

Some of my best friends are Neosophists: A Response to Scott Consigny

The worst fate in academia is to have one's work ignored, so I am grateful for Scott Consigny's (hereafter SC) attention. I admire SC's scholarship a great deal, so it pains me that I must devote this reply to grumping and groaning. SC has misunderstood me, I shall maintain, and the misunderstanding *matters* for our collective understanding of antifoundationalism and the genre of writing known as history. In this reply I begin with claims that are intended to challenge SC's reading of my work: First, I am an antifoundationalist. Second, I do not "oppose" neosophistic scholarship. Third, SC's reading of my work is overly reductionist. Then, in conclusion, I want to suggest that SC's account of antifoundationalism is problematic and that a more "pragmatic" version of antifoundationalism would be more consistent with SC's presuppositions and politically more useful.¹

I do not understand why SC believes I am a foundationalist, since I have identified repeatedly my theoretical preferences for antifoundationalist social constructionism. SC simply proclaims, *ex cathedra*, that Poulakos, Crowley, Vitanza, Welch, and Jarratt are antifoundationalists, and Havelock, Kerferd, de Romilly, Cole, and I are foundationalists. Though I would be honored to be counted as part of either group, I do not understand why I am in the group that is supposed to move to the back of the bus. Why are these scholars (all of whom have published in classics journals) to be branded "foundationalist"? Just because they do history and work with original Greek texts? And, even if these scholars are (gasp!) foundationalists, precisely how does that make their work any less valuable?

I honestly do not know if Kerferd, de Romilly, or Cole (Havelock is dead) would agree with the "foundationalist" label, but in my case I flatly deny the charge (though I have been called worse!). *SC goes out of his way to put words in my mouth*. I have never described my work as "objective" or "accurate," "immune from the vagaries of time and chance," or as "disinterested and unbiased." SC at one point says "Schiappa claims that he bases his reading on uninterpreted 'facts' . . ." Not only have I never said any such thing, I explicitly acknowledge that "all facts are theory-bound" ("History" 307) and I stipulate that "facts" are "*temporarily reified interpretations* that are socially constructed and subject to deconstruction" ("Sophistic" 12). Furthermore, contrary to SC, I have never described a presupposition as a "foundation"; indeed, in *Protagoras and Logos*, I end my "methods" chapter by noting that all interpretation is

limited by the historicity of the interpreter. I offer an explication of my own hermeneutic presuppositions there so that readers may assess those beliefs for themselves.

I agree with most of SC's description of antifoundationalism in the first portion of his essay and share his affinity for Fish and Rorty. I agree that "rationality" is "whatever a particular community commends as such" and that is why, in part, I am interested in how the sophists contributed to changing what *counted* as rational in their own time. With regard to my own work and the claims I have advanced about the sophists, I agree that "every interpretation is a provisional fabrication whose validity depends solely on its ability to elicit" agreement. If SC believes that my claims should be less persuasive because they are somehow contaminated with the disease of foundationalism, *then* I would argue he is wrong.

My antirealist beliefs and commitment to antifoundationalist social-constructionism have been explicated in print as early as 1985 ("Dissociation") and recently in *CCC* in 1992 ("Counterstatement") and *JAC* in 1993 ("Burkean Tropes"). Given space limitations, I simply note that I have, in at least three different publications, articulated my antifoundationalist commitments and explained why I am convinced that such beliefs do not force us to give up on the genre of writing known as "history" ("History" 307-09; "Sophistic" 10-13; "Isocrates"). I devoted a significant portion of an essay (ignored by SC) in this journal, "Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?" explicating why "the interpretive, narrative, and rhetorical aspects of doing history do not require a cessation of efforts to evaluate competing historical accounts" (13). Recognizing that "facts" are only temporarily reified interpretations that are socially constructed and historically contingent does not make them useless in argument. This is a crucial point, for SC implies that he cannot argue that I am "wrong" but only point to the rhetoricity of my writing. In sum, when SC claims that I refuse "to acknowledge the contingency and partiality" of my own "assumptions, strategies, and interpretations," I must respond: *Wrong*.

Second, SC claims that I "oppose" neosophistic scholarship and that I seek to "overturn" all neosophistic readings. *Wrong again*. I coined the term *neosophistic* not to trash anyone but to make a distinction between the methods and purposes of two categories of literature ("Neo-Sophistic"). My point in 1990 was that there is a difference between essays that make claims about how the discourse communities of fifth- and fourth-century BCE Greece interpreted and understood the texts of the sophists (historical reconstruction) and essays that seek to draw upon sophists' texts in order to inform contemporary theoretical or pedagogical interests (contemporary appropriation). Because I believe that the notion of a monolithic "sophistic rhetoric" in ancient Greece is problematic *as history*, I describe certain contemporary appropriations as "neosophistic rhetoric" in order to highlight that "it is we who have formulated

the rhetoric" and that we are bracketing strict historical consideration of what "sophistic" rhetoric might or might not have been ("Sophistic" 15).

I have never "opposed" neosophistic theory and criticism. What I have on occasion opposed are specific claims advanced as "historical" that I believe are "wrong" if judged by various historically situated norms of the discourse community we share. For example, I argued that "several of Poulakos's works are praiseworthy as examples of neo-sophistic rhetorical criticism, [but] those same works require correction if viewed from the standpoint of historical reconstruction" ("Neo-Sophistic" 198). And I noted that Susan Jarratt's claim that "the sophists were all anchored in Athenian democracy" (98, emphasis added) must be set aside as history because some of the sophists simply weren't ("Sophistic" 9-10). Historical details aside, Jarratt's work is valuable because she self-reflexively recovers the bits and pieces of "the sophists" that can inform contemporary pedagogy productively. I like neosophists. Some of my best friends are neosophists. And, with qualifications, I consider myself neosophistic.

True, I have sometimes expressed doubts about the necessity of turning to the sophists. I think we have more to learn from bell hooks, Jacques Derrida, Catharine Mackinnon, or Michel Foucault than from my old buddies Gorgias and Protagoras. I refer readers to a portion of "Sophistic Rhetoric: Oasis or Mirage?" for the argument that we are, in certain respects, better served by letting dead Greeks lie and developing our own theories and pedagogy (13-15). Indeed, as SCs essay illustrates, a turn to the sophists often reproduces certain binaries (philosophy/rhetoric, rational/irrational) rather than deconstructing or replacing such dualisms. At other times my neosophistic friends have persuaded me of the value of recovering the sophists as a cultural counterweight to Plato and Aristotle, so I produced my own neosophistic account that describes Isocrates as a precursor to contemporary neopragmatism ("Isocrates"). Again, to sum up: I do not seek to "overturn" all neosophistic readings. I join their conversation, sometimes to agree, sometimes to disagree. That is what friends do.

My third claim is that SCs account is overly reductionistic. In his description of my account of the sophists, he divides the intellectual world into two broad categories by employing a set of rather tired old binaries: On one side is the irrational, mythical-poetic, antifoundationalist culture of the sophists that SC sums up with the term *Rhetoric*, on the other is the rationalistic, foundationalist, logocentric, scientific culture of Plato and Aristotle that SC sums up with the term *Philosophy*. SC attacks my reading because he believes I turn the sophists into Philosophers, and so he very selectively quotes words and phrases that smack of Philosophy. But the main point of my work has been to challenge this very binary. A quick example of SCs selectivity: He claims I say Gorgias's *On Not-Being* should be read as "legitimate" philosophy rather than

"mere rhetorical display." But I ask the reader to view the passage in question to see how our point was distorted:

We conclude that Gorgias's argument gains rhetorical and philosophical strength the more closely it is read as a response to Parmenides' texts. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to consider Gorgias's argument in either/or fashion as is typically the case—as mere rhetorical display as opposed to 'legitimate' philosophy. (Schiappa and Hoffman 156, emphasis added)

We stressed the "philosophical" aspects of the text in that essay because we were opposing reductive readings by certain philosophers. Throughout my work I have opposed reductionistic or dismissive readings of the sophists that treat them as unimportant to the history of ideas. And I have consistently challenged the appropriateness of the terms *Rhetoric* and *Philosophy*—when used as mutually exclusive categories—to "reduce" rich sophistic texts in either direction (*Rhetorikē*).

SC seizes upon those passages in my work that use certain words (like *rational* and *philosophical*) and argues that I want to turn Protagoras and Gorgias into Modern Rationalists. *Wrong still again*. But neither do I want to turn them into postmodernists. Instead, I am interested in studying how Protagoras and Gorgias changed their own culture. My work argues that they did so in ways that our dominant categories do not describe very well. Take, for example, the labels *philosophy* and *rhetoric*. Yes, we can describe the sophists as actors in the hackneyed play of "Philosophy vs. Rhetoric" and there are times in contemporary theorizing where invoking their spirit is useful. But, in addition, it is also interesting to note that there are important ways in which the sophists' texts defy the labels *philosophy* and *rhetoric*, *foundationalist* and *antifoundationalist*, and *rationalistic* and *mythic-poetic*.

Approaching the sophists "historically" means, to me, to approach their texts with sufficient openness that one might learn something new. In a recent, essay I argue that there is a parallel between approaching a historical text and an Other human being ("Isocrates" 39-41). In addition to valuing what we may have in common (that which we see as "sameness"), it is ethically imperative that we also seek and value that which we see initially as "strange" and "different." We learn more by trying to inhabit their world than by simply seizing on similarities and ignoring differences. What I find fascinating about the sophists' texts is that the more I value their differences, the more I learn about how they bridge, transcend, or otherwise avoid certain dualities that have plagued us since Plato.

My last point concerns the inference SC makes: If he is an antifoundationalist, then he cannot argue with my historical claims. I think this

is a problematic inference to say the least and ultimately a very disempowering move. I close, then by arguing that we should embrace a pragmatist version of antifoundationalism rather than a version that Rorty has called "silly relativism." I will explain the difference between the two in general, then apply the distinction to the study of historical interpretation in particular.

Different forms of foundationalism endorse certain modes of thought. Consider the thought pattern "X is really Y" (see Mourtelatos). If one believes that different things (including texts) have *essences*, for example, then one would argue that one can claim "X is really Y" only when one has figured out what the essence of X is. A foundationalist inspired by essentialism, then, can be identified in part by his/her insistence that they can confidently dig down to the "real essence" of a thing, person, or text in order to claim "X is really Y." Accordingly, if one were to argue that Protagoras is "really" a postmodernist or is "really" a positivist, then one would betray a foundationalist's impulse.

Antifoundationalism in general and anti-essentialism in particular call the propositional form "X is really Y" into question. Thus far SC and I would agree. Antifoundationalism is *in*; foundationalism is *out*, and with it goes declarations of the sort that *The Real Protagoras* (or whomever) can be reconstructed or *The Real Meaning* of any given text is discoverable. But here is the key: Where do we go from there?

Consider two alternatives. Rorty describes one version of antifoundationalism as "silly relativism"—the stance that "every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other" (*Consequences* 166). Some have read postmodern authors such as Nietzsche and Derrida as supporting such a stance. I believe that one can describe positions that claim or imply that "all interpretations are equally fictional" as an example of what Rorty rejects as "silly relativism."

Rorty explicitly rejects the idea that there can be no shared "criterion of choice" among critics (or historians) and adopts Fish's position that we can judge a "good interpretation for certain purposes" (*Objectivity* 89). In fact, it is from Rorty's work ("Historiography") that I originally developed my description of the different purposes associated with historical reconstruction and contemporary appropriation of the sophists' texts. Pragmatist antifoundationalists agree that all linguistic attributions of qualities (claims about what X "is") are human constructions rather than unbiased reports of objective reality, and thus agree with William James that things or texts have as many possible "essences" as we have interests or theories. Yet, being pragmatists, they maintain that for some purposes some constructions are more useful than others: Reading "X as Y for purpose Z" may be preferable to an alternative "reading" of "X as not-Y."

Steven Mailloux has described a "rhetorical hermeneutics" that rejects foundationalism but leaves room for historically situated argument over

competing interpretations: "Putting aside realist and idealist foundationalism . . . does not mean that just anything goes" (145). Furthermore, Mailloux points out that "referring to textual details during an argument is not the same as trying to construct a general realist theory of reading" (146). In short, one *can* make text-based arguments without collapsing into foundationalism as long as one acknowledges one's presuppositions and the historical contingency of any given interpretation.

In my opinion Nietzsche and Derrida fit the pragmatist description far better than the "silly relativism" category. Nietzsche, after all, actively sought to encourage acceptance of his preferred reading of the ancient Greek culture and of Christian values; he clearly did *not* feel that just any old interpretation would do (Nehamas). And Derrida notes that while there be no such thing as "the final, correct" *pure* interpretation, this does not level all interpretations as equal (144-46): Though even paraphrase is interpretation, he says, there are historically situated dominant "conventions" and "contracts" that inform judgments about better and worse readings. There is a good deal of "stability" (though "such stabilization is relative") about the shared language that "grant a minimum of intelligibility" to our readings of texts (144). Derrida refers to evidence concerning an author's intentions, what texts might have informed the writing/reading of the text under study, and what an historically situated audience may have gleaned from a particular text. Without such historical information, "one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or encouraging others to say, just anything at all, nor have I argued for indeterminacy as such" (144-45).

These passages position Derrida fairly close to Fish's notion of the reading of texts "authorized" in a particular discourse community. Derrida explicitly says that there is a "right track" and "better" and worse readings. He even says that some readings of Deconstruction are "false (that's right: false, not true) and feeble" and depend on "a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading" (146, parenthetical comments in the original). Rorty, Mailloux, Nietzsche, and Derrida all demonstrate that it is possible to be an antifoundationalist without treating all acts of interpretation as *merely* interpretations, and it is possible to maintain some notion of "history" as a genre of writing.

The preceding point is particularly relevant to the interpretation of historical texts such as my work on the sophists. SC's account of who is or is not a foundationalist tends to imply that History = Objectivism = Foundationalism. But he has made *no* argument whatsoever that leads to the conclusion that we must give up the genre of writing we call "history"—merely that we need to do so with the humility and irony appropriate to antifoundationalism. The charge of *anachronism* is irrelevant to certain forms of fiction, but it is considered a bad move in history writing *even* to antifoundationalist historians such as myself. *That is how we have agreed to*

play the game. Just as the concept of "dribbling" helps to define the social practice of basketball, avoidance of *anachronism* is a definitive move that helps us to recognize history as a genre of writing.

SC is right to point out that no act of translation can wholly escape that charge of anachronism; if I have given the impression otherwise, I was wrong. But again, this does not mean that all claims about the sophists' texts are equally anachronistic or equally valuable as historical propositions (consider the claim "the sophists were Lutherans" or "the sophists built the pyramids"). Though no translation-interpretation is perfect, that does not mean one cannot argue about the advantages and disadvantages about particular translations/interpretations offered for specific purposes (X as Y for purpose Z). One purpose may be historical, one might be theoretical, another might be pedagogical. The "same" reading "X as Y" might be assessed quite differently according to each purpose. Clearly SC does not believe that "anything goes" regarding claims about the sophists—otherwise his entire essay would be an exercise in futility.

Since SC obviously disagrees with some of my specific descriptions that clash with his beliefs about the sophists, I look forward to a future exchange in which we move away from metatheory and argue particulars. It is easier to challenge an alternative reading based on metatheory rather than get our hands dirty with textual and historical evidence, but that is what we need to do if our arguments are to avoid being superficial or overly general. Such an exchange of readings need not be "foundationalist" in orientation and can be done in a spirit of collegiality.

Such exchanges are important because *history* is important. An earlier critic of my work reasoned from the premise "all interpretations are partisan" to the conclusion that there is no point in arguing about history. And SC says that we cannot "break the bonds of the present" because all history is merely self-affirmation. Yikes! What a frightening picture. *Of course* we can "break the bonds of the present." We do it every day with every act of imagination that constructs an ever-changing future, and we do it every time we encounter an historical text with sufficient openness to learn something new. If SC does not believe we can learn something new from the sophists' texts, then why bother with such texts at all?

SC is correct that I offer claims about the specific ways in which Gorgias and Protagoras changed compositional practices and "advanced" theorizing and intellectual inquiry (what counts as rational) in the fifth century BCE. But should we ignore such activities because it runs afoul of efforts to portray the sophists as postmodernists? Should we simply ignore, for example, Protagoras and Prodicus's interest in "correct analysis" (*orthos logos*) because it sounds too rationalistic? Should we ignore the carefully structured "rationalistic" side of Gorgias's compositional technique and the fact Gorgias describes his method as

"reasoning" (*logismos*) in the *Helen* (see Schiappa "Gorgias")? Should we ignore evidence such as the claim by Philostratus who calls sophistic rhetoric "philosophical" (*Vitae sophistarum* 1.480.1)? Instead of rejecting my reading of Protagoras and Gorgias because it does not fit within his either/or categories, SC should reconsider those categories in order to be open to the possibility that the sophists were both poetic and rationalistic, that they advanced doctrines that were "foundational" in certain respects and "anti-foundational" in others, and that their texts can be seen as equally "rhetorical" and "philosophical." I believe such a reading would be more consistent with his own theoretical presuppositions.

Note

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The editor invites responses to Consigny and Schiappa to be published in RR's Burkean Parlor.