrates feels like he has received a knock out blow. Then, as Vlastos explains,

To recover from the set-back [Socrates] tries a brazen maneuver and succeeds in pulling it off: he has the effrontery to claim that when the poet says “it is hard to be good” he is using “hard” (*χαλεπόν*) to mean “bad”--a willful travesty of the poet’s meaning, for which he nonetheless manages to win support by wheedling endorsement for it from a distinguished member of the company, Prodicus, master of the “correct use of words.”¹⁷

Vlastos goes on to note Socrates’ thoroughly tongue-in-cheek representation of the anti-intellectual Sparta as “doing more than any other Greek state to foster philosophy.”¹⁸ Vlastos concludes that “It can hardly be disputed that throughout this performance Socrates is pulling the wool over his hearers’ eyes. What is his game? Irony, certainly, but irony put to a very special use: mockery elaborately played out in sly concealment of its mocking intent.”¹⁹ But Vlastos sees a great divide between the impression Socrates’ performance made on outsiders as opposed to insiders. Thus,

. . . when Alcibiades [one of Socrates’ companions] hears Socrates say poker-faced that it is bad to be good he knows that someone’s leg is being pulled. But others in the company who are not in the know would be easily fooled. No signal of irony would come across to them from the wild constructions Socrates puts on Simonides’ verse. Nor would they have any way of knowing that the tale about the Spartans was a spoof. Only at the end of his long speech does Socrates give away the information from which his hearers, if they had the wit, could figure out that he had been putting

¹⁶ Vlastos, 134.

¹⁷ Vlastos, 135.

¹⁸ Vlastos, 136.

¹⁹ Vlastos, 136.

on an act.²⁰

Let us remember that Vlastos set out to defend Socrates against the charge of arguing like a sophist. And so, in light of all of these frank admissions of Socrates' devious dialectical stratagems, I must conclude that Vlastos is not a sophist. Would you wish to be defended in an Athenian court by someone who admits that the charges that you are cunning and deceptive are true except when you are being serious?

Now we are ready to return to our question. Is the pervasive presence of ambiguity and the allusive presence of Socrates in the scene of Paul in Athens intimately related? Surely. Luke decides to have Paul encounter some Epicureans and Stoics. The very recent introduction (17:2) and repetition (17:17) of the image of Paul as dialectician is surely a prelude to this encounter. Ten of the thirteen occurrences of διαλέγομαι in the New Testament are found in Acts, where they always refer to Paul (17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8,9; 20:7,9; 24:12,25). The first occurrence in 17:2 refers to his dialoguing in the synagogue of Thessalonica on three Sabbaths. In 17:17 he dialogues both in the synagogue and the agora. It is hardly accidental that Luke has introduced this word at just this time and restricted it to Paul. For Luke, Paul is the first and foremost Christian dialectician. Only Apollos is given a similar, though by no means equal, honor. Apollos' "powerful refutations" (διακατελέγομαι) are mentioned but not narrated (18:28). Paul, on the other hand, dialogues with Jews (17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8), philosophers and other frequenters of the Athenian agora (17:17-18), attendees of his formal lecture series in the Hall of Tyrannus (19:9), fellow workers (20:7,9), and a Roman governor (24:25).

While commentators invariably concentrate upon the contrasting cosmological and theological ideas of the Epicureans and Stoics, as well as the relative incompatibility or compatibility of their ideas with those expressed in the ensuing speech, what is missed is the *rhetorical* significance of a dialectical Paul confronting representatives of the two philosophical schools which had the least in common where general linguistic theory, particularly dialectic, was concerned. While Epicurus, and the school he founded, was lampooned by rival schools for a naive and totally inadequate theory of language, the Stoics were, and still are, recognized as having the most highly developed linguistic theory in the history of Greco-Roman philosophy. They were indeed the philosophers of the Word (λόγος), and they were especially renowned for their dialectic. The Stoic stress on mastery of linguistic theory and lexical precision is certainly related to the fact that they provide the first surviving definition of the linguistic phenomenon known as ambiguity (ἀμφιβολία), one that is remarkable for its "complexity, subtlety, and precision."²¹ Why were the Stoics the ones to take such

²⁰ Vlastos, 137.

²¹ Catherine Atherton, *The Stoics on Ambiguity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 1.

a keen interest in this subject? As the Atherton explains,

Stoic interest in ambiguity was the inevitable consequence of the basic doctrines about human nature, language, and rationality on which the whole Stoic system was based. . . . The point was that seeing or missing an ambiguity could make a difference to one's general success as a human being.²²

. . . Like other Hellenistic philosophies, Stoicism was above all a theory for expounding and recommending a way of life; . . . Since happiness consists in moral goodness, and human good is perfected rationality, any failure to recognise ambiguities in philosophical argument, disquisition, or exposition, can result, not in some minor intellectual error--a botched definition or a shaky conclusion--but, by way of deep conceptual confusions, in blocking access to the truths and supporting proofs which systematically define and explain the governing principles of the universe, and the comprehension of which guarantees correct, successful conduct of an individual life.²³

Since they were the first philosophical school to study the subject systematically, it is perhaps not surprising that the Stoics took considerable pride in their ability to detect ambiguities, whether intentional or accidental. As Atherton has stated,

Stoic dialectic is able to distinguish what is said ambiguously (D.L. 7.47 (31B7)), as if nothing else could, and no person but the man with dialectical knowledge--an extraordinary claim, whose remarkableness lies rather in its ambition than its uniqueness. Behind it lie Stoicism's pretensions to authoritativeness in philosophy, in the principles of science, and in all linguistic matters.²⁴

Epicurus' attitude toward dialectic and the importance of detecting ambiguity was quite different. Both Diogenes Laertius and Cicero provide evidence that,

Epicurus' famous hostility to dialectic (*e.g.* D.L. 10.31(191); Cicero *acad.* 2.97 (201)) was blamed for his failure to teach "how ambiguities are distinguished", "qua

²² Atherton, 2-3.

²³ Atherton, 129.

²⁴ Atherton, 127.

via . . . *ambigua distinguantur*”, or to fix the meaning of such a key term as *pleasure* despite his frequent assertion “that the force of words should be carefully expressed”, “*diligentia oportere exprimi quae vis subiecta sit vocibus*” (Cicero *fin.* 1.6, 22 (19H)).²⁵

In light of the well known Stoic pretensions to dialectical mastery and expertise in detecting ambiguities and sophisms, as well as the equally well known shortcomings of the Epicureans in such matters, Luke’s casting of Paul in the role of Socrates, the returned father of dialectic, can hardly be coincidental or innocent. In the opening encounter in the agora, his point is not simply to link Paul with Socrates as one who dialogues, but also to portray the Athenian philosophers as grossly misunderstanding Paul’s message as the proclamation of a new god and goddess precisely through their failure to disambiguate *anastasis*. In the speech, Luke’s point is not simply to link Paul with Socrates as one who appeared before the Athenian court, but also to portray the Athenian intellectuals as victims of sophistic verbal cunning through their failure to recognize Paul’s “wickedly sophisticated use of ambiguity,” to borrow Guthrie’s expression.

Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* defines “Socratic Irony” as “a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and the outsiders’ incomprehension.”²⁶ Or, in other words, Socratic irony is “the use of words intended to convey one meaning to the uninitiated part of the audience and another to the initiated, the delight of it lying in the secret intimacy set up between the latter and the speaker.”²⁷ And what of those Platonic dialogues where there is no initiated audience, only Socrates and his interlocutor? According to Vlastos, “The ironies with which Socrates plies his interlocutor in each of those dialogues, lost on his interlocutor, are certainly not meant by Plato to be lost on the readers: they are the ‘initiated’ who are meant to grasp the meaning that eludes the interlocutor’s comprehension.”²⁸

While Vlastos would like to deny such high-handed sophistic concealment to the historical Socrates, at least when he was being serious (!), he finds that it is “indeed acceptable as a description of *Platonic*, rather than *Socratic*, irony . . .”²⁹ Based on the reading of Paul in Athens presented here I would contend that it is also acceptable as a description of Lukan irony. Vlastos speaks of the “amusement” Socrates’ initiates would have “derived from watching him stick pins in Athenian

²⁵ Atherton, 110.

²⁶ Vlastos, 244.

²⁷ Vlastos, 245.

²⁸ Vlastos, 245.

²⁹ Vlastos, 245.

windbags . . .³⁰ Apparently Luke invites his initiates/insiders, Theophilus and all other readers, to a similar carnival. Who, then, is the unknown Paul of Acts 17? The Lukan Socratic Paul: *both* philosopher *and* sophist.

³⁰ Vlastos, 245.