SOPHISM AND PRAGMATISM

NICHOLAS SHACKEL

Abstract
A traditional pastime of philosophers is the analysis of rhetoric and the repudiation of sophistry. Nevertheless, some of what philosophers call sophistry might rather be a subtle repudiation of the traditional principles of rationality. In this paper I start by granting the Sophist his repudiation and outline some of the obstacles to settling the dispute between Sophists and Rationalists. I then suggest that we should distinguish pragmatic Sophism from nihilistic Sophism. In the hope of driving a wedge between these two I illustrate the way in which the two are confounded when Sophism is advanced by use of a particular rhetorical manoeuvre and then give an argument against nihilistic Sophism which even a nihilistic Sophist should be persuaded by.

Introduction

The art of good speech involves paying attention to many and varied things, such as rhythm, sonority, lucidity, cogency and structure. Rhetoric is the study and practice of that art, of the instrumental good of effective speech, and perhaps also of the intrinsic good of beautiful speech. Where rhetoric turns dark is when it ceases to serve truth and instead serves only the persuasive aims of the speaker.

Or at least, that is what philosophers have been inclined to say — and it is what I am inclined to say. But there is another view of the matter, and it is perhaps the view of the Greek Sophists. A picture we have of Protagoras from Aristotle is that he is willing to make the weaker argument the stronger. But this might not be how Protagoras would represent himself. He might rather say that, objectively, there is no measure of an argument, no standard by which to choose between a proposition and its negation. If we seek a measure then there is only what can be said with respect to the measure of all things, namely Man, and with respect to arguments and propositions that measure is simply and entirely a matter of how men judge. How men judge

NICHOLAS SHACKEL

is effected by the exchange of persuasive speech. Truth seeking is just the exchange of such speech and is not answerable to standards other than the effects it has in bringing about judgement. How we ought to judge is how we do judge in the face of persuasive speech.

Now I am not concerned here with the exegesis of the Greek Sophists but with the philosophical issue. The point of framing the argument I have just put in their mouths is to direct our attention to the philosophical issue that can be obscured by the accusation of sophistry. Grant that there are many instances of sophistry which are merely specious reasoning. Nevertheless, might there not be something that these Sophists are getting at? My claim that rhetoric can turn dark depends on drawing a distinction between the aims of enquiry and the persuasive aims of a speaker. The Sophist is saying that this is a distinction without a difference, in this instance, because the standards of enquiry just are the standards of effective persuasion.

It might just happen to turn out that persuasion is effective only when or only because what is said in order to persuade is such that to be persuaded by it would be to conform to relevant truth conducive norms. Perhaps this would be so if we were perfectly rational in our belief formation processes. However, it seems to be empirically false. As a matter of fact, we can be persuaded by what we ought not to be persuaded by. At least, so say I. But all of this is quite beside the Sophist's point. For the work here is done by the truth conducive norms standing in judgement over persuasion, and that is just what he is challenging. Good enquiry, says he, is answerable only to the standards of effective persuasion.

The norm being offered by this Sophist appears to be:

Actual subjectivism: You ought to judge however you do judge in the face of persuasive speech.

It is not prima facie attractive. It is not attractive because it appears to allow of no fault in the most bizarre or arbitrary of judgments. But this is not a beauty contest. Furthermore, there are ways of ameliorating the appearance of faultlessness, of retaining what Wright calls cognitive command,[1] ways which might be advanced by pragmatists and perhaps by some anti-realists. For example,

---

[1] "a discourse exerts cognitive command iff it is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, so to speak, will involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming." Wright 1992:144

Actual intersubjectivism: You ought to judge as your peers judge in the face of persuasive speech.

Ideal subjectivism: You ought to judge however you would judge in the face of all relevant persuasive speech.

Ideal intersubjectivism: You ought to judge as your peers would judge in the face of all relevant persuasive speech.

There is a possibility of idealising the subject as well as the speech, but care has to be taken if one is not to end up importing rationalism through the back door.

I am not going to attempt to formulate a precise version of the philosophical position I have sketched here. The key feature of the position is the rejection of standards of enquiry as truth conducive norms logically prior to and explanatorily independent of persuasive speech. Rather, the standards of enquiry are norms of effectiveness in persuasive speech, where effectiveness is spelt out in some form of actual or ideal subjectivism. In short, it is cogency that matters. I'm going to call that position Sophism. By Rationalism I mean the position that asserts what Sophism rejects: that standards of enquiry are truth conducive norms that are logically prior to and explanatorily independent of persuasive speech.

Obstacles

How, then, can we hope to address and to settle this dispute? There are obstacles which make the dispute somewhat intractable. In the first place, there are difficulties that arise in finding some ground on which to base a settlement. Consider for a moment the analogy with the dispute over scepticism. There is some neutral ground on which sceptic and dogmatist can seek to resolve their dispute. Rationality, understood in a fairly straightforward way, is taken to be the neutral ground on which the dispute can be settled-indeed, the sceptic claims to be the better Rationalist. The challenge that scepticism poses to dogmatism is over whether we can satisfy rational requirements that are agreed to be constitutive of possessing knowledge. As such it is a challenge mounted from grounds shared with the dogmatist, the shared acceptance of the status of the norms of rationality. So both sceptic and dogmatist are Rationalists of a certain kind.

What exactly do we have to do to resolve the threat from scepticism? Are we required to refute scepticism on premisses that the sceptic accepts, or

would grounds that only we accept suffice? Does it suffice to offer an explanation under which we would be entitled to our knowledge claims, if the only justification we can give for why that explanation is true of us is circular, or circular in only certain restricted ways? If in the end the Rationalist can defend our entitlement to knowledge claims but not in terms that satisfy the sceptic, he may do one of two things. On the one hand, he may give up the claim to have founded the resolution of the dispute on entirely neutral grounds. On the other hand, he may offer an ameliorating explanation of the sceptic's continuing rejection, such as that the sceptic is relying on a skewed account of rationality, fails to weigh its demands accurately, misappropriates or misapplies the norms in play, etc. In this case he is not giving up the claim of a neutral ground on which the dispute is resolved.

Something similar applies in the dispute with Sophism. The Rationalist would like to show that what the Sophist accepts commits him to the Rationalist's view. If in the end the Rationalist cannot show this to the Sophist's satisfaction, he needs to make the Sophist look as if he is engaging in some kind of distortion. Where the analogy breaks down is on the issue of neutral ground. By the nature of the challenge posed by the sophist it is unclear whether there is anything that could be thought of as neutral ground on which to settle the dispute. For example, there doesn't seem to be some third factor by consideration of which we might be able to discuss the question of the priority of truth over cogency or vice versa. Each side takes it's notion to be basic. In this case, to show that there is neutral ground requires showing that least some core of Rationalism is inescapable. It's not clear that that can be done. It looks as though one would have to show that the nature of having contentful mental states requires adherence to rational requirements.[2] Yet we have noted for millennia the degree to which humans are distressingly irrational and recent psychological research has tended to strengthen that judgement.

If the Rationalist cannot show that some neutral ground is inescapable, it is difficult to know what is to count as settling the dispute. After all, to settle it by our standards, even if they are not shared in any way with the Sophist, is to have settled it by the standards we accept. For them to be our standards does not make them *merely* our standards. What else should we judge by? Nevertheless, to give up on neutral ground whilst being satisfied with our standards might amount to accepting some kind of relativism; furthermore, perhaps being satisfied with our standards and indifferent to the Sophist's rejection of them is a kind of chauvinism. Both relativism and chauvinism are rejected by Rationalists, and this fact poses some problems for them in this circumstance.

[2] For an attempt along these lines, see Shackel 2004, Chapter 3.

For example, Dummett (1973), in defending the possibility of justifying deduction, seems to settle for chauvinism of this kind. Dummett distinguishes suasive arguments, whose purpose is to persuade us of the truth of their conclusion, and explanatory arguments, whose purpose is only to explain the truth of their conclusions. Whilst it is objectionable for a suasive argument to be circular, that is not true of explanatory arguments. In the latter case we work backwards from the *true* explanandum to the explanans, and hence there is nothing wrong with an explanation that appeals to that which is to be explained in the course of its explanation. He suggests that, whilst in the case of induction we need a suasive justification, in the case of deduction, because we are antecedently inclined to think it justified, we need only an explanatory justification. The success of soundness and completeness proofs in showing the coincidence of syntactic proof and semantic logical consequence suffice to explain and hence to explanatorily justify despite the circularity. Dummett's paper is subtle and difficult, and here is not the place attempt an assessment. We need only remark that Haack's (1976) argument that Dummett has not evaded the objection of circularity is strong and if well made out would show that Dummett has not evaded the chauvinism rationalists seek to avoid.[3]

If there is no neutral ground then there is only the question of how each looks in the light of each, and some difficulties in knowing what to make of various patterns in that view. First of all there are two grounds from which to make assessments, Rationalism and Sophism. Secondly there are two positions to be assessed, Rationalism and Sophism again. In each case there is the possibility of confutation, vindication or neither.[4]

		Assessed on grounds	
		Rationalism	Sophism
Position	Rationalism	Confuted, vindicated or neither.	Confuted, vindicated or neither.
	Sophism	Confuted, vindicated or neither.	Confuted, vindicated or neither.

There are 81 possible outcomes of this assessment (3^4). Obviously I'm not going to try to explore all those outcomes. I lay this out to make it clear that assessing the dispute adequately is a potentially lengthy business, since one

---

[3] For a recent commentary on this debate see the discussion in Hanna 2006:66 ff. where Hanna sides with Haack.

[4] I intend these to be neutral terms for the relevant kind of failure or success.

NICHOLAS SHACKEL

must first get clear the answer to four initial questions, namely, how does each position stand when assessed on each ground, and then discuss what the pattern of answers means for the dispute. I am going to discuss only a few patterns before moving on.

It is not immediately clear what we should make of the pattern that we might initially expect to find, the symmetrical situation in which each side can vindicate itself and confute the other.

Standoff		Assessed on grounds	
		Rationalism	Sophism
Position	Rationalism	Vindicated.	Confuted.
	Sophism	Confuted.	Vindicated.

Each side could declare itself victorious in its own terms, but that sounds smug and also unpersuasive. Certainly, for the Rationalist, self vindication and other confutation cannot suffice to imply overall vindication since then both would be overall vindicated. But the positions are contrary and so both being overall vindicated is ruled out be the logic of contraries. Thus, in the absence of some further explanation for why self vindication and other confutation brings overall vindication for one side and not the other, the Rationalist at least cannot declare victory.

I fear the problem here may be worse for the Rationalist than for the Sophist because of the varieties of incipient relativism that the Sophist can accept. An irresoluble standoff is not consistent with the Rationalist's position because part of his position about rationality is that its demands are not arbitrary in the way that the demands of etiquette are. It is not enough to convict the other side of irrationality. He needs to explain why they too are committed to being governed by rational norms, in some relevant sense of committed (since as a matter of fact there is a clear sense of commitment in which they are *not* committed). Whereas the Sophist can say that the Rationalists have a peculiarly cramped view of cogency, but if it works for them, well, that's the main thing anyway.

If the Sophist *does* say that, then perhaps he can take the Standoff pattern to be an overall vindication. On the other hand, he may also think that the situation is not Standoff, but rather this pattern:

Support for Sophism?		Assessed on grounds	
		Rationalism	Sophism
Position	Rationalism	Vindicated.	Not Confuted.
	Sophism		Vindicated.

For this pattern too, and contrary to what one might have expected, a Rationalism being self vindicating and not confuted by a self vindicating sophism need not be a way of Rationalism being vindicated overall, but may tend to support the overall vindication of Sophism. Again, the Sophist being able to regard Rationalism as a peculiarly cramped view of cogency, which nevertheless works for those who take that view, seems to leave him with some kind of overall vindication. Rationalism, however, comes out worse again when we consider the same pattern with roles reversed.

Undermining Rationalism?		Assessed on grounds	
		Rationalism	Sophism
Position	Rationalism	Vindicated.	
	Sophism	Not Confuted.	Vindicated.

The problem for Rationalism here is that, because Rationalism and Sophism are contrary, if rationality vindicates itself that entails that Sophism is false. Now if Rationalism deems Sophism false and yet if, except for the argument just given, it does not directly confute Sophism, that would seem to mean Rationalism is committed to something very like a contradiction, which would undermine its self-vindication.

A further thing that I think we should take from this pattern is this. In addition to the complications of assessment due to the large number of possible outcomes that arise from assessing each position in terms of each ground, there are potentially serious interference effects that arise for those individual assessments when we move to the overall level and consider the implications of the pattern.

Moving on, there are difficulties which are on the surface terminological. We cannot discuss these issues without deploying a great deal of the vocabulary that, under its standard usage, applies the Rationalist concepts. I have just used the notions of truth conducive norms, logical priority and explanatory independence, but if we grant the Rationalist all that he commonly means by truth and logic his case is already won. For the Rationalist good enquiry is truth seeking enquiry, and cogency ought to serve truth seeking.

Sophists make use of standard Rationalist normative vocabulary, but in such a way that they clearly reserve the right to repudiate our reading them straight. Their ironic detachment makes it difficult to know what they would say about good enquiry were they to speak straight. We know they want to start from cogency, but speaking ironically leaves them uncommitted between many options: Perhaps they are deploying different conceptions of the Rationalist norms, or relativising them, or insisting on there being a greater variety of norms and of good ways of enquiring than those recognised by the Rationalist. Perhaps they are employing different concepts from the concepts meant by the Rationalist's use of rational vocabulary, or making different claims about the ontological and explanatory priority between the concepts deployed. Perhaps they are rejecting the Rationalist concepts altogether and replacing them with some other account of good enquiry, or rejecting the very notion of good enquiry, or of normative constraint.

So there are many Sophisms, and each variety may appear under a variety of guises, which makes it difficult to disentangle them. However, when we survey the variety I think we can discern some for which there remains a possibility of finding some neutral ground. There are Sophisms that appear to be a response to scepticism. Locating the source of scepticism in the rational norms as the Rationalist holds them to be, the Sophist suggests that the Rationalist conception is in error. The solution is to frame rationality in terms of cogency. By so doing the Sophist places a limit on how wrong we could be, a limit that excludes global sceptical possibilities.

The thought of limiting how wrong we could be links Sophism with pragmatist and anti-realist positions which claim that we misconceive the nature of rationality, and thereby commit ourselves to a metaphysical view that draws an impenetrable barrier between ourselves and the world. In this way we let in the sceptic, but, we are told, the error is in the view, not the impenetrability of the barrier. If instead we ground rationality in the norms of cogency we will avoid sceptical alienation, and the degree of universal applicability for the norms of cogency is all the universality we need.

In this light we may feel that we share some common ground with a Sophistical project, and so think that to resolve the threat from Sophism is in part to offer something the Sophist would accept, or indeed, that he might offer something that the Rationalist would accept. However, more radical Sophistical thoughts arise as we weaken the account of cogency, through shades of relativism towards the pure nihilism of cogency as just whatever actually works.

Given the nature of the obstacles here I think we can see why resolving the dispute between Sophists and Rationalists is not a swift or easy matter. For Rationalists I think there is a danger of being too quickly content with apparent refutations of Sophism, too quickly content because of the failure to distinguish nihilistic Sophism from positions that have rather more going for

them. The latter arise from a suspicion that Rationalism is based in inflated metaphysical commitments that we would be better off without, and that we could be without if we reconstrued rationality in pragmatic terms, terms that base the norms in whatever usefulness thought and talk can have.

For Sophists the danger is to slide around between deflationary pragmatic Sophism and nihilistic Sophism and to fail to put in the work necessary for pragmatic Sophism to pose a serious challenge to Rationalism. The bare assertion that standards of cogency constitute some kind of normativity does not get us very far. We shall need to hear rather more of the Sophist's construal of rationality under those standards — a task that is theirs rather than mine.

Two Sophists

What I hope to do in the rest of the paper drive is to drive a wedge between the pragmatic and the nihilistic ends of the spectrum of Sophistical positions. I shall do this by first exhibiting a rhetorical manoeuvre[5] used by two Sophists that obscures the distinction, and then offering an argument against nihilistic Sophism that even nihilistic Sophists should find persuasive.

I shall call the rhetorical manoeuvre of interest the Sophist's Two-Step, which goes like this: First step, the metaphilosophical claim is made that philosophy cannot properly be done except negatively: that to occupy a position is already to be mistaken. I am going to refer to this position as the No-Position Position. Second step, the existence of universal norms of rationality, norms that they bind us all, is denied. If there are any such things as the norms of rationality, they are arbitrary constructions, and among those ways in which they can be constructed there are none that are more 'truthful' or 'correct' than others (note the scare quotes). The upshot of this pair is that the Sophist can *use* normative notions of rationality while evading accountability to rational standards. By the substitution of vague terminology in place of standard rational terminology, for example, the use of 'valid' instead of 'true', by enclosing rational terminology in scare quotes whenever it is used, by ironic use of Rationalist norms, the Sophist leaves us guessing at his commitments in the theory of rationality, commitments which the No-Position Position allow him to keep hidden.

---

[5] By a rhetorical manoeuvre I mean a way of setting up or speaking in favour of a doctrine. This term is intended to be broadly neutral. I don't intend to damn a manoeuvre by calling it rhetorical. Whether a rhetorical manoeuvre aims to serve truth seeking or some other goal such as cogency is not settled simply in virtue of it being a way of setting up or speaking in favour of a doctrine. This section draws on some of the material in my earlier paper: Shackel 2005.

Neither of these claims need be stated plainly. Rather, they can be appealed to by insinuation whenever someone, such as myself, attempts to refute the position. Since the position is never plainly occupied, it need never be plainly defended. For example, to Rorty "truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about" (Rorty 1982, xiii), so a demonstration that his position on truth is incoherent is ultimately irrelevant, because in such a case he can retreat to the No-Position Position. If, on the other hand, the No-Position Position is argued against, why, following where argument leads has already been shown to be optional by the denial of theories of universal rational norms, which are rather tools of oppression, structurings of power relations, and other such things from which it is good to be liberated.

The upshot of this manoeuvre is to advance some variety of Sophism whilst not making it especially clear which variety — indeed, without doing any of the serious philosophical work required at all — and whilst also making it very difficult for critics to discuss. Any attempt by a critic to characterise the position for the sake of analysis and discussion can be rejected as an attack on a straw man. What makes it a variety of Sophism is that all it leaves for the settlement of dispute is cogency. The Two-Step passes its own test, since as a matter of fact, people can be persuaded by it. What allows it to have a foot in pragmatism (if its utterer so wishes) is that it can be presented as a deflationary and anti-metaphysical move that takes us away from vain philosophical speculation and focuses our attention on practical import. What allows it to insinuate nihilistic Sophism is the implicit refusal to make any commitment to a stable content to the normative notions that are used.

Rorty is a master of the Sophist's Two-Step:

> Pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions anymore. When they suggest that we not ask questions about the nature of Truth and Goodness, they do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that "there is no such thing" as Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject.(Rorty 1982, xiv).

In declaring the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness he is intending to deny universal rational norms, and to deny them on pragmatic grounds. By insisting on changing the subject rather than offer new non-Platonic answers he asserts the No-Position Position. Let us just fill that out a little and see how he places a foot at each end of the Sophistical spectrum.

When rejecting what he calls technical realism, Rorty says that 'the prag-
matist. . . refuses to make a move in any of the games in which he is invited
to take part'(Rorty 1982, xxviii). The metaphor of moves in games stands
for argumentation bound by rational norms. Rather, 'the pragmatist hauls
out his bag of tried and true dialectical gambits' (Rorty 1982, xxviii). In the
context this amounts to a declaration that cogency is what counts, and hence
of his allegiance to Sophism. He lays down the Sophist's challenge:

> It is not a question about what the word 'true' means, nor about
> the requirements of an adequate philosophy of language, nor about
> whether the world "exists independently of our minds", nor about
> whether the intuitions of our culture are captured in the pragmatists'
> slogans. There is no way in which the issue between the pragmatist
> and his opponent can be tightened up and resolved according to cri-
> teria agreed to by both sides. This is one of those issues which puts
> everything up for grabs at once — where there is no point in trying
> to find agreement about "the data" or about what would count as
> deciding the question. (Rorty 1982, xliii).

That is to say, there is no neutral ground on which to meet.

It is clear that he has a foot firmly planted in the pragmatic end of Sophism.
He is an avowed pragmatist. He deploys the pragmatic thought that closes
the gap through which scepticism can seep in:

> The pragmatists has no notion of truth which would enable him to
> make sense of the claim that if we achieved everything we ever hope
> to achieve by making assertions we might still be making false as-
> sertions. (Rorty 1982, xiv)

He denies universal rational norms and offers in their place usefulness:

> criteria [for resolving disputes] as the pragmatist sees them: tempo-
> rary resting places constructed for specific utilitarian ends. On the
> pragmatist account, a criterion. . . is a criterion because some partic-
> ular social practice needs to block the road of inquiry. (Rorty 1982,
> xli)

But Rorty is not going to offer any stable content for such criteria

> The pragmatists. . . will not succumb to the temptation to fill the
> blank in S is true if and only if S is assertible — with "at the end

of inquiry" or "by standards of our culture" or with anything else.
(Rorty 1982, xxv)

The effect of this brief expression of an element of the No-Position Position (it's abjuring positive philosophy) is to plant a second foot firmly in nihilistic Sophism.

Although Rorty makes use of the No-Position Position, he makes clear that this is merely a way station, since he thinks we should be leaving philosophy behind altogether and moving on to a

> Post philosophical culture...[something] much like what is sometimes called "culture criticism" ...a term which has come to name the literary-historical-anthropological-political merry go round (Rorty 1982, xl)

The upshot of being persuaded by Rorty's Two-Step is to leave us almost anywhere between pragmatic and nihilistic Sophism.

We now turn to a subtle example of the Sophist's Two-Step from Bloor. Bloor proposes that the sociology of knowledge should be conducted by the methodology of his Strong Programme, a programme aimed at giving explanations of how beliefs come to be believed or endorsed. Bloor enumerates some principles (1991, 7) to which the Strong Programme is committed. The third principle states that the same types of causes should be used to explain true and false beliefs, and this is referred to as "the symmetry requirement." Well, there is a certain amount of wriggle room in the use of the word *type* here, but I think the principle has a clear implication: the truth value of a belief is not relevant to explaining why it is believed.

Bloor asserts that there are only two positions that can be taken about reason: you can be a naturalist like him or a Rationalist like Worrall (1990) and Geach. Bloor denies that there is any position between these two:

> Composite positions are incoherent ...[by] making reason both a part of nature and also not a part of nature. If they don't put it outside nature they lose their grip on its privileged and normative character, but if they do, they deny its natural status. They can't have it both ways. (1991, 178)

He remarks that "clear headed Rationalists know what is at stake ...[they] must suppose that we can intuit evidential relations and some logical truths" (1991, 178). Rationalists must appeal to an "abstract, non-physical realm [existing] over and above the flux of biological and cultural change" (1991, 178) if they are to explain and justify the normative force of reasons for

belief. But such Rationalists are always embarrassed by the problem of explaining how we can get a grip on the abstract so we can get a grip on the norms. For Bloor, then, the rationality of belief can have no role in the explanation of its acquisition. The symmetry requirement encapsulates this by virtue of stopping "the intrusion of a non-naturalistic notion of reason into the causal story" (1991, 177).

Now it can't be denied that Bloor is alluding to a deep problem about the nature of normativity. I have some sympathy with the challenge that he is posing here. Indeed, we might think that he is harking back to Hume's attempt at a thorough-going naturalism about human nature, and is entitled to draw on that philosophical tradition in developing his own position about normativity.

On the whole it is a problem more discussed in metaethics, but in fact the problem is quite general and the positions within metaethics generalise to metanormativity without difficulty. Bloor seems here to be proposing that Rationalists are and can only be non-naturalists. If this were the case, quite how natural rational agents might be bound by the non-natural rational requirements is a real philosophical problem.[6] But merely *that* it is a problem does not rule out the possibility. However, even if they can be so bound, Bloor probably thinks that being so bound can have no place in the empirical explanation of their beliefs. I think that is moving too fast, but it is a tricky issue and I'm not going to try to tease it out here. All this being said, we should also remember that metaethical naturalism, in both reductive and non-reductive versions, is a well established contender, and hence by generalisation so is metanormative naturalism. Bloor ignores such a possibility.

As we shall see, were Bloor to adopt explicitly an anti-Rationalist position he would undermine our grip on why we should listen to anything he has to say. So for this reason, having feinted at the Rationalists, he must himself adopt the No-Position Position about rationality. The philosophy of rationality can only be done negatively. The positive program is to be done within natural science and Bloor is claiming that his Strong Programme represents (the proper!?) application of natural science to knowledge.

> The symmetry requirement . . . is not designed to exclude an appropriately naturalistic construal of reason, whether this be psychological or sociological. Brown (1989), for example, is typical in mistaking the sociologist's rejection of a non-naturalistic notion of reason as a rejection of reasoning as such. (1991, 177)

[6] One which I have attempted elsewhere to answer in terms that do not depend on, but are compatible with, non-naturalism about normativity (see Shackel 2004). These kinds of problems are what have led many naturalists to metaethical subjectivism or expressivism, and led Mackie (1977) to his error theory in metaethics.

NICHOLAS SHACKEL

With a significant amount of philosophical work, such a position could be developed into metanormative naturalism (the possibility he ignores).[7] But the upshot of that work will not leave the symmetry principle intact and hence Bloor cannot afford to get into such a positive philosophical programme. Left as it stands, the Strong Programme is a kind of Sophism, and this is evident once we ask what position does Bloor have on what ought to be believed. He might be a Rationalist sceptic of a certain kind. He might hold that we ought to believe in accordance with the evidence; nevertheless, since by his symmetry principle the rationality of belief is irrelevant to our having a belief, so our beliefs cannot be sensitive to normative requirements. I don't think this is his position because, as we just saw, he wants to reconstrue reason naturalistically. Furthermore, if he accepts that ought implies can then this position is ruled out. Reconstruing reason naturalistically in terms of psychology and sociology therefore amounts to a commitment to reason as cogency. Without some rather clever moves, it will be actual cogency, and this amounts to having a foot firmly placed in nihilistic Sophism. Being thus committed to cogency, Bloor is implicitly denying universal norms of rationality.

Bloor evidently thinks we ought to believe that the Strong Programme is the right method. He thinks we ought to accept it because it is what is required to find out the truth about belief acquisition given the truth about human belief. That sounds fine. He thinks we ought to believe it to be the right method for the reasons he is offering. The trouble is, the truth about human belief is supposed to be that truth is irrelevant to explaining how it is that we believe what we believe. So by his own lights, that there might be reasons for accepting the Strong Programme cannot be part of an explanation of our accepting it and so cannot be why we might accept it. Reasons, qua reasons, are not what brings us to belief. Why then does he adduce reasons *as reasons*? Why reason with us at all? Why append an afterword to the second edition of his book in which at some length he takes on and rebuts the arguments of his critics?

For brevity let us talk of the set, S, of considerations Bloor adduces and the doctrine, D, he wishes to induce. First of all, we can recognize from the content of S that what we would accept to be rationally relevant considerations are what he must be taking to be causally efficacious. Suppose for the sake of argument that S constitutes reasons for believing D. That, of itself, and in the light of the body of empirical evidence about human irrationality, would not lead us to think that the uttering of those reasons would be reliably causally efficacious in bringing about the desired belief. So it cannot be

---

[7] Indeed, in metaethics this programme has recently become very vigorous, e.g. Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007. Also see Joyce 2001 for pressures towards moral scepticism.

that he takes what he is doing to be in any very simple sense causally efficacious in bringing about belief in D. More importantly, if he once allows that we can appreciate the normative relation, or that appreciation of the normative relation can effect the belief in D, then he has given up his symmetry requirement. For now the normative relations have causal power.

It must then be that Bloor takes S to be reasons to believe in D, where reasons to believe are yet causes of belief, only their causally efficacy is obscure and indirect. But for him to take his utterances in this way is difficult to understand in the light of his version of naturalism. He is saying that S are reasons for D, that the reason relation is an obscure and intermittent causal relation, which nevertheless we can appreciate as holding as a causal relation (but not a normative relation). But how can we appreciate it as holding? By his lights all we would have are observations of people believing various doctrines in the light of various sets of considerations, without there being evident relations holding between the sets of considerations and the doctrines. The regularity exists at the normative level, but we can't appreciate that.

But without some accessible notion of normative connections between beliefs, this seems quite mysterious. In the absence of such a notion how could we ever appreciate any relation whatsoever holding between S and D when any such relation cannot manifest itself other than in a complicated and inconsistent causal manner? If there is nothing that makes it correct or incorrect that S is a reason for believing D, but merely that S variously brings about or does not bring about the belief that D, how can Bloor maintain that *he* grasps a relation holding between S and D? He can't just retreat to the claim that for him they do bring about the belief that D but they may not for us, since that is to renounce his attitude toward them. For clearly he takes it that some sets of considerations for believing in D are correct and others are not correct (else why bother to correct misapprehensions of the Strong Programme?). Within the Strong Programme there is no suitable notion of correctness to apply here. Bloor's own theory cannot account for his attitude toward it.

Bloor feints at normative theories of rationality but eschews explicit rejection of rationality, adopting a No-Position Position instead. Thereby he seems to be able to have it both ways: he's not explicitly saying that there is no such thing as reasons, only that the truth or falsity of a belief is not part of the explanation for belief in it; he thinks we ought to agree with him, argues in his own cause, offers refutations of his opponents, but not because coming to agree with him could be explained in terms of the rationality of what he says, for reasons as such cannot have such a causal effect.

I think his only way out of this consistent with hanging on to the symmetry principle is to offer a pragmatist explanation of the connection between S

and D and to claim that being a pragmatic relation it is a natural relation which can cause us to appreciate its holding by causing us to believe in it.

So I think I have illustrated that both Rorty and Bloor make use of the Sophist's Two-Step to advance their positions, and that having done so both end up a foot planted firmly in each end of the spectrum from pragmatic to nihilistic Sophism. With Bloor I think we perhaps have things the other way round from Rorty. For Rorty, the official position is pragmatic Sophism but examination of his way of negation show him moving rapidly towards nihilistic Sophism. Bloor, on the other hand, seems to have nihilistic Sophism as his official position, but examining what he actually does in his writing is most charitably understood as based in some kind of pragmatic Sophism.

Argument against Nihilistic Sophism

I hope now to undermine the nihilistic end of the spectrum of Sophism. In erasing the distinction between what ought to work, between what you ought to be persuaded by, and what does work, what does persuade, nihilistic Sophism erases all distinction between causes and reasons. Now I don't mean here to deny that reasons might be causes, although there is view which holds causal and rational explanation to be incommensurable. But if reasons are causes they are a special class of causes.

My objection to the nihilistic Sophist is this. The loss of special distinction is a disastrous doctrine, since it erases the distinction between understanding and not understanding. But to think about something is to have some understanding of it. To have some understanding of something is to have certain beliefs and to appreciate the rational relations in which those beliefs stand to actual and potential reasons. To appreciate those reasons as having a rational status is to appreciate a special distinction between causes and reasons. Or, to put it in a vocabulary more to the Sophist's liking, if cogency is all it is something and so to understand is to appreciate some relations of cogency to actual and potential considerations of cogency, and so to make some special distinction within such considerations. If there is no such distinction there is no difference between understanding and not understanding. If there is no such difference there is no such thing as thinking about something. So the nihilistic Sophist is committed to denying thought, indeed, denying the very possibility of thought.

The nihilistic Sophist must therefore say that my experiences as of thinking are illusions. Now whilst it might be possible to have an illusion about my thoughts, that is, to take my thought as having a different content from the content it has, in so taking it I have a thought with some content or other. So it is not possible to have an illusion of thinking without actually having a thought.

At the very least, the nihilistic Sophist is involved in a kind of pragmatic contradiction, since to deny thought is to deny the existence of content bearing entities, but to deny something is to use a content bearing entity as such. An actual contradiction does not seem far away. The nihilistic Sophist might say that the content bearing entity used is a sentence but he is only committed to denying the existence of mental entities that bear content, and so the looming contradiction depends on a premiss he can deny, the premiss that linguistic content is dependent on the intentionality of thought. Certainly, with that premiss the contradiction is quickly to hand. But I don't think the premiss is necessary for a contradiction. The intentionality of thought could depend on language and still denying thought will lead to a contradiction. The existence of language implies the possibility of thought as content bearing mental activity in virtue of the relation that that mental activity bears to the pattern of language use. Hence the linguistic denial of the possibility of thought implies the possibility of thought, and we have our contradiction.

To speak of contradiction as refuting does not quite get us over the hurdle articulated earlier, the danger of smug chauvinism when it is the very rational norms, including the prohibition on contradiction, that are under question. But I think there is a deeper incoherence here, an incoherence that we can articulate as a contradiction, yes, but that is in fact more direct. This is partly why I expressed the argument above in terms of understanding. The incoherence both falls foul of the Sophist's general standard and undermines that standard. For what he must say to us is that everything he says, indeed, everything, is literally incomprehensible, just because there is no such thing as understanding. Now, first of all, that lacks any cogency whatsoever. Secondly, we can only be persuaded by what we understand, and hence cogency presupposes understanding, so if there is no such thing as understanding there is no such thing as cogency. If there is no such thing as cogency then there is no such thing as the Sophist's standards of enquiry and hence no such thing as Sophism.

So I think there are on the one hand Sophist's who advance a deflationary criticism of Rationalist pretension, perhaps based in well known pragmatist lines of thought, and on the other hand, nihilist Sophists. The former might justifiably, on too quick a dismissal, accuse us of a chauvinistic Rationalism; we may have something to learn from them and we might hope to persuade them our way. The latter, however, we can reject whilst having a good reply to the accusation of being merely chauvinist Rationalists.

Conclusion

In an earlier paper (Shackel 2005) I identified some rhetorical manoeuvres typical of the way in which postmodernists proselytise, intending by the

analysis of those particular manoeuvres to expose some intellectual crimes of which postmodernists are typically guilty. Those manoeuvres are, in my opinion, *merely* rhetorical. They are neither well grounded nor offer good reason, but merely *sound* good, and flatter in order better to deceive.

When rhetorical manoeuvres are made in aid of Sophism it is not so simple to dismiss them as merely rhetorical. By speaking for Sophism the proponents have changed the stakes. For the merely rhetorical to be a kind of intellectual crime requires the distinction between the standards of enquiry and persuasion to be warranted — the very warrant rejected by the Sophist. I think I have shown that the rhetorical manoeuvres of Rorty and Bloor are in a certain way persuasively unstable. I have shown that they end up with a foot in each of pragmatic and nihilistic Sophism and by that method insinuate nihilistic Sophism under the guise of pragmatism. Finally, I have sought to drive a wedge between pragmatic Sophism and nihilistic Sophism by showing that Sophists cannot cogently adhere to nihilistic Sophism.

Department of Philosophy
University of Cardiff
Cardiff CF10 3EU
E-mail: shackeln@cardiff.ac.uk

Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Oxford
Oxford OX1 1PT
United Kingdom

REFERENCES

Bloor, D. 1991. *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dummett, M.A.E. 1973. The Justification of Deduction. In *Truth and Other Enigmas*. London: Duckworth.

Haack, S. 1976. The Justification of Deduction. *Mind*, 85 (337), pp. 112–19. Online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/2253263.

Hanna, R. 2006. *Rationality and Logic*. London: MIT Press.

Joyce, R. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Online at http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/cam024 /2001025740.html.

Mackie, J.L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin.

Nichols, S. 2004. *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgement*. New York: Oxford University Press. Online at http://

`www.oxfordscholarship.com / oso / public / content /philosophy/9780195169348/toc.html`.

Prinz, J.J. 2007. *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rorty, R. 1982. *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shackel, N. 2004. *On the Obligation to Be Rational*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Nottingham.

Shackel, N. 2005. The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology. *Metaphilosophy*, 36 (3), pp. 295–320.

Worrall, J. 1990. Rationality, Sociology and the Symmetry Thesis. *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 4 (3), pp. 305–19.

Wright, C. 1992. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.