

## The Sophistic Effect

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Peter Carravetta, *The Elusive Hermes: Method Discourse Interpreting*, Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2012, 504 p.

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Peter Carravetta's *The Elusive Hermes* is an immensely erudite book. It covers over 2500 years of the history of thinking about language, method, theory and the task of interpretation. While the book has substantive and perspicacious analyses of figures such as Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Peirce, and Buchler, it is not a history of the philosophy of language per se. *The Elusive Hermes* is a systematic articulation of a philosophical position that links three key propositions. First, that there is no method without a theory, and that theory is proleptic of the fashioning of a method. In other words, method is never without presuppositions. Second, that discourse, and more precisely, the rhetorical enactment of all communication, is the ground on which method and theory interpenetrate and contaminate each other. Carravetta puts it thusly: "We will argue, and abundantly demonstrate, that *method and rhetoric are the recto and the verso* of the same discursive process." (8) Third, that interpretation requires four loci, or cardinal points, to "guarantee" its validity or efficacy. These frames or loci are: the interpreter, the work or text, the interpretation, and society, or the community of interpretation, to use Josiah Royce's term. These three interrelated philosophical propositions are carefully and "abundantly demonstrated" through the three sections that make up the book. Part one presents the

architecture of Carravetta's overall proposal. Part two provides us with a history of the debates about method beginning with the different interpretations about the origins of rational thought and its separation from myth, taking us from the sophists, Plato and Aristotle through Bacon, Galilei, Descartes, then Hegel and Husserl. Part three of the book culminates with careful reconstructions of the theories of interpretation and discourse in Gadamer, Perelman and Ricoeur. It must be noted that this massive volume is one of a tetralogy, that is to say, that if one thinks something has been left out, it is very likely that it is because it is being or will be covered in the other three volumes, of which two are already finished, and the fourth is under preparation. In addition to the three pivotal theses Carravetta sets out to prove or make plausible, there is a major claim that orients the entire text, and perhaps his entire thinking, and that is that "the sophists should be considered full-fledged philosophers of language and interpretation" (xiv). Carravetta is interested in rehabilitating the much maligned sophists. In fact, he sees them as the true founding fathers of philosophy.

Given that this is a prodigiously rich book, I will have to do what a cautious philosopher would do, and that is take a corner or two of Carravetta's book and see if we can get into a fruitful dialogue. The one corner I would pick has to do with Carravetta's three key philosophical theses and the questions that they raise about the elucidation of the normative grounds of all discourse. The second corner of Carravetta's work that I would like to toil has to do with his claim about the sophists, and in particular, his reading of Protagoras's famous sentence that "Man is the measure of all that is and of all that is not that it is not."

At first blush, Carravetta's central theses would seem to lead us into the cul-de-sac of second order historicism, and with it, into the bottomless pit of relativism. If it is the case that all we have is discourse, and discourse as such cannot be dissociated from its rhetorical enactment, and theory and method are but two sides of discourse, and this discourse is but the expression of a society or culture's historical experience, then it would seem we have entered the prison house of

language, in which there are neither windows nor doors to other houses. Given that Carravetta in fact rejects radical nihilism and insidious relativisms, then it cannot be that he would like his work to be read in this way. Let us disaggregate the propositions and what they may or may not entail. One of the basic distinctions between the two cultures, to use C.P. Snow's term, is that the one has a method and the other does not, or that one has a method that is scientific, while the other has a variety of techniques of interpretation that cannot be reduced to a calculable, legible, iterable, neutral, and purely formal system of investigation. This last list of adjectives seems to trace the contours of what method is taken to be. Implicit in this view of method is that it is prior to theory. A method is the foundation on which a theory can be erected. Carravetta challenges this view by noting that a method presupposes a certain view of what is to be analyzed and how it can be analyzed. No method is presuppositionless. Method is neither the death of prejudice, nor the neutralization of preunderstanding. Method is not and cannot be the *carte blanche* of conceptual naïveté.

As Carravetta show, every method is a way to transfer something, it is a bridge, it is a raft, it is a relay between a conception and its possible consequences. An analogy may help illustrate the point that we are trying to make. We draw up maps in order to survey a territory, give an account of its qualities and characteristics. They let us take a territory at one glance. Maps are omnivorous. Maps, however, are tools. They are *dispositifs* that have efficacy. They have consequences. How we map a certain territory prejudices how we see that territory, and how we are related to that territory. Maps position us in specific locations. Yet, we draw maps with pre-established aims. A map is also the performance of a certain view or perspective. Maps are worldviews dissimulated in the language of similitude. We can say then that method is to theory as maps are to territory; or in other words, there is no method that is not also the enactment of a theory. Methods are worldviews dissimulated in the language of neutrality, iterability, calculability and legibility. Here Carravetta is not far from Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and our Robert Crease.

If the specter of relativism and second order historicism does not arise from that thesis, then where does it reveal itself? I think it does with Carravetta's second thesis: namely that it is in discourse that method and theory contaminate each other. For Carravetta all communication is discourse. We could say that for him, there is no information that is self-communicating. Information requires communication and communication is always already a discourse. All discourse, however, is always a rhetorical drama. All communication is the staging of a rhetorical performance. Let me appeal to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics to illustrate what I think Carravetta is claiming. For Peirce all communication is semiosis, that is the process of assigning to certain entities certain signifying functions. Semiosis is the process of marking in order to signify, and we signify in order to convey something. Semiosis, then, is the process of marking in order to signify something about another something to someone. Peirce thought that in this process we have basically indexes, icons, and symbols, where the first is the most elemental mark and the latter the most dense and implicated mark. Peirce also made the point that even indexes, that which we generally assume to be the most elemental and thus the least symbolically suspect, presuppose reference to symbols or the whole thick webs of meaning. Indeed, take a dot on a black board. The dot could mark a "here" or a "now." It could be a dot in a series of dots that turns out to be the trajectory of a projectile following a Galilean parabolic fall. Or let us take Wittgenstein's example, culled from Augustine. I place in front of you two apples, one green, and one red. I say two. You are just learning English. What have you learned? The number two? How do you know that "two" refers to "2;" Or that I did not mean that apples are called "two;" That the green is "two;" That red is "two;" Or that "two" is green or red? Or that "two" means: "here have something to eat, it is late and you must be hungry?" I am here getting carried away with my Lemony Snicket' philosophy of language. You get Peirce's point: all semiosis culminates in hermeneutics. I think that it is on these Wittgenstenian and Peircean grounds that Carravetta comes to the conclusion that we are always in the grip of discourse as rhetoric. Rhetoric,

however, is more than the profligacy of semiosis. Rhetoric is the élan of language. It is its zeal, abundance, and joy. Without rhetoric we would all talk either like automated phone systems or Data in Star Trek. But we don't. We are all Shakespeares, EE Cummings, Frosts, and Ginsburgs in our little parcel of language, the one we share with many others poets and virtuosos of language.

I think we can agree with Carravetta on the importance of rhetoric for language. With him, I would add that if "poetry is the utopia of language", to quote that wonderful line of Umberto Eco, rhetoric is its chalice, the one from which we all imbibe in the newness that language makes possible. Languages, as French structuralists have taught us to see, have this elasticity and possibility for malleability against the background of rules that make possible violations and innovations. There is the famous distinction between *Langue* and *Parole*, language and speech. The rules of the language do not have to be unchanging, but they cannot change radically from speaker to speaker, generation to generation. Additionally, even, if we do not go along with Chomsky, and pretend that all languages share in a common and deep grammar, we can recognize the following: Every language establishes some formal relations that have normative dimensions. Let me use Habermas' theory of communicative action to illustrate. For Habermas all speaking is a doing, and doing is entangled with speaking. Discourse is made up of speech acts. Every speech act puts in relationship three worlds: my subjective world, the social world in which I speak, and the objective world about which I make claims when I speak. Let us take a speech act: "It is now raining outside." I am making an objective claim about the state of the world outside, which I myself believe, and I am making it to you. There are three validity claims embedded in this claim. Habermas calls them: truth, truthfulness and rightness. In other words, no matter how flamboyant, irreverent, playful or poetic I become with my language, I am still beholden to at least these validity claims. I cannot speak and not be in the grip of the normative force of language. To speak does presuppose the poesis of rhetoric, but also the binding force of the claims that I raise with every speech act.

So, language may be a 'prison house' of meaning, but it is also the gateway to the realm of the normative. I think that Carravetta has allowed the normativity of language to be swallowed with the ambrosia of its natality.

Let me now turn to the second corner of Carravetta's book that I want to engage. As I noted, it has to do with his claim that we need to rehabilitate the sophists from the calumny and vitriol that has been piled on them by most philosophers since Plato. I totally agree with Carravetta, but perhaps for different reasons. Therefore, before I offer a supplemental reading of Protagora's famous claim, let me briefly say something about the sophists. Sophist, in Greek, means skilled, expert, wise, or qualified in a certain field. The sophists were itinerant teachers, who went from city to city teaching the art of rhetoric. In fact, in as much as they sought to develop the rules for eloquent and effective speaking, they were the first to develop logic as a dimension of language. They devised rhetorical techniques, and in the process, discovered fallacies and crooked thinking. The sophists were rationalists insofar as what could be claimed and said could be done so in accordance with certain rules. The sophists develop all the rhetorical tools and devices that Socrates uses to disarm his opponents in the Platonic dialogues. In fact, there would be no Platonic dialogues without the art of rhetoric that Sophists invented. The Sophists, additionally, were proto-cosmopolitans. As travelling teachers, they could not be provincial. They introduced the distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, that is, the distinction between a type of lawfulness that is by nature, and lawfulness by convention. They recognized and never ceased to point out that different *Politeia* had their own laws, which gave expression to their conventions. But, they also recognized that there was a level of lawfulness above the contingency and relativity of human laws. It is this distinction between *phusis* and *nomos* that the Stoics will take up in order to develop their conception of natural law. Finally, and most importantly, the Sophists were secularists. In the same way that they pointed out the variety and contingency of laws, they observed and challenged the role of the gods in public life. When Aristophanes pokes fun at Socrates in his play the

*Clouds*, what he is satirizing are the Sophists as both cosmopolitan and secularist teachers.

Still, I want to foreground something unique about the Sophists. They were itinerant teachers who made their living by teaching a public skill. Plato makes much of the fact that sophists had to earn their living, while Socrates refused payment for his teaching. So, before we have the Academy and the Lyceum, we had the office of the paid teacher. This is extremely important for the Sophists signal a functional differentiation within society. With them emerges the office of the teacher. The sophist is neither a priest, nor someone who works for the King, or the powerful. The sophist is at the service of the *Polis*. His work is the work of the *Polis*, the work of democratic eloquence and democratic opinion formation. In contrast to Plato, who wanted to bring the philosopher from the public agora into the private chambers of the King, the sophists were radical democrats. That they were also secularists, makes them even more radical, as they wanted the *Polis* to be only supported by the power of rational deliberation and democratic persuasion. I would make the radical claim that sophists invented the *Political* as such. It is with them, at the very least, that the entwining of philosophy and politics begins.

Let me close by quickly glossing Protagoras's famous *Homo-Mensura-Satz*, as it is known in German, with the help of Ernst Bloch. Like Bloch, Carravetta notes that the term ἀνθρώπος could be translated as individual men, man in the sense of the genus, or species. If we take the word *anthropos* as individual, then we give a subjectivistic and relativistic meaning to the sentence. If we take it to refer to humanity, then, we are in fact offering a formulation that as Bloch notes, is close to what we find in the young Marx, for instance in the text of the *Introduction to the Critic of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where he claims "Radical is to grasp things by their roots. The root for Man (*Mensch*) is but Man himself." By this Marx meant that to radically grasp human existence required that we understand the totality of social relations that make up "man." So, a third reading of Protagoras sentence would say something like, "The measure of all that is that it is and that it is not that it is not is the ensemble of all social relations." We

could say that the social totality is the measure of all that is. Or, perhaps, we could say with Hegel, that the “Das Wahre is das Ganze [The True is the whole].” But, Bloch goes on to note that there is a third motive or possible interpretation of this sentence, one that is inchoate in Protagoras’s entire philosophy. This interpretation reads: Society determines man or humanity in general. In other words, individuals are products of socialization and humanity is the sum total of all social determinations. Bloch then claims audaciously “With Protagora’s sentence is born natural law.” Behind this interpretation stand the already mentioned distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, law and convention. By making this distinction, and collating it with the task of accomplishing humanity, the sophists gave us a revolutionary tool: natural law (Bloch 1985, 108).

I think Bloch’s reading of Protagoras’s famous sentence can supplement Carravetta’s very well, and offer more evidence for why his call for the re-evaluation of the sophists should be a task that we should take up with all due seriousness and diligence. As can be seen from this sober and circumscribed engagement, Carravetta’s text is rich and worthy of serious consideration and study.

## REFERENCES

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